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LOOKING BACK ON A CLOSING CHAPTER:
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EAST GERMAN CHURCHES

By Barbara G. Green

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An early twentieth-century German macabre short story, Der Gefesselte (The Bound Man) tells of a man who awakens one day to find himself irretrievably bound hand and foot. Slowly, he learns to walk again in his new condition, then to take care of himself, and then to do fancy flips. He joins the circus and builds a new life for himself, winning fame and fortune with the tricks he can do all tied up. Then one day, he wakes up to find that the bindings are gone, as inexplicably as they appeared. He is disoriented, staggers about hardly able to walk, and realizes that his life’s meaning is over. The story provides apt commentary on the experiences of Eastern European church people, including East Germans. They, too were much admired, in a suspect way, by friends in the West for all that they could do under the restraints of the old system. Now that it is gone, they are finding it hard to keep their balance.

June 27, 1991 marked the end of the Federation of Protestant Churches, formerly in the German Democratic Republic. As of that day, by virtue of the constituting EKD [Evangelical Church of Germany] synod meeting held June 27-30, its member churches are members of the EKD. Twenty two years after it was launched, it is gone. This essay will attempt to take stock of that institution, the circumstances in which it arose, its historical legacy, and its impact on the wider ecumenical community.

For an American observer, coming from a national history defined by voluntary or involuntary emigration, a startling feature of GDR life was the decision not to emigrate. All GDR citizens were people who themselves made choices not to leave or whose parents or grandparents had made such choices. The war ended in 1945, the GDR was founded in 1949, and the Wall was not erected until 1961. So for those sixteen years emigration was nearly as simple as taking the city train system across town and getting off. One did not have to learn a new language or change cultural customs. One was guaranteed West German citizenship and material help in getting settled in a new situation. Many thousands of people
did it, so many that everyone knew someone had done it, and everyone was directly confronted with the question, "Should I?" A particularly difficult time for church people during the early 1950's made these decisions even heavier for them in those years.

The situation was compounded by the growing gap between the economies of the two German states, and the disparity of consumer standards of living. Most of the German industrial base had been destroyed during the war in the entire country. In the years just after the war the United States poured billions of dollars in hard currency into rebuilding West German industry, while the Soviet Union was coping with the wartime devastation of its own economy and industry. The Soviet Union had applied to the United States for a loan of some billions of dollars for its own reconstruction. It was only after that request was ignored and then rejected in Washington that the Soviet Union began to plunder East Germany and other countries in Eastern Europe for its own reconstruction. So the East Germans were left with even less that the little which was left at the end of the war. Their economic troubles were compounded by the confiscation of industry and the collectivization of agriculture under the new regime.

For many Christians, their faith played some part in their decision to stay in the East. Outsiders cannot claim to know just what mix of family connections, ties to historical roots, inertia, vocational responsibilities, or faith went into their decision. But it is fair to say that they did tend to ask themselves: Why did God put me here? What does God want from me? What does God expect from me? Will I be able to keep my faith and practice it better here or elsewhere? One pastor at the time describes his own experience:

One day I noticed that my relationship to my society, which had begun to develop socialism, was dominated very much by fear, stubbornness, feelings of superiority, in short, by a very defensive attitude. I asked myself, what had happened to my faith, which had grown and been tested in the church resistance movement to the Nazis, my faith that God never gives up in faithfulness to his people. So I traveled to the government official responsible for church affairs in my district and told him something like this: Please accept the fact that as a Protestant Christian and pastor I am not leaving for the West. I am going to stand with both feet right here, and I'm going to stand here as a Christian. That was in the fall of 1957. I think that many other Christians in our country have had similar experiences - some earlier, some later.

All that changed in 1961, of course, when the wall was built. But it did not change completely. In the mid-1980's new permits for legal emigration became possible, and some thousands left. So the fundamental question was raised again in a new generation. In 1984 the Evangelical Academy in East Berlin held a weekend conference on the subject. In a paper at that conference, participant Fred Mahlburg said:

I am a Christian. I am convinced that one can be a Christian anywhere in the world, even if the burdens and temptations involved are very different. I do not stay here, because I think the external conditions here are particularly good for a Christian life. I stay because a sense of political responsibility belongs to my faith, and after all that I have experienced and all that I have said, it points me to this place. Certainly the ties of home to a particular geographic place play a role in this, but I believe that this role
is rather relative. Yes, I suspect that these ties are especially relative for Christians, because Christians live more toward a home than in a home. This is a home which Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, and which is actually more of a journey than a place. One can live on this journey.

