

***KIRCHE IM SOZIALISMUS: EAST GERMAN PROTESTANTISM'S  
POLITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL WITNESS, 1945-1990.***

By John S. Conway

John S. Conway is Professor of History at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945 (New York: Basic Books, 1969) as well as numerous articles on recent German church history, the Vatican, and Christian-Jewish relations in the twentieth century.

In the beginning was the church--and no State. Germany's inglorious capitulation of May 1945, as Martin Greschat has rightly noted, left the Christian churches bereft of the established support they had enjoyed for centuries from princes, electors, kings, and even their secular successors. The physical ruin of Germany, the occupation of the whole country by foreign armies, the collapse of all national authority, the roving bands of displaced persons, the desperate shortages of food and medicines, presented a bleak picture of a defeated and divided nation. But even more striking was the moral humiliation. German Protestants were now forced to face the fact that the Nazi regime which, for the most part, they had loyally supported, had betrayed their ideals, and made them accomplices in inhuman crimes on an unprecedented scale. The nation's total defeat had shattered the illusion that Lutheran orthodoxy could be combined with the goals of Nazism, along with its dreams of domination and conquest. Instead, church leaders were now confronted with an awareness of moral disaster, which was only exacerbated by the terrible and unrelenting revelations of atrocities committed in the name of Germany in the concentration camps and throughout the occupied countries. The result was disillusionment about the past and dismay for the future. The dilemma which Dietrich Bonhoeffer had perceived in 1939 had now become a calamitous reality:

Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization.

In these circumstances it was remarkable that the surviving church leaders had the courage to begin afresh in the attempt to make German Protestantism once again a living and creative reality. Their issuing of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt in October 1945, though highly disputed, was a sign of their determination to restore the church's witness by admitting their complicity in not combatting effectively enough the evils of Nazism, and by recognizing the need for a complete cleansing and spiritual renewal.

The situation in East Germany was particularly grim, and was only heightened by indoctrinated fears of the ravages of the Russian occupation troops and consequent Soviet political oppression. In fact, however, church leaders, such as Otto Dibelius, newly-installed as bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, were surprised by the Soviet military occupation's almost benevolent attitude which allowed church services to continue and

church life to be revived. But subsequently when the Communist-led German Socialist Unity Party (SED) consolidated its hold and after the establishment in 1949 of the German Democratic Republic, the situation grew more difficult. The doctrinaire Marxists in charge made no secret of their hostility to the churches, which were regarded as survivals of a pre-socialist culture, due to be replaced by the historically-destined victory of atheistic Communism. The regime was determined to assert the supremacy of Marxism-Leninism in forging a new socialist ideology for the land of workers and peasants, which should become the irreversible pattern for the whole German people. Severe restrictions were placed upon the church's witness and outreach. The church was forced to retreat from its former positions of privilege and status, and many churchmen were led to believe that their only hope lay in the ever-retreating prospect of reunification with their fellow Lutherans in the west.

In the face of the Communists' strident charges that the Christian churches had been supine accomplices in the Nazis' wanton crimes and aggressions, the surviving members of the Confessing Church sought to put the record straight. They undertook to describe the dramatic events of their Church Struggle against Nazi misrule, to draw attention to their ordeals and sufferings at the Nazis' hands, and to chronicle the resistance efforts of their own heroes and martyrs. These were, to be sure, few in number. There was Paul Schneider, a fearless preacher, tortured to death in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1939; there was Martin Niemöller, who miraculously survived seven years in Sachsenhausen and Dachau as the *Führer's* personal prisoner. But both his nationalist past and his unaccommodating and lacerating demands for contrition and repentance after his reappearance made him a controversial role model. And then there was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But in 1945 Bonhoeffer was a relatively unknown figure. He had never been in charge of a parish in Germany, and his conspiratorial activities against the Nazis had necessarily been secret.

