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The Methodist Church in the German Democratic Republic

Bill Yoder
THE METHODIST CHURCH IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by Bill Yoder

Bill Yoder (Mennonite) is a previous contributor to OPREE. As a resident of West Berlin, a long-time observer of the GDR, and a freelance journalist, Yoder provides valuable insight into the life of the churches in the GDR and other Eastern European countries. This article was written without any official sanction of the Methodist Church in the GDR.

The history of Methodism in Germany actually began in 1738 on the occasion of John Wesley's journey to Herrnhut to meet Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Brethren. Three years previously, Wesley had been deeply impressed by the fearlessness and piety of fellow Moravian shipmates during a stormy crossing of the North Atlantic. Only three weeks after having received personal assurance of salvation—his heart having felt "strangely warmed"—Wesley set out for Herrnhut. Moravians and Methodists have a long history of cooperation, yet it wasn't until September, 1982, that the very first Methodist conference in Herrnhut (these were sessions involving European Methodist committees) took place. Herrnhut is located in a hilly region close to the present-day Polish and Czech borders.

1. A Brief History

The first Methodist congregations in Germany were founded by returning emigrant Germans. Some of them had been sent back to Germany from 1850 onward by Methodist mission societies from England and the U.S.A.. So, for obvious reasons, the German church, during its formative years, was under strong Anglo-Saxon influence.

The church grew rapidly despite persecution. In some instances, services were only tolerated under the watchful eyes of local police. Methodists were long forbidden to construct their own chapels and some churches even today appear like ordinary houses from the outside. It was not until 1921 that the Methodist Church was officially recognized and sanctioned by the state. During the Herrnhut conference in September, 1982, a West German participant stated that "it's a strange feeling
being greeted courteously by the representatives of an atheistic state. For I know that 100 years ago Methodist pastors fled from Saxony to avoid a forced baptism of their children according to Lutheran doctrine."

From the outset three distinct, Methodist-related groups were active: the Prussian Church, the Wesleyan Fellowship, and the Evangelical Association. The Prussian Church, which was U.S.-related and therefore maintained a bishop, was united with the British-related Wesleyan Fellowship in 1897. Attempts at unification with the Evangelical Association (known since 1946 in North America as the "Evangelical United Brethren Church") began in 1911. A significant step was taken in 1952 in the GDR, when the Evangelical Association began sending its students to the newly formed Methodist seminary in Bad Klosterlausnitz. During the 1960s a few smaller GDR congregations from both denominations were consolidated. Finally, on April 23, 1968, in Dallas, Texas, the "Evangelical United Brethren Church" and the "Methodist Church" merged to form the United Methodist Church. In Germany, these same two churches followed suit on May 26, 1968, with services being held in Frankfurt (West) and Dresden (East). This new church entity was christened "Evangelical-Methodist Church in Germany" (EmK). Despite birth pangs, this union has clearly demonstrated its viability in Germany.

The second major development concerning GDR Methodism occurred on June 6, 1970, during the UMC's general conference in St. Louis, when the East German request to elevate their three annual conferences into a central one was granted. Until then GDR-Methodists had belonged to the all-German "German Central Conference," with its bishop residing in Frankfurt. This new central conference was named "Evangelical-Methodist Church in the German Democratic Republic."

During festivities in Karl-Marx-Stadt on June 17, 1970, Armin Härtel, then 42 years of age, was ordained bishop by Bishop Franz Schäfer of Switzerland. Härtel has remained the only Methodist bishop residing in Eastern Europe until the present. As a member of the UMC's bishop's council, he is a frequent visitor to the U.S.A..

- 12 -
2. Organization and Structure

All of the larger Methodist congregations in the GDR are located in the strongly pietistic southern and southwestern portions of the country: in Karl-Marx-Stadt, Zwickau, Aue, Plauen, Leipzig, and Dresden. Every Spring the annual conference convenes in one of the major southern congregations. In the GDR a central conference is held in conjunction with the annual one every fourth year. The last central conference (in 1980) re-elected Bishop Härtel to another four-year term. GDR delegates regularly attend the general conferences held in the U.S.A. as well as sessions of the World Methodist Council.