Whenever such personal decisions were made, the task then became making sense of life in the GDR. For Christians, this inevitably led to challenges over their participation in church life. The course of the church led through uncharted terrain: a majority church of Protestant confession encountered Marxism-Leninism. The socialism founded on this world view was not limited to one party among others; rather, it formed the all-encompassing state in which they lived. The encounter was unavoidable. There were no tradition and no precedents. The Soviet model normative for the state was based on the self-understanding of the Orthodox church, not a Protestant one. Many churches and Christians from other churches in the world came asking if it were possible at all to live as a Christian in a socialist society with atheism included in the basic convictions of Marxism-Leninism. Such questions came especially from Third World countries beginning to build socialist societies.

Rapidly the numbers of people who found the church relevant or of interest began to shrink. Church people were used to having a Volkskirche, a church supported by the state to which everyone automatically belonged, which provided the acceptable rituals for milestones of people's lives (baptism, marriage, death). The public schools had provided mandatory religious instruction for everyone. Now, smaller and smaller numbers of people rattled around in huge, drafty old church buildings or small ancient stone village churches badly in need of repair. The state provided alternate, secular rituals for marking life milestones, and religious instruction was aggressively thrown out of the public schools. They found the new situation required for them a new ecclesiology. If they could no longer be a Volkskirche, what would it mean to be the church?

For the first two decades of the GDR, they tried to keep organizational and administrative unity with the West German churches, despite periodic tensions. A prime case causing tension was the 1957 agreement between the EKD and the West German military establishing military chaplaincies under military discipline. The churches, however, even tried to maintain unity after the wall was built in 1961 and communication back and forth was nearly impossible. Only in 1968, when the GDR began work on a new constitution with more aggressive restrictions toward the church, did the eight Regional Churches in the GDR organize their own independence from the Evangelical Church in Germany. In June 1969, they established the Federation of Protestant Churches in the German Democratic Republic. The Federation was immediately able to speak much more specifically and forcefully to the specific situation in the GDR that the old joint body had been, although some eighteen months passed before the government was willing to recognize it as a legitimate voice for the GDR churches. With hindsight, there is some controversy within the EKD as to whether
they actually withdrew their EKD membership, or 'went inactive', or some other description of the breach, thus, how the newly (re?)established membership should be defined, and whether the EKD is obligated to undertake reform in the process.

Founding the Federation established institutional and administrative clarity. But it still did not answer the ecclesiological questions, and the Federal Synods in the early years struggled repeatedly with them. They launched the formula "church as a community of witness and service" as a way of expressing ecclesiological identity accessible to lay people.

At the Church Federation's synod meeting in Eisenach in 1971, they developed the formula which was quoted so frequently: "We want to be a church, not alongside of, not against socialism; rather, we want to be a church within socialism." This statement rejected both a ghetto-like existence for the church and its existence as an opposition party or counter-society. A church within socialism—first of all, this meant the presence of the church where its members lived and worked. It also meant participation in the problems and achievements of society; it meant responsibly contributing to the development of society, hence, as the then-bishop of Magdeburg put it, "differentiating the instances where cooperation is possible, and where it is not possible." The weakness of that formulation, of course, lay in the fact that it could be interpreted in so many different ways, including ideological acceptance of the system itself.

At the 1972 Federal Synod meeting, Heino Falcke, who was then director of a small church college in Gnadau and later became prominent for his role in the World Council of Churches' "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" program, found important new language to build on the "church within socialism" theme in considering what it means for Christians to live in and co-operate with a socialist society. He said:

We mean this above all: we can accept in faith that in a socialist society, too, the lordship of the liberating Christ is a reality... So we are set free to reject socialism's rigid view of itself, a view which would face us with the need either to reject or accept it totally. We are set free from the paralysing alternatives between outright opposition and uncritically allowing ourselves to be taken over. Thus, we are set free to offer practical and discerning cooperation.