Not until 1951, with the publication of his Letters and Papers from Prison, edited by his close associate Eberhard Bethge, did his deeds and ideas gain a wider audience. This small book, and Bethge's later superb biography, showed Bonhoeffer to have been a consistent opponent of Nazism from the beginning, whose insights and predictions had been strikingly vindicated by events. Here, it seemed, was a true example of the 'other Germany', a theologian whose Christian discipleship had led him to conspire against Hitler's evil regime, and to seek, if necessary, to overthrow it by force. The dreadful circumstances of his murder at the hands of the SS in Flossenbürg concentration camp, only days before its liberation, added still greater poignancy to his words and stimulated interest in the work of this most promising theologian whose life had been so tragically cut short at the early age of thirty-nine.

But it was not so much the desire to find a heroic exemplar from the days of the Church Struggle which gave Bonhoeffer's surviving writings their appeal. Rather it was the fact that, particularly in East Germany, there was an urgent need for a new theological vision, which could offer guidance in their unprecedented and troubled situation. For many East Germans Bonhoeffer's honesty, self-doubt, and self-criticism, as expressed in his unfinished and often enigmatic remarks about the future of Christianity in the post-war

world, opened up new horizons and appeared to offer more forceful insights than did traditional orthodoxy. Many younger pastors were strongly attracted by the radicalism of his ideas, which were, in fact, to become one of the main formative theological influences in the East German churches during the 1960s and 1970s.

Bonhoeffer appealed for a new beginning. He called on the church to renounce its misguided tradition of providing theological justification for the nationalism and militarism of the past. He invited churchmen to accept the loss of their former privileges by becoming a serving, not a ruling, church. Christians, he believed, could now best witness by living 'for others' in a 'world come of age'. Furthermore, he asserted, in the secularized climate of the post-war world, attempts by religious establishments to stress man's dependence upon God or his church would increasingly fall on deaf ears. What was required in the future was a 'religion-less Christianity' which would instead demonstrate its faith by participating in the sufferings of fellow-men, particularly of the poor, the weak and the marginalized in society. Here would be a true, if costly discipleship.

Such ideas did not, however, find universal acclamation, especially in West Germany. Some West German church leaders, for example, were much more attracted by the notion that Lutheranism should now take advantage of the overthrow of Nazi paganism to finalize the spiritual vacuum by embarking on vigorous programme of 're-Christianizing' Germany, which also included a restoration of the church's former privileges. Many Germans, especially those of the older generation, still regarded Bonhoeffer with distrust. His imprisonment and execution, they believed, were due to his political treachery against Hitler, and such disloyalty was incompatible with their understanding of Romans 13. When the pastor and people of Flossenburg put up a plaque to commemorate Bonhoeffer, the then Lutheran bishop of Munich refused to have anything to do with the dedication, on the grounds that Bonhoeffer was a political casualty, not a Christian martyr.

But for many younger pastors in the German Democratic Republic, Bonhoeffer's message seemed particularly relevant to their situation. In the drastically changed political and social circumstances confronting their churches, they were well aware that they could not expect to return to the comfortable security of earlier years. Many believed that the lessons of the Church Struggle against Nazism necessitated a new approach, both theologically and politically. In East Berlin, for example, they formed the Weisensee Study Group, which was highly critical of the backward-looking views of their bishop, Dibelius, and instead welcomed the new impulses from Bonhoeffer's legacy. They were particularly encouraged by receiving support from the prominent Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who had earlier been the leading theologian of the church struggle and who was now highly regarded in reformed Protestant circles around the world. In 1958, in a letter to a young East German pastor, Barth had adopted a surprisingly lenient stance towards the new G.D.R., and warned the churches against a doctrinaire anti-Communist attitude. In the following year, together with an East German student chaplain, Johannes Hamel, Barth published a small book, How to Serve God in a Marxist Land, which took an optimistic view of the Christian situation in East Germany. Barth and Hamel called on church members to remain true to the tenets of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 by

refusing to see the Gospel as identified with 'the western way of life' or to idealize conditions in West Germany. Rather, Hamel wrote, Christians in East Germany should accept the revolutionary changes around them and make use of these changes as an opportunity:

In the face of these powers, God calls His people, treading the path of the cross, to new obedience, new praise, new prayer, new endurance. He calls for the renewal of our Church and for the transformation of her patterns in order that she may serve Him in greater faithfulness.