The EmK is one of the very few East German churches maintaining its central offices outside of Berlin.* The Church in the GDR is divided into three superintendent's districts. The Zwickau district, located in the southwest, is seated in Zwickau. Its superintendent is Friedmar Walther. The Aue district covers the remaining southern regions between Aue and the Polish border, and is led by Lothar Gerischer. The expansive Berlin district (it encompasses the entire country north of Leipzig) is headed by Superintendent Günter Hering of East Berlin. Each superintendent serves for an eight-year period.

In the GDR 150 Methodist pastors (including retirees) and 350 lay ministers serve at the 650 different locations where services are held. In true German Protestant tradition, the EmK retains one order consisting of 180 deaconesses. It also boasts of four hospitals, five old people's homes and seven retreat centers. Schwarzenshof, the largest retreat center, is being readied for extensive renovations. The GDR state usually demands payment for a large portion of the costs of church construction projects in Western currencies and over $400,000 will be needed from Western churches for the completion of this undertaking.

*They, as well as the bishop's residence, can be reached under the address: Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, DDR-8020 Dresden, Wiener Strasse 56. Director of the press office is Rev. Gerhard Rögner. He is also editor of the church's periodical, "Die Friedensglocke" (The Peace Bell), which appears bi-weekly.

- 13 -
The seminary is located in a romantic old villa in Bad Klosterlausnitz. In recent times, 15-18 students have been attending there each semester. Almost all students are delegated there by their home congregations, making them eligible to receive a church-sponsored scholarship. Tuition is free. Two years ago, two Methodists from Angola studied there; they were replaced the following year by one from Cuba. The seminary's director is Lother Schieck, instructor in Old Testament studies. Since the state-operated universities still retain theological faculties, a few Methodist pastors do have university degrees, or degrees from Lutheran seminaries.

The EmK has several women pastors and is the only GDR "free church" which expends effort to foster female participation in pastoral leadership. Due to the circumstances of the military draft, most Methodist theological students at state-run universities are women. The presence of the UMC's first woman bishop, Marjorie Matthews, was greatly appreciated at the 1982 annual conference in Karl-Marx-Stadt.

For eleven years now, the EmK, in cooperation with the Baptists, has been producing correspondence courses for laity. The Methodists have their own bookstore in Reichenbach; it supplies all of their own church booktables within the country.

The percentage of church members in the GDR has decreased dramatically since 1945. At that time 90% of all citizens were Lutheran or "United." Today that percentage is slightly less than 50%. So, in a country of nearly 17 million citizens, roughly eight million are members of one of the three Lutheran or five United (Lutheran and Reformed) provincial churches. In 1945 nearly 50,000 adult Methodists resided in Eastern Germany. Presently, that number is hovering at 16,500. The largest single factor in the decline has been westward emigration. However, member participation is relatively high (50% of all GDR-Methodists attend church regularly), and, since baptized children are not counted as members, Methodist influence is greater than the statistics indicate. Utilizing Lutheran census practices, one would arrive at a Methodist membership of 28,000, thus elevating the EmK to the largest "free church" in the country.

- 14 -
3. Theological Issues

In Europe there is a strong distinction between state (Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic) and free (Methodist, Baptists, Brethren) churches. Since no GDR church can today be defined as a state church, one can utilize the German term "Volkskirche" [people's church] when referring to the Lutheran and United provincial churches.

Although no significant doctrinal differences between Methodists and the "Volkskirche" exist, their understanding of congregational life does vary. Although a bishop's office exists, GDR Methodists define their structures as non-hierarchical. They demonstrate this by retaining the bishop on the same pay scale as that of other pastors. Methodists do stress the priesthood of all believers and encourage lay participation.

One GDR pastor, Siegfried Barth, has written: "We ask ourselves, what is special about our church? What makes us different from others? . . . A long time ago we could point to our evangelistic thrust and to the stress placed on conversion and sanctification. We could mention the level of lay participation and the existence of Sunday schools. But, today, others possess these also. No longer are we qualitatively different." For the "Volkskirche," they have become their "little, younger brother."

Other pastors disagree with this view, claiming that subtle differences do remain. In any case, it can be concluded that the Protestant "Volkskirche" and the Methodists are moving towards each other. The remaining differences in congregational life are slowly but surely disappearing.