Perhaps the least controversial and most extensive area of discerning cooperation was the extensive network of social work the churches maintained. The Protestant and Catholic churches in the GDR had, between them, fifty-two hospitals, eighty-seven homes for the mentally and physically disabled, eleven mother and baby homes, 280 homes for the elderly and nursing homes, twenty-three children's homes, six hospices for the dying, 328 day care centers for children and 419 rural nursing stations, as well as training institutions providing personnel for those institutions. The churches were also the only non-governmental owner of agricultural land. The Protestant church had some 500,000 acres under cultivation and some fifty agricultural enterprises under its supervision. These farms cannot compete with
Western farms, and the churches now have to find new uses for their agricultural land, including reforestation.

In 1976, an announcement was made that from then on church building could be built in new housing districts. This was important not only for the state’s policy toward the church, but also at an ideological level. By implication it altered the timeline under which the Marxists expected the church to die of its own accord. It tacitly admitted that there would still be people around for a long time who would confess and practice their Christian faith.

In March 1978, the Executive Committee of the Federation of Churches, headed by its President, Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, was formally received by then head of state of the GDR, Erich Honecker. At that meeting the societal significance of the church and its right to societal participation were explicitly recognized for the church within socialism, without trying to make it into a socialist mass organization. Its independence was clearly defined. In his response to Honecker’s address at that meeting, Bishop Schönherr said:

Our ideological conflicts, which should neither become effaced nor be underestimated, cannot constitute unbridgeable barriers. There is too much at stake. If our concern is for a more just, peaceful and friendly world and if we know that working for that is God’s will, then we do not need to take the barriers of ideology more seriously than the common task. We sincerely wish that trust could grow between representatives of the state and the church through meetings and conversations that neither side doubts the honesty of the other, but rather presupposes it. The more such experiences take place at all levels, the more this trust will be realized. Openness and clearness are barometers of trust. The relationship between the state and the church is as good as individual Christian citizens experience it in their local social situations.

That last statement meant that the church could measure the sincerity of the state in holding such a meeting by the experience of individual Christians. Church people were particularly elated when it was included in the front-page report on the meeting in the next day’s party newspaper, as that meant it had been accepted and they could quote it whenever they needed to. Bishop Schönherr recounted later, at the end of that meeting, Honecker took him aside and said quietly, "Herr Bischof, you and I will both have trouble enforcing what we have decided today all the way down to the grass roots." Such proved to be the case.

The political situation in Central Europe, both east and west, during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s was dominated by the Euromissile debate. The mid 1970’s deployment of SS-20 missiles by the Soviet Union targeted on Western Europe and even more so NATO’s response in the so-called “Two Track Decision” of 1979 brought a new wave of concern over nuclear weapons in Europe. In fact, battlefield and tactical nuclear weapons had been in place in Europe for a long time, but the size, speed, and short warning times, permanently changed the stakes of nuclear weapons politics.
President Carter's plans in 1977 to proceed with neutron weapons, later withdrawn, galvanized opposition to new nuclear weapons in several European countries. That opposition grew exponentially with the "Two Track Decision," which set a four-year deadline to negotiate the SS-20's away, and if that failed, to deploy nuclear-armed cruise missiles in five NATO countries and Pershing II medium range ballistic missiles in West Germany. Before such negotiations could begin, the Carter presidency was distracted and weakened by the Iran hostage crisis and the election campaign of 1980. In late 1981, after half the negotiating period had passed, the Reagan administration proposed the "zero option" for intermediate-range missiles. It was an open secret at the time that the "zero option" was designed to be unacceptable to the Soviets, to disarm the opposition movements, and to provide a license for Reagan's nuclear buildup to proceed. Predictably, the Soviets withdrew from the negotiations, and cruise and Pershing II deployment began in December 1983.

For the churches East and West all this meant a new confrontation with the moral issues surrounding nuclear weapons. The GDR churches undertook a lengthy and complex process of study, conferences, dialogue with government representatives and ecumenical partners, and efforts to participate in the international debate. Within the international story, there were three developments particular to the GDR churches.