In such words we can surely recognize the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

By the end of the 1950s it seemed clear that the German Democratic Republic, under the control of the Marxist-dominated SED, had come to stay. The wishful thinking of many western politicians that the regime would disappear under pressure for reunification was belied by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which effectively cut off contacts between East and West. From the time of the second Berlin crisis of 1958, the East German government had subjected the churches to continuous pressure, which was only intensified in the following decade, demanding that they should separate themselves from fellow Lutherans in West Germany and particularly from the official structures of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, i.e. the umbrella organization which up to then had linked both the western and eastern churches, and which had been one of the most active forces promoting national unity. After several years of heated debate the East German churches agreed in 1969 to the formation of the *Bund der Evangelische Kirchen in der DDR*, or *Kirchenbund*, a federation of the eight East German Protestant churches. By this move they relinquished many of their organizational ties with West Germany. At the same time the East Germans still affirmed their desire to retain a special but undefined relationship with their western colleagues.

Such an accommodation to the pressures of the G.D.R. government was, of course, strongly resisted by staunch anti-Communists, such as Bishop Dibelius, who went so far as to question the moral authority of the G.D.R. state in terms of Romans 13. But Dibelius' wholehearted support for the Bonn Federal Republic, including its policies of remilitarization and its plans to install military chaplaincies had led to his being banned from the eastern half of his diocese. Resentment against his authoritarian style of leadership also added to the belief of many East German pastors that the time had come to seek a new style of Christian witness in circumstances which appeared irreversible for years to come. The need was now apparent for some new arrangement between the churches and the Communist authorities.

No less striking was a change in the Marxist government's policy towards the churches. At first the regime had tried, like Hitler, to root out the influence of 'political clericalism' and in particular had forcibly repressed the churches' youth and education work. Its massive ideological campaign sought to discredit the 'reactionary superstitions' of all religions in order to pressure Christians to turn away from their traditional church loyalties, instead to embrace the more modern creed of Marxist-Leninist socialism. But

with the consolidation of the regime in the 1960s its policy now began to recognize that forcible repression was counter-productive and that the existence of the churches as social institutions would have to be tolerated for at least several more decades. This conclusion involved a similar change of tactics, in particular in the Ministry of State Security, nicknamed the *Stasi*.

As we now know, the *Stasi* constituted the largest and most elaborate state secret police organization in the world. It is estimated that, at any one time, in addition to its full-time professional staff more than 100,000 'unofficial collaborators', i.e. paid or unpaid informers, were actively engaged in spying on their friends, neighbors, colleagues, and even families. The surviving files, containing information on more than four million East German citizens, occupy no less than 120 miles of office space. Documents from this Ministry, newly available since 1989, are highly revealing and often personally shattering. But, in particular, they provide a graphic picture of the lurching, often contradictory practices adopted by the *Stasi* in seeking to control and manipulate the churches. Even though the official policy remained firm in asserting that the churches were 'agents of political reaction', hand in glove with the West, and bent on overthrowing the GDR state, the *Stasi's* policy in the 1960s changed from one of outright intimidation to one of 'normalization'. The *Stasi* was now instructed to instigate increased measures of infiltration by building up its corps of 'unofficial collaborators', to report in minute detail on all activities of the church bodies, and at the same time to influence church policies in directions desired by the regime. These multifarious activities were to be undertaken by a specially-created section XX/4 responsible for the surveillance and subversion of the churches. The vast extent of this *Stasi* network can now be seen to have been even more pervasive than anyone suspected. In the city of Leipzig, for example, no fewer than 120 such 'unofficial collaborators' were organized by the *Stasi* to spy on church activities, and the bishop himself was surrounded by a number of these individuals, including members of his diocesan office.

But, at the same time, the *Stasi's* practices were ambiguous. On the one hand it insisted on strict political control and was quick to suppress any open opposition. On the other hand it also sought to encourage so-called 'progressive elements' in the churches and to foster those church activities which might enhance the policies of the regime, especially abroad. Selected and compliant individuals were allowed to travel to ecumenical meetings in foreign countries. Appointments to theological schools and faculties were given to those demonstrably loyal to the regime. Organizations such as the Christian Peace Conference were secretly subsidized in an attempt to support those Christians who opposed the western policies of remilitarization and nuclear rearmament and whose deliberations were blatantly exploited for propagandistic purposes. By such means the *Stasi* and its political masters played cat and mouse with the church authorities, alternating between repression and seduction, but never abandoning the determination to make the churches subservient to its overall goal of consolidating the 'socialist identity' of the German Democratic Republic.