During the 1970s, many Protestant congregations in the south came under the sway of a charismatic movement strongly influenced by the writings of Larry Christiansen, Hal Lindsey and David Wilkerson. This has led to tension among Methodists, e.g., when a departing charismatic pastor attempted, with the support of his church council, to designate his own successor. Because this pastor disregarded church polity—the EmK is of course more "connectional" than congregational—his relationship with the EmK was terminated at the annual conference last May.

The EmK's role in the GDR is unique, for it retains an equally positive relationship with both the Evangelical Alliance (known as the
'National Association of Evangelicals' in the U.S.A.) and the ecumenical concerns emanating from the Geneva-based WCC. Perhaps the majority of pastors prefer the WCC, yet most congregations retain an evangelical form of piety. In the GDR, the conflict between theological conservatives and liberals is not as vehement as in the West, yet its presence cannot be denied.

Theologically, the EmK appears closest to the "Volkskirche," yet its understanding of church life is primarily free-church in nature. Methodists consequently find themselves somewhere between the high and low Protestant churches. According to Bishop Härtel, Methodists hope to play a meditative, "fermentive" role in their relations to both.

4. The Relationship Between Church and State

During the Third Reich, German free churches attempted to secure sufficient freedom of movement through what they considered to be political abstinence. This led to suspicions among some Lutherans that the free churches were especially sympathetic to Fascism. The need after the war to co-exist with that which most believers had considered the arch-enemy of everything Christian was understandably traumatic. In the early 1950s strong state pressure was brought to bear on the "Volkskirche." Due to the free church's small size and consequent political significance, it remained relatively unhampered during this trying period. The two decades between 1950 and 1970 were characterized by resistance to the GDR state's increasing interest in a partitioning of all German churches between East and West. The predominant church stance in the beginning was one of "holding the fort," of putting in time until German reunification and the resulting disappearance of the Marxist government took place. Generally, it was not until the late 1960s that GDR denominations began to think in today's terms of being "a church within socialism," of becoming salt in that specific socialist setting into which God had placed them.

Already in 1950, a separate East German Methodist periodical (The Peace Bell) had come into being. After it became virtually impossible to send students to the seminary in Frankfurt, a new seminary was opened in Bad Klosterlausnitz. In 1957, a major East-West conflict ensued after
the all-German "Volkskirche" ("Evangelical Church in Germany"--EKD) signed an agreement with the West German army to supply it with chaplains. Out of consideration for its East German congregations, the all-German Methodist Central Conference wisely refused to partake in any such agreement.

Discrepancies between Methodist conference boundaries and those of the four Allied zones existed primarily in the Berlin area. After the border was closed in August, 1961, all church committees still united were forced to meet separately. But until 1968 it was possible for the Methodist bishop, who resided in Frankfurt, to travel to the GDR on official business. During that year Bishop C. Ernst Sommer was denied a visa to attend the Dresden unification ceremonies involving the Methodist Church and the Evangelical Fellowship. West German Methodist officials seemed surprised that permission had been withdrawn, "even though we had made it clear to East Berlin officials that no East or West German church even existed, but rather solely a world-wide Methodist church." The all-German EmK did not, of course, conceive of itself as an autonomous Methodist Church, but rather as one of numerous central conferences within the United Methodist Church. Since the annual conferences of Hungary and Czechoslovakia were part of the Swiss-based Central and Southern European Central Conference, the Methodists saw no particular reason for elevating the three East German annual conferences into a central one. But after the partitioning of the all-German EKD in 1969--the eight provincial churches formed a "Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR"--Methodists alone were obviously incapable of stemming the tide. At an emergency annual conference in Leipzig on December 12, 1969, it was agreed to request permission from the United Methodist Church to form a new central conference. This restructuring was sealed through the ordination of Bishop Härtel the following June.

The East German government expressed its satisfaction in a news release of September 17, 1970, regarding the Fourth European Methodist Youth Conference: "In Vienna, for the very first time, participants from the GDR and FRG [West Germany] participated in a Methodist conference as the delegates of two autonomous churches, fully independent of one another." But German Methodists still speak of a "special relationship"
to one another, and on one occasion in 1980 the two bishops (Härtel and Hermann Sticher) emphasized that they would continue referring to one another in the "we" form.