The first of these was a rather unexpected rediscovery of the power in the Old Testament vision: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks..." (Micah 4:3). In 1978, the GDR government announced plans to introduce a kind of para-military instruction into the curriculum of the public high schools. The churches expressed clear opposition to this move, and as it was implemented, they decided to develop their own programs for peace education. This came to assume the form of an annual "Ten Days for Peace" program held in November at the end of the church year. The first of these was held in a rather experimental way in 1980. In 1981, a simple logo for the "Ten Days" was developed. The words "Swords into Ploughshares--Micah 4:3" were printed around the edge, and a profile of a statue of a muscular man beating a sword into a plough was in the center. The particular statue shown had been a gift from the Soviet Union to the United Nations. Thousands of small cheap felt badges showing the logo were printed up for the church young people to wear during the "Ten Days." The people who developed the logo assumed nothing could be wrong with a Bible quotation (i.e. nothing contemporary) and art from the Soviet Union. To their astonishment police and school officials quickly confiscated most of the badges, and many young people were questioned as to what this was supposed to mean. Was this a call to pacifism or a rejection of mandatory military service, they were asked. Was "swords into ploughshares" a utopian vision or a misguided means for getting there? This led them to undertake the intense reflection so characteristic of the Church Federation. The 1982 synod meeting of the Church Federation stated:
This passage expresses our Christian hope that God will someday create a world in which we people no longer need weapons to protect ourselves. It also expresses our Christian responsibility as a consequence of such a hope to do everything possible so that people and nations solve their conflicts with out weapons. The nuclear weapons of our time, if they are used, will leave no victors behind.

Working for peace in the sense of the image "swords into ploughshares" means particularly working for disarmament. These words clearly mean making utensils of war into utensils of peace, and that means disarmament. We know that we Christians are not the only ones, or even the first ones, who are working for disarmament in the current threat to peace. We also know that the struggle for disarmament has been long and laborious and can only proceed slowly partial step by partial step. We Christians do not have easy political solutions, either. But we want to, and from our faith we must, participate in the struggle for disarmament, even in this country.

The biblical image "swords into ploughshares" has for us Christians the significance of guidance expressed in an image. It is not a directive recommended for everyday politics; it is not a simple recipe against nuclear weapons. It is a signpost, which shows the direction anyone who wants disarmament must go. It is a sign, which does not produce lasting peace as if by magic, but symbolizes it in an encouraging way. Christians must learn anew that such obedience to the discipleship of faith may have consequences.

The second development was a theological rediscovery of the Sermon on the Mount and a reclaiming of its relevance for the political situation. In particular, they began to rethink the part about "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven..."(Matt.5:43). A spate of new commentaries and meditations appeared on the Sermon on the Mount. The weekend that cruise and Pershing II missile deployment began in 1983, Bishop Albrecht Schönherr preached a sermon in East Berlin on the subject. In it he said:

Today, it has become clearer for us that the Sermon on the Mount is not only there to give us bad consciences, that it is not only for our personal private use. We sense that it has a great deal to do with real life, thus, also with life as it is expressed in the newspapers and the radio and TV news broadcasts. Today we are beginning to wonder--in the face of what the so-called "realists" are doing and have done--whether the 'crazies and dreamers' are not the true realists with respect to the future. We wonder whether the so-called 'realists,' who risk their security on human fears of death, on the functioning of highly delicate machinery, and on piling up risks of self-destruction are the true 'crazies.'

unpublished sermon, 12/4/83

The notion of "loving one's enemies intelligently" began to appear as a fixed concept. This meant being intelligent enough to find specific actions and symbols, which would be recognizable to the enemy, to contribute to defusing tension and hostility. Translated into the secular language of the Helsinki Final Act, "intelligent enemy love" becomes "confidence-building measures" in the broadest sense of the word. The Theological Studies Department of the GDR Church Federation made widely respected contributions to the discussion of what such measures might look like, contributing internationally to the concept
of "Common Security," as developed by the Palme Commission under United Nations auspices. In brief, common security is the notion that the world has become so interconnected and interdependent that the only way to increase one's own security is to increase the security of one's adversary. Church people in the GDR worked hard at fleshing out common security as a politically practicable translation of the Sermon on the Mount.

The third development occasioned by the new challenge of nuclear weapons had to do with the process of developing a consensus moral position on nuclear deterrence for the GDR churches. To explain the context: in the midst of the political debates, the governing body of the Reformed Churches in West Germany issued in 1981 a statement that declared a status confessionis with respect to nuclear weapons. They drew a clear line equating biblical faithfulness with rejection of nuclear weapons, even their production and deployment as deterrence. In doing so, they caused an international controversy as to whether nuclear weapons, and specifically nuclear deterrence, are matters where a diversity of opinion could or could not be tolerated.

