Churches and Religious Groups in the GDR: Overview in Figures

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It has been fifteen years since the last church membership survey in the German Democratic Republic. About ten of the seventeen million citizens of the GDR proved to be members of Protestant churches and almost 1,400,000 of the Roman Catholic Church. What the public survey did not reveal was the membership of about 113,000 GDR citizens in other religious groups. The available statistics presented here have been approximated or taken from old sources, so are intended to give an overview of the situation, not an exact representation.

The Eight Protestant Regional Churches

The "shrinking process" has become a much-used expression of the declining membership in the Protestant churches. Bishop D. Albrecht Schönherr made this development clear in his address about the future of the church in socialism before the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg.\(^1\) He recalls that in 1946 these churches still had 16,000,000 members in the GDR, whereas the present approximation is scarcely 7,000,000.

There is no doubt in the eight regional churches that this trend will continue. A withdrawal of membership is the main reason for this same development in the industrialized Western states. But in the GDR it appears to be rather a drop in the percentage of baptized children as compared to the total number of births.

The statistics regarding the churches in the eight regions can only be approximated. Their accuracy is limited by the method used to collect data according to the number of church taxpayers. Where a recent count within a regional church was not available, the statistics from the Annual Statistics of the Lutheran World Federation, 1978 were used.

Besides the numerous service organizations and their respective training centers, the Protestant churches support about fifty institutes for the education of parish workers. Included are three theological seminaries, two schools for preachers, nine schools offering seminars and courses for Christian educators, five church music schools, four other church worker training schools, and many continuing education facilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Members</th>
<th>Church Districts</th>
<th>Parishes</th>
<th>Pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Protestant Regional Church of Anhalt</td>
<td>216 000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg</td>
<td>750 000</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1 640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protestant Church of the Church District Görlitz</td>
<td>117 000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protestant Church of Greifswald</td>
<td>400 000</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evangelical Lutheran Regional Church of Mecklenburg</td>
<td>650 000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protestant Church of the Church Province Saxony</td>
<td>1 400 000</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2 230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony</td>
<td>2 114 000</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Thuringia</td>
<td>1 200 000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1 392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6 847 000</strong></td>
<td><strong>218</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 433</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Evangelische Verlagsanstalt produces a yearly average of 220 titles and is one of the larger presses in the GDR. It offers a range of subjects from scientific, theological, and practical church life publications to novels, poetry, art and pictorial volumes, hymnals, church magazines, calendars, and brochures. Out of eight regional Protestant churches, six publish their own Amtsblatt, and five larger cities have their weekly Sunday paper (up to 40,000 copies).

The Roman Catholic Church

In comparison to the Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR has maintained a constant membership in the last few decades. Available figures in 1964 accredited the Church with 1,375,237 members. In 1974, statistics show a slight drop to 1,283,066.

The Catholic Church in the GDR is divided into seven district jurisdictions: Berlin, Erfurt, Görlitz, Magdeburg, Meiningen, Meissen, and Schwerin. Presently, more than 1300 priests are at work in more than a thousand counseling facilities and places of worship. About a tenth are from religious orders. At the end of 1974, the Catholic orders of nuns had about 2500 members in almost 300 establishments. For the education of its church workers, the Roman Catholic Church has thirteen Exerzitation houses for its use, some of which are joined with the fourteen training facilities.

The main branch of the German "Caritas" Association, which represents the district jurisdictions, supports over thirty hospitals with a total of about 5500 beds,
eleven nursing homes, over 100 homes for the aged, over eighty kindergartens, thirty-four children's homes, fourteen rehabilitation centers, two sanitariums, three children's sanitariums, five homes for the care of elderly nurses in the service of the church, and two recreational homes for mothers.

The central publishing house for Catholic printed material is the St. Benno Press in Leipzig, which also publishes the two church papers, Tag des Herrn and St. Hedwigisblatt, as well as the two official church papers. Amtsblatt, the official information service, is published by the Berliner Bischofskonferenz, the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR.