After the EmK's division, tensions between this church and the state subsided. Bishop Härtel stated in 1976 that "ideological coexistence is impossible, yet everyday life presents us with realms in which the constructive cooperation of Christians is feasible." On March 6, 1978, a significant discussion between Erich Honecker, head of party and state, and Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, chairman of the Evangelical Federation, took place. The legal right of the church to exist "within socialism" was acknowledged on the highest level, and efforts to eliminate the discrimination against non-party Christians in the educational and working worlds was promised. This agreement also led to certain improvements for Methodists; in 1980 Pastor Wolfgang Ruhnow was granted permission to begin ministering within prisons.

The "Spirit of March 6" was also evident in a much-quoted speech by Dr. Horst Dohle of the State Ministry for Church Affairs, delivered at the annual conference in 1980. He claimed then that Christians in the GDR have learned increasingly to "accept this land as their own." The socialist state on its part intends to demonstrate "that the Christian is accepted in this country not only because of his productivity as part of the [under-staffed] working force, but also as a believer and Christian citizen. Party and state assume," continued Dohle, "that this country would not be what it is today if Christians had not helped create it." In the ensuing question-and-answer period he was asked which world view he then considered to be the correct one. His astonishing reply was: "Shouldn't we rather leave this question for our children and grandchildren to decide? They can then decide between Wesley and Marx."

Carl Ordnung and Heinz Ludwig are the leading personalities among a small group of staunchly pro-socialist Methodists. Ordnung is a politician and functionary of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU). This party, itself of minimal political significance, is reserved for avowedly religious persons incapable of joining the atheistic, communist party. Heinz Ludwig, a theologian and former pastor, is one of the very few "worker-priests" in the GDR. He has spent 20 years as a lathe
operator in a tractor factory near Magdeburg. A former instructor in Bad Klosterlausnitz states that Ordnung and Ludwig "have found no broad political platform within the church and have on occasion experienced rejection. Yet they have remained deeply loyal to their church and have in time made a viable contribution to it. They have played a significant role in the church's acceptance of itself as a church 'within socialism' and have aided it in finding its bearings for the present specific situation." The years from 1958 to 1968 were the glory years of the Prague-based "Christian Peace Conference," and Ordnung and Ludwig were at that time major participants in an intensive discussion among Methodists concerning the future of their church.

5. The Search for Self-Identity

The political naïveté of pre-war German Methodism was overcome in record time within the GDR. Today the EmK, as well as most GDR denominations, is deeply inspired by the struggle for peace and ecumenical reconciliation. At least as early as 1958 the state press began to take note of Methodist statements concerning the imperative for disarmament and the surmounting of the Cold War. Before the opening of the Herrnhut conference in September, its GDR hosts stated that "for us, all participation in the preparation of a nuclear conflict as well as the development and deployment of appropriate weaponry, is sinful." In Herrnhut, an ad hoc European Methodist peace committee was formed at the suggestion of the East Germans.

Methodists participate in the Evangelical Federation's present "peace decade." Yet their peace contribution within the GDR can only be described as "one contribution among many." But on a world scale that perspective is radically different, for the GDR-EmK is the most articulate and fluent Methodist church in any communist-governed country. Among the world's 40 million plus Methodists, the GDR church thus has a vital interpretive role to play.

GDR Methodists possess extensive contacts with Methodists in other countries as well as ecumenical contacts with other denominations within the GDR. A special partnership between the "Peace Church" in Karl-Marx-Stadt and the First United Methodist Church of Washington, Pennsylvania,
has existed since 1959. Every year, on a particular Sunday in March, mutually prepared services on the topic of peace are held. Bishop Härtel has been in Washington; numerous members of First United have visited the "Peace Church."

East German Methodists also strive to strengthen their ties to Methodist churches in other socialist countries, for example in Cuba and Mozambique. In Angola this past August Bishop Härtel ordained one of the former students of Bad Klosterlausnitz. But in the GDR, as elsewhere, laity complain that foreign contacts tend to remain the exclusive domain of the clergy.