The GDR churches' Federal Synod began to clarify their own position in this debate at its annual meeting in 1982. The executive body's report to the synod raised a series of questions on the subject:

- Must not our churches now reject the spirit of the system of mutual deterrence and all of the forces resulting from it? Is not the thought of deterrence a denial of faith and hope and a fundamental contradiction of the commandment to love one's neighbor?
- Such questions will have to be discussed in more depth in our parishes and churches. We will have to think about these aspects of the issue:
  1) The demand for new alternatives will only be helpful as a contribution to a peaceful future for the world, if we learn to deal with the given realities in such a way that they get a new direction. Rejecting deterrence must not mean that we do not take reality seriously.
  2) Rejecting the spirit and logic of deterrence must have positive content, in that we answer the question of how in the given circumstances we can really help achieve a new way of thinking.
  3) Mutual deterrence threatens total destruction and is not limited to defense against military measures of one's opponent. Rejecting this system is not the same as rejecting a reasonable self-defense. We need to see through deterrence thinking as an abuse of every country's right to defense. Our churches have not questioned, but have recognized the legitimate security interests of our state and other states. That does not have to be amended, when we come to recognize that the spirit of the deterrence system can only be rejected.
  4) We will need a great deal of ecumenical communication about this, both in bilateral consultations and in the broader ecumenical institutions.

In response to this statement, fundamental theological questions were raised, such as:

- May Christians participate in the preparation for defense with nuclear weapons, when it is clear that defense will irreparably destroy what it is supposed to protect?
- May Christians participate in threatening with weapons which make more probable the catastrophe which they are supposed to prevent?
May Christians and churches in light of the unimaginable terror of a possible war still justify violence with weapons as a means of securing peace and as protection?

November 1983 marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s birth. Until that anniversary the GDR state had been sharply critical of Luther as a reactionary servant of the princely classes. School curricula, for example, mentioned Luther as a villain of his time. All that changed, however, as the government took the 1983 occasion to do some fundamental ideological revision of its interpretation of history. In 1980, the government organized its own top-level commission to prepare for the anniversary. The churches organized their own commission which cooperated with the government group as needed. The main buildings associated with Luther, particularly in Wittenberg and Erfurt, were renovated and repaired at government expense. A round of articles by Marxist scholars appeared discovering some positive contributions by Luther to German culture and historical progress. Meanwhile, the churches dug out the refrain from Luther’s Short Catechism, “You shall, above all things, fear, love and trust God.” They organized a series of seven regional church rallies around the country throughout that year, all under that theme, challenging their members to ask what it might mean to risk trust. New scholarly and popular editions of Luther’s works were published. The Federal Synod reported that year:

The main intent of the church events in the Luther Year is to enter into dialogue with Martin Luther, using his own statements, as a witness to Jesus Christ, an interpreter of Holy Scripture, a teacher and reformer of the church, and in the conversation with him, to make some progress. Thus, honoring Luther appropriately means enabling God and Jesus Christ to speak, reading and interpreting Holy Scripture together, uncovering and naming threats to the church, in order to help the church to be renewed by the Gospel. The basic insights of the Reformation still need to be applied to the present, even, where necessary, against our own tradition and institutions.

Since 1985, the GDR constantly had as a story underneath the story the changes in the Soviet Union brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev’s ascent to power. The GDR government followed a zigzag course in responding to Gorbachev’s initiatives, and its behavior toward the church has varied accordingly. At first, the GDR churches noticed some further relaxation. The state-run movie studio released a film called "Bear One Another’s Burden" about a young Christian and a young party member who are thrown together as involuntary roommates and their gradually coming to tolerate and to respect each other. A West German film about Martin Niemoeller, “What Would Jesus Say?” was shown in GDR theaters, sometimes with dialogue between local Christians and party members organized afterwards. Church newspapers began to include more controversial material. Peace groups began to expand into hitherto taboo areas like environmental pollution. In September 1987, Christian young people participated with unprecedented openness in a government-sponsored peace march commemorating Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme.
Of particular importance to the churches was the emergence of a broad range of self-organized groups addressing all kinds of social issues, including the taboos of human rights and ecological concerns. While maintaining substantial independence from church structures in defining their agenda, the groups consistently sought refuge within the church to protect their legitimacy. With hindsight, an extraordinary unplanned partnership evolved, with the groups willing to press the social agendas steps further than the church leaders were willing or able to go, while the church leaders provided protection without which the groups would have been thoroughly destroyed by the secret police.