The Central European Exarchat of the Russian Orthodox Church

The Exarchat for Berlin and Central Europe was established about 1960. Although there are relatively few believers who belong to the four Russian Orthodox parishes in the GDR, its leaders play a role out of proportion to their numbers in the public life of the GDR. The Exarch, also Archbishop of the Diocese, has his office in Berlin-Karlshorst and is responsible for the Russian Orthodox believers in West Berlin, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Austria, as well.

The Independent Churches in the GDR (Freikirchen)

The "free churches" are generally defined as those churches dedicated to renewing a fellowship like that of the first Christians. Other characteristics are their independence from the state and their openness to ecumenical actions.

The Methodist Church, now joined with the Evangelical Fellowship (Evangelische Gemeinschaft), has about 37,000 members. It has 125 pastors and over 300 lay preachers who care for approximately 270 parishes with a total of 330 worship locations. The theological education of the pastors takes place in the church's own seminary at Bad Klosterlausnitz. The Diakonissenwerk of the Methodist Church supports four hospitals, a nursing school, a home for handicapped children, and three recreational centers. The church publishes its own paper, Friedensglocke.

The Federation of Evangelical Free Church Congregations in the GDR (Baptists) includes some 22,000 baptized members in 220 parishes and over 300 affiliate parishes. Most of the 135 pastors who serve these parishes were trained at the theological seminary in Buckow/Markische Schweiz. Additional church workers are trained at a Bible school. The Baptists support a care center for the handicapped, three homes for the aged, a recreational home for church workers, and a deaconess home. A publishing agent prints a monthly magazine for the Baptists. The highest office is the Council of the Federation, made up of representatives from the legally and financially independent parishes.

The Union of the Independent Lutheran Churches in the GDR (Vereinigung selbst-
Minder evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchen) was formed in 1972 by the merging of the Old Lutheran Church (Evangelische-Lutherische Kirche--altlutherisch) and the Lutheran Free Church (Evangelische-Lutherische Freikirche). The Union has 208 parishes and worship locations and approximately 15,000 members, served by forty-one pastors. Theological training is carried out in the theological seminary in Leipzig. The church supports a Deacon Center, a hospital with 137 beds, a recreational center, and a kindergarten.

The Church Federation of the Protestant Reformed Church (Kirchenbund Evangelische-Reformierter Gemeinden in der DDR) in the GDR was formed by the merging of the autonomous Reformed parishes in Mecklenburg and Saxony. Its membership stands at about 8000. The consistories publish a monthly magazine. The Church Federation and the Reformed Church in Berlin-Brandenburg and Saxony, with a total membership of 23,000, are represented in the Reformed General Convention.

The Protestant Church Union of the United Brethren, District Herrnhut, with about 3200 members in nine parishes, is an associated member in the Federation of Protestant Church in the GDR. A group of twenty pastors is led by a directory. The bishop is responsible only for spiritual tasks. Besides the yearly publication of the Daily Watchwords, the Brethren place an emphasis on service tasks. They support a hospital, a home for brain-damaged youth, four children's homes, three homes for the aged, a nursing home, and several nursing stations in villages and towns.

The Federation of Free Protestant Congregations in the GDR (Bund Freier Evangelischer Gemeinden) is made up of twenty-four independent congregations with about 1200 members. Thirteen preachers and three nurses serve these churches. A church paper is published, and the Federation supports three nursing stations and a recreational center.

The Old Catholic Church in the GDR has about 1200 members who are served by three pastors and a deacon. They also publish a bi-monthly paper.

The German Protestant Free Church (Deutsche Evangelische Freikirche), with its 700 members and fourteen parishes, is to be found mostly in and around Potsdam. The church runs two nursing stations and a bookstore.

The Mennonite Church in the GDR was established only after 1945, when its members moved from the former Eastern regions to the GDR. The church is made up of about 300 members and one preacher. Services take place in Berlin and a few times a year elsewhere in the GDR. Worshippers meet in church rooms of a Protestant church or in members' homes. The traditional peace emphasis is expressed in the Mennonites' refusal to do military service or to swear oaths.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the GDR has fifty members and many "friends of the Friends." A yearly meeting is held, organized independently by the Quakers in the GDR. Each group is represented and led by a "Writer." The Quakers re-
ject all forms of war or activities leading to war, and they refuse to swear oaths.