In these circumstances the church leaders in East Germany recognized that they faced two major challenges. On the one hand they were at pains to make clear to the East

German government that they were not mere accomplices of a western-based plot to destabilize the regime. They therefore sought to establish their own independent decision-making organs, clearly separate from the all-German E.K.I.D. This led to deliberate measures to distance themselves from the West German churches and to demand the right to separate representation in such bodies as the World Council of Churches or the World Lutheran Federation. On the other hand they also recognized the need to uphold the witness and autonomy of the church against the totalitarian ambitions of an explicitly atheist Party and State. The result was the rise of a movement calling itself *Kirche im Sozialismus*, or Church within Socialism, which sought a distinctive proclamation of the Gospel, untainted by associations with the past errors of the church or with the anti-Communist stance of western Christians.

The most prominent advocate of this movement was Albrecht Schönherr, who became in 1967 the acting and later the elected Bishop of East Berlin and Brandenburg, and simultaneously chairman of the East German Church Federation. He had been one of Bonhoeffer's first students at Finkenwalde, and, in the 1950's, was a member of the Weissensee Study Group. Theologically this group accepted Bonhoeffer's insight that "Christendom" in its traditional form was no longer a valid option. Instead, the East German churchmen saw that new patterns of discipleship were called for in what was likely to remain--at least for the foreseeable future--a Marxist-controlled and indoctrinated society. The churches could no longer rely on their traditional sources of authority, backed by the power of the established government. Nor could they expect to play their well-known role as the guardians of the nation's conscience in matters of public morality. Nevertheless they were determined to seek to remain a relevant and creative minority and rejected the temptation of becoming a pietistic sect, concerned only with its own personal salvation or preaching only about the world to come. Instead they wanted to be actively engaged as Christians in an atheistic state without surrendering the traditions of their faith. They were called, they believed, to be "there for the world, just as Christ was there for the world," not merely for their own members, but for non-Christians as well.

The theological justification of such an unprecedented and hazardous stance was expressed by Heino Falcke, the head of one of the church's theological colleges, in 1972:

We cannot accept withdrawal from the secular world into sacred isolation. Were we to settle for that we would be falsifying the gospel of freedom into a spare-time gospel. We would ourselves be victims of the misunderstanding that declares the gospel to be an instrument of man's alienation rather than of his social liberation. We would be conceding that man's political maturity depends on his liberation from Christ rather than on being liberated by Christ.

It was on this basis that Schönherr and other church leaders sought a fresh start in their relationship with the Communist state. On the one hand they heeded the warning of the Church Struggle's most significant statement, the Barmen Declaration, that no dominant ideology should be allowed to dictate the church's doctrines and polity. It was on these grounds that some pastors opposed the separate creation of the *Kirchenbund*. On the other

hand they also heeded the call for Christians to witness wherever God had placed them. Could God leave empty spaces on the map? If not, how was he at work in the GDR? The Church needed to share in the confusion and struggle of each age, not to sit above parties or above the clouds. For, as Bonhoeffer had insisted, the church "in which Jesus Christ . . . is presently active as its Lord", cannot be "placeless."

In line with these views the churches sought to adopt a position of critical solidarity within their particular socialist society, not beside it, not against it, but certainly not endorsing it. The short slogan *Kirche im Sozialismus*--or as Schönherr later preferred 'The Christian in a world come of age'--became the benchmark of this movement, seeking to stress its political contribution through service to the welfare of the whole community. This stance involved a deliberate refusal to adopt a ghetto-like existence or the mentality of a diaspora. It also meant refusing the idea that the state would impose its totalitarian goals on the whole of society. Instead it sought to adopt a thoughtful concept of how Christians should take their place as citizens in a post-Christian society. Schönherr was clear that this entailed steering a course between the twin dangers of a total acceptance or a total rejection. The great danger of accommodation lies in the temptation for a powerless church to seek its own institutional survival by sacrificing its freedom and the fullness of the Gospel. But the danger of rejection lies in the false assumption that an atheist and totalitarian state can only produce error in all its operations.