By late 1987 a change began to show, and 1988 proved to be full on tension for the churches. The seven weekly church newspapers came under repeated attack and occasional editions were confiscated. Church leaders repeatedly had to seek top-level talks with government authorities to restore regular working conditions for the papers.

In addition, new groups of people seeking emigration used both church and secular events to stage special demonstrations, in the hope that the public attention would speed their cases. Some were arrested. The churches organized a series of intercessory worship services on behalf of those in prison. People trying to attend those overcrowded services were turned away by the police. Klaus Gysi, the state secretary for religious affairs, was quietly toppled for being unable to control the situation.

The international ecumenical "conciliar process" for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) took root in the GDR and led to a series of three highly visible church "delegates assemblies" at roughly six-month intervals. In them, a broad range of international and domestic issues were hotly debated. The section of the final documents on "Justice in the GDR" was particularly sharp in naming many problems against which people particularly chafed. The recommendations of the JPIC process were passed from hand to hand across the country, and discussions of them were even heard inside enterprises. They proved to be quite influential in forming the reform agenda of the early stages of the 1989 revolution.

The September 1988 Federal Synod reported:

The Protestant Church has always challenged people to stay in our country, and to give witness with their lives that Jesus Christ has called them to this place. The church will not stop its mission of witnessing the liberating message of the Gospel to people, no matter what kind of situation they get into and need help. The church will turn in pastoral responsibility to such people as request advice and help. It will not deny this help to people who want to leave our country. At the same time it will help to stop irresponsible and degrading treatment of people who want to leave.

They may not be barred from entering worship services and other church meetings. The church has protested repeatedly against hindering people from attending church events, and especially worship services, at various places in the GDR. Wherever the issue becomes participation in worship and other events, the church's mission is directly affected. Hindering attendance at worship curtails the right to free practice of religion.
In the spring of 1989, groups of people loosely under church auspices organized to monitor the local elections held in May of that year. As democratic reforms began to break through in Poland and Hungary during the summer of 1989, tensions mounted within the GDR. When Hungary opened its border to Austria, GDR citizens began to use that route to "vote with their feet" to emigrate to West Germany. The character of the whole society had changed from one which chose to stay to one which chose to leave. The exodus seriously demoralized those who remained behind, leading to a powderkeg situation by September.

On September 10, 1989 the Federation leadership released an open letter to Honecker, addressing the hemorrhage:

Anxious and concerned, the Leadership Conference of the Evangelical Churches notes that the numbers of people applying for release from GDR citizenship have not diminished, that citizens are leaving the GDR by way of the Hungarian/Austrian border, and that some individuals are trying to force their emigration by other means.

Faced with this situation, the Conference does not know what it can do. Even the easing of travel restrictions, as requested by the Conference, has not helped--in its present scope--to reduce the number of exit application...

Therefore, we are asking urgently and again that steps be taken

- to lead open and true-to-life discussions about the causes of discontent and malfunctions in our society and not to reject them out of hand with stereotypical admonitions or even with threats.

- to accept critical objections by citizens and to give them consideration so that the results will be noticeable changes beneficial to all.

- to work toward making available pertinent information in all political and economic areas and toward realistic reporting by our media which no longer contradicts what our citizens are seeing with their own eyes and experiencing for themselves day after day.

- to see to it that all government offices respect all citizens as partners who shares responsibility rather than treating them as subjects who need supervision.

- to secure for all citizens, regardless of family ties, permission to travel to other countries.

- to permit officially the return of all GDR citizens who have moved to another country.