In the GDR itself, a committee consisting of the EmK and the provincial Lutheran Church of Saxony has been active since 1972. Its purpose, among others, is to resolve any conflicts between them. An ultimate goal is the sharing of pulpit and sacrament between both churches; this already exists among the provincial churches within the Evangelical Federation. Discussion exists as to whether the Methodists should join a "United Evangelical Church" which would replace the Evangelical Fellowship, if and when it is ever created. GDR-Methodists have hosted the ongoing theological discussions between the World Methodist Council and the Lutheran World Federation; in fact, the first regular session took place in Dresden in January, 1979.

In the brand new East Berlin suburb of Marzahn, which consists solely of massive high-rise buildings, Methodists and the provincial church of Berlin-Brandenburg are cooperating closely. Initially, common church services for both denominations were intended, but they have yet to be realized.

6. Methodists and the Luther Year

Cooperation between Methodists and Lutherans has been possible in the context of the celebration of the birth of Martin Luther. East German church festivities to commemorate this event began with a shout on May 4. These opening ceremonies on the Wartburg near Eisenach were carried live on East and West German television; the Luther Year is offering the East German church unprecedented local coverage. Since May, six of the seven scheduled regional "Kirchentag" (Church Day) conven-
operator in a tractor factory near Magdeburg. A former instructor in Bad Klosterlausnitz states that Ordnung and Ludwig "have found no broad political platform within the church and have on occasion experienced rejection. Yet they have remained deeply loyal to their church and have in time made a viable contribution to it. They have played a significant role in the church's acceptance of itself as a church 'within socialism' and have aided it in finding its bearings for the present specific situation." The years from 1958 to 1968 were the glory years of the Prague-based "Christian Peace Conference," and Ordnung and Ludwig were at that time major participants in an intensive discussion among Methodists concerning the future of their church.

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ations have run their course. The largest one was held July 7-10, 1983, and drew over 100,000 persons into downtown Dresden for its closing assembly. This was the largest church gathering in the GDR since 1954. The one remaining "Church Day" convention will be held in Wittenberg in late September and will be devoted entirely to the study of Luther's theology. Festivities in Eisleben and Leipzig, November 10-13, will close out the Luther Year.

Astonishingly, the Marxist government is also sponsoring its own Luther commemoration. Suddenly the Great Reformer is no longer labeled a "lackey of the princes" and "murderer of the peasants." Three years ago the state had proposed a joint church-state planning committee to prepare for the Luther Year. This offer was flatly rejected by the Lutheran and United Church Federation. Therefore, the chairman of the Federation's Luther Committee, Bishop Werner Leich of Eisenach, functions solely as a consultant within the government committee. None less than State and Party boss Erich Honecker chairs the government-sponsored Luther commission. The Communist Party's reversal on Luther can be traced to its earnest and largely pragmatic search for a historic past; it would be trite to attribute this new quest primarily to a heightened desire for Western tourism. The Party increasingly sees itself as the heir of "everything progressive" in German history.

At all church-sponsored Luther functions, it is the church which is obviously in control. In the aforementioned mass session in Dresden, broadcast live by Western media, clear concerns were mentioned regarding government discrimination against believers. In Dresden, state officials as well as the police maintained an extremely low profile and no convention texts were subjected to prior censorship. Johannes Cieslak, president of the Lutheran synod in Saxony, unabashedly concluded that the government had thereby "jumped over its own shadow." Though "Uncle Martin" is long dead, he is still good for a few surprises on his own home turf.

President Cieslak has pointed out with gratification that Methodists were involved in the planning of the Dresden "Kirchentag" from its inception. Thomas Röder of the national Methodist headquarters in Dresden points out in explanation that Methodists lack those
theological concerns which block the ecumenical progress of other smaller Protestant bodies. In a forum on ecumenism in Dresden on July 10, 1983, the national Methodist bishop Armin Härtel reported on a local Lutheran service in which the host pastor had requested that he take part in administering communion. He was then offered communion by the Lutheran pastor, who himself received communion from Bishop Härtel. The Bishop's closing inquiry from the forum audience--"Did we do something wrong?"--was answered with robust applause.