Special Religious Groups and Sects

With the exception of the German Protestant Free Church, the ten "free" churches and unions mentioned above work together with the eight Protestant regional churches in the Association of Churches and Religious Societies in the GDR. The Quakers, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Seventh Day Adventists are present at the Federation's meetings as observers. Religious sects are to be distinguished from these churches by their tendency to exclude themselves. They think of themselves as "chosen" and base their faith partially on non-biblical literature. The following groups are recognized officially in the GDR:

The New Apostolic Church is by far the largest sect in the GDR. At present its membership stands at 80,000, and it is steadily increasing. The leadership rests in the hands of the main apostle (Stammapostel). Counseling services are provided by the lay members and volunteers.

The Fellowship of the Seventh Day Adventists numbers 11,300 members in 316 parishes, served by 132 preachers, who are trained in the Seventh Day Adventist seminary in Friedensau near Magdeburg. Ten to fifteen publications are distributed yearly. The Adventists support a home for the aged and other service organizations. They are characterized by their reverence of the Sabbath; without exception, no work is done on Saturday. And they refuse any kind of military service.

The Christian Fellowship (Christengemeinschaft) consists of approximately 5000 members with fifteen parishes and thirty affiliate parishes. Leadership is carried out by the Archsenior Guide who is aided by Senior Guides and Guides. The fellowship takes charge of a training center, homes for the aged, and nursing centers for young people.

The Fellowship of the Shepherd and His Flock is largely represented in Saxony and Thuringia; it consists of about 5000 followers in 150 parishes. The believers refuse all forms of worldly amusement and forbid ceremonial forms of worship.

The Followers of the Fellowship in Christ Jesus (Lorenzianer) consider themselves to be the chosen ones at the time of Christ's return. They number about 5000 members.

The Church of John (Johannische Kirche) in the GDR has 5000 followers in sixty-six parishes, led by forty parish leaders and fifteen pastors.

The Apostolic Catholic Congregations presently number about 5000 members in eight different parish areas.

The Reformed Apostolic Church Confederation (Reformiert-Apostolischer Gemeindebund) has about 5000 members in seven parishes. Fifty parish leaders guide the congregations, and two Apostles lead the confederation. A church paper is published every two months.
The Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) has 4700 followers in forty-seven parishes. There are no paid church workers or pastors, because every male believer living according to Mormon laws and commandments becomes a priest at the age of twelve.

The Fellowship of Godly Socialism/Office of the Apostle Juda (die Gemeinschaft des göttlichen Sozialismus/Apostelamt Juda) split off from the New Apostolic Church and has 1200 followers in forty-seven parishes. In each of the fourteen main parishes, a prophet, a shepherd, and an evangelist lead the congregation.

The Evangelical Bible Fellowship (Evangelische Bibelgemeinschaft) numbers about 700 members, led by thirty lay preachers and elders or deacons.

The Office of the Apostle Jesu Christ (Apostelamt Jesu Christi) is led by a main apostle (Stammapostel) and has about one hundred lay priests serving a few congregations.

Other Unrecognized Religious Groups

In contrast to these officially recognized religious groups in the GDR—which also includes eight Jewish parishes with about 700 members—there are relatively few unacknowledged or illegal religious groups. Among those forbidden groups are the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Pentecostals, the Christian Science Church, and the Grals Movement. Followers of these groups exist in the GDR, but do not publicly confess their faith. Jehovah's Witnesses have called attention to themselves in the last eighteen years since the beginning of the mandatory military service, because they were often imprisoned for refusing the draft. In recent years, however, followers of these groups have no longer been persecuted.

The main problem for the smaller religious groups and sects is the decline in membership. This decline is occurring somewhat slower for them than for the Protestant regional churches, but—because the groups are smaller—the dwindling number affects their church life much more noticeably.