What then happened in the momentous fall of 1989 is a matter of public record. The churches' role in the events leading to the collapse of the GDR is less well known, and a matter of some controversy among the participants themselves. At least three functions can be identified unique to the churches during those precarious weeks: years of preparation ahead, direct organization of the mass movement of people, and midwifing the birth of the transitional government.
The churches' weeknight services for peace became the nucleus of the street demonstrations. The churches' longstanding commitment to nonviolence provided the precedent and discipline which kept the demonstrations nonviolent on the part of the participants. After the government fell, the wall opened, and early efforts to establish a transitional government failed to achieve power, the churches established a "round table" forum to which representatives from the former government and all major opposition groups were invited to agree on procedures for holding new elections and establishing a new parliament. The round table model was emulated in all major cities to deal with local issues, such as party property and the secret police legacy, in each case with local church leaders presiding as the only group with the moral authority (and the experience in parliamentary procedure!) to lead such meetings.

With the emergency of the transition nearly behind them, and the GDR established along the road to unification with the Federal Republic, the churches turned to mending their own tattered fences with related churches in West Germany. In a January 1990 declaration at Loccum, West Germany, church leaders announced their intent to establish their own unity at their own pace. This declaration met with considerable opposition for moving too fast among GDR church people when it was first released. In fact, it identified a timetable for unification of the churches by the end of 1991, a deadline now beaten by six months with the June EKD synod meeting mentioned above. The two church agencies established a joint commission to work out the terms of unification.

According to recent statistics, the EKD before unification consisted of seventeen member regional churches with about 25 million people and an annual income from the church tax system of 6.5 billion Deutschmarks. The GDR Church Federation consisted of eight member regional churches with roughly 5.1 million people and an income of voluntary contributions of about 107 million GDR marks. Outstanding problems between the churches include the longstanding controversy over military chaplaincy, policies concerning the church tax finance system, and religious education in the public schools. In the whole country, differences in abortion laws (available in the former GDR, highly restricted in the former FRG) remain deeply controversial with special implications for the churches.

In addition, churches in "the five new provinces" as the territory of the former GDR is now referred to, are facing enormous pastoral problems as the economy has collapsed and unemployment has soared. The legacy of the secret police has left deep scars and disillusionment. Many speak of forty years 'stolen' from their lives. Environmental devastation from the socialist industrial policies has left large areas of the country with serious pollution problems and resulting health damage.

Repeatedly, as they try to make sense of those decades, church people in the former GDR are asked what they do want to keep, what is worth bringing into the new situation.
Some of the questions are sympathetic, some hostile, but articulating responses has been difficult and painful. In response to such questions, at the final meeting of the Federation’s synod in February 1991 Bishop emeritus Werner Krusche of Magdeburg was invited to attempt to summarize their twenty two years together. He developed six fundamental theses:

1. God needed us to have a church living in a society with a socialist model and an atheistic ideology, which--without giving up its previous community [with the West German churches]--intentionally accepted the place it was put, to fulfill its mission here and to bring the gospel close to the people.

2. God granted us that we could make a small step of progress along the path toward greater community with each other and within world Christianity.

3. God made us sensitive to the problems of human survival and taught us that hope for the shalom of God's kingdom makes it necessary and possible for us to contribute toward the maintaining peace, achieving justice, and preserving the creation.

4. God challenged us in the social context God gave us, listening to God's word, to walk the narrow path between opposition and opportunism, between complete rejection and complete acceptance in critical solidarity and mature responsibility.

5. God led us to try new forms and structures for our work and to gain new insights into what we need for a church which became a minority.

6. God made us a community of people who were learning. We can speak openly with each other about what we think we learned along the path we went and what we would like to keep, where we got stuck, and where we deceived ourselves and assumed guilt.

The churches have now been structurally unified with West German churches, and the Federation has been dissolved. A political campaign to discredit church leaders by charging them with inappropriate security police contacts has reached an unexpected pitch. Church tax is being implemented across the "five new provinces," as the former-GDR is now called, providing for a serious income loss in the short term. Children’s religious instruction is being implemented in the public schools, albeit with some controversy, according to the former West German model.

While it is too soon to for the final historical analysis of this chapter to be written, these theses offer a pretty good summary of their faith journey. In his essay from New Year's Eve 1942, After Ten Years, Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggles with the thought of years being lost under a bad system and rejects calling them lost years. He writes: "Time lost is time in which we have failed to live a full human life, gain experience, learn, create, enjoy, and suffer; it is time that has not been filled up, but left empty. These last years have certainly not been like that." They were not empty in the GDR, either, but full under God.