In Eisenach the hosting Lutherans pleaded for forgiveness from all those against whom Luther and his followers had sinned. GDR Lutherans frequently stated that this commemoration is to be understood as an ecumenical invitation to dialogue. It is to be distinguishable from all previous Luther anniversaries through its rejection of heroization. In contrast to the Pope in his native Poland, the elevation of Luther in the GDR has led to only a minimal amount of denominational arrogance. Thomas Röder interjects that Methodists are constantly on the lookout to guard against any such eventuality. The Methodist press is bringing attention to the numerous Lutheran roots of Methodism, which came about in part through the association of John Wesley with the Moravians in Herrnhut. Otherwise, Methodists simply cooperate with existing Luther activities; they do not speak of any unique contribution of their own to the Luther Year.

Evangelization is a major topic of present Methodist-Lutheran dialogue in the GDR. It was also a primary one at the Methodist Annual Conference, which took place in Plauen June 1-5, 1983. As Gerhard Rögnér, editor of the Methodist Die Friedensglocke, puts it: "In what respect is the missionary spirit of the past still relevant in view of the drastic improvement of ecumenical relations?" Rögnér assures that today's GDR-Methodists "do not want to proselytize" other Protestant churches. Many Methodists, including Pastor Rögnér, are delighted by the new Marxist interest in Luther and consider it a fruit of the ongoing rapprochement between church and state. Yet others remain concerned that state concessions during the Luther Year may not be without a price. Marxist attempts to send a revolutionized Luther into combat against his own namesake church have usually remained discreet. On occasion, though,
party functionaries cannot refrain from pointing out to an increasingly pacifist Protestant clergy that Luther himself was indeed a foe of pacifism.

Fears exist regarding the eventuality that the major state concessions of this year might be retracted once Luther is removed from the limelight. Yet most feel that negation of the major recent concessions would only seem likely in a climate of greatly intensified East-West tensions. East German Methodism strives to counter this through its support for arms reduction in both East and West.

7. The Matter of Peace

The Methodist peace statement released in Plauen on June 4, 1983, has raised a few eyebrows. It observes that "the planned stationing of medium-range American missiles . . . increased in a frightening way the danger of war. In the face of such a threat, the desires of the socialist countries for [adequate] defensive security are legitimate." It appeals for the concept of "security partnership" and adds that "the legitimate interests of the other side mark the boundaries of one's own defensive measures." In Plauen, GDR-Methodists, as well as Dr. Hans Wilke from the party-run "State Ministry for Church Affairs," applauded the UMC-Bishops Council's "courageous" stand in favor of nuclear disarmament. The issue of disarmament remains a primary one within virtually all GDR denominations; NATO's planned stationing of further weaponry on Western European soil finds no supporters among East German Christendom.

8. Future Prospects

The continuing shrinkage in numbers has left its mark on the past decade. In a theological paper presented at the 1979 Annual Conference, Dieter Weigel of Tabarz described in ruthless detail the rocky road in today's post-persecution era:

We [pastors] have only enough time and energy left to guarantee the administration of that which already exists . . . There remains too little energy, time and imagination to make evangelization on new frontiers possible . . . The church is becoming more pluralistic all
the time. The church's unity is not threatened by so-called modernists and fundamentalists; rather, by a specialization and relativization of the truth. People, who according to their piety and theology belong to different centuries, exist alongside each other in our congregations. Will they ever be capable of living together or for one another?"

Pastors are afraid of being consumed in struggles on inappropriate fronts. As the church becomes smaller and older, the individual's fear that he might someday be deserted increases. The gravity of the actual situation is suppressed; spiritual revival and a new openness are desperately needed.

Other pastors have experienced a more positive church life, so this paper was not approved by everyone. Superintendent Hering believes that the low-water mark (in numbers) may already have been reached. In a single service during 1982, for example, one congregation accepted 17 new members. A number of these were young persons from unchurched backgrounds—a not uncommon phenomenon in the GDR today.

The "Tabarz discussions" are attempting to clarify existing theological differences. Will the EmK be capable of playing a mediative role and bridge the gap between the competing theological understandings as well as that between free churches and the "Volkskirche," or does it only reflect the existing polarizations within the "Volkskirche"? Is the EmK a bridge or only a reflection of the "Volkskirche"'s unanswered questions? Only a further spiritual recovery coupled with even greater concern for the ills of those in its surrounding community can secure a positive response to these penetrating issues.