Leading members of the Communist regime, however, reacted with suspicion to such an attempt to revitalize the East German Church. Similarly many of the church's own members were skeptical for traditionalist reasons. Several years were to pass before the church leaders could find acceptance for this new position of 'critical solidarity,' or as some termed it 'pro-existence.' The model followed was that of the Confessing Church during the Nazi years, treading the thin dividing line between compromise and opposition and seeking to safeguard their institutional freedom while resisting the pervasive surveillance, harassment, and often unpredictable repression to which they were subjected. Nonetheless as Schönherr reminded his audiences, the real question for Christians had been posed by Bonhoeffer in one of his enigmatic prison reflections: "After 2000 years of church history, during which the church had often enough demanded that others should be there for her, rather than she for them, `are we still of any use?'" Bonhoeffer's positive answer, from his cheerless cell in Tegel jail, gave them the courage to seek to forge new patterns of costly discipleship.

The strongly ethical emphasis on service, derived from Bonhoeffer's legacy, saw the East German churches maintain and extend throughout the country a vast network of social service agencies--hospitals for the mentally-ill, old-age homes, hostels for delinquent youth and alcoholics, kindergartens for the young, church choirs, publishing houses, retreat centers and most significantly their own theological schools. By such means they were able to demonstrate their positive contribution to the life of the socialist-dominated state and had won the grudging admission in 1960 from the Communist leader, Walter Ulbricht, that "Christianity and the humanistic goals of socialism are not contradictory." For its part the state now began to see the value of exploiting the churches' contacts abroad as a means of gaining greater international recognition for the sovereignty and

equal status of the German Democratic Republic. By the end of the 1970s the results seemed encouraging.

A notable meeting between the SED chief, Erich Honecker, and Albrecht Schönherr in March 1978 paved the way for a greater rapprochement. The church leaders were now prepared to distinguish between dictatorships of the right and left, were ready to affirm the allegedly humanistic goals of Marxism, and even saw the prophetic role of the church as recalling the regime to its own best intentions. For their part the Communist authorities saw this meeting as a new sign of the "readiness of the Evangelical churches to cooperate in the formation of the socialist society. It is the end of an often painful learning and re-evaluation process amongst the churches." The SED leaders also noted that the churches were demonstrating an "increased sense of loyalty to the GDR, and were using their influence in the World Council of Churches to strengthen the interests of the younger churches in the Third World and the socialist states." Hence they were prepared to postpone the 'inevitable' victory of atheistic materialism, to tolerate the church's existence as the embodiment of an alternative value system, and to allow it a relative freedom to conduct its own affairs within limits, which however were always subject to the regime's ideological purposes.

Pragmatically this development gave the churches a new sense of direction and purpose, though at the price of recognizing the distinct identity of the German Democratic Republic by acknowledging that, ideologically as well as geographically, they were now on separate paths from their fellow Lutherans in the West. The justification for this jettisoning of much of the church's political heritage, it may be suggested, was to be found in Bonhoeffer's well-known words urging renunciation of past privileges and a willing identification with the new social conditions.

Despite this evidence of a more harmonious relationship between the state and church leadership, the *Stasi* still retained its ingrained suspicion and wariness. Its agents continued to see the churches as potential destabilizers of the regime and in any case were not ready to abandon their habit of seeking to control every aspect of the nation's existence. The *Stasi* included in its espionage network not only well-known opponents but also those church leaders who could be regarded as 'trustworthy' and especially those who had contacts with the West. Instructions were issued for "measures to reduce the churches' attempts to become a collecting point for hostile forces or to misuse opposition movements, by spreading their political influence and religious views." Furthermore under the leadership of the Soviet Office of Security, a common plan should be worked out "to oppose the aggressively ideological claims of the Vatican and to attack both the position of Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Church."

The ambivalence of the GDR authorities was openly apparent in 1983 during the festivities commemorating the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth. The SED leader, Honecker, took a personal interest in promoting this event, but his underlings in the *Stasi* saw these celebrations as an opportunity to increase the staff of their church section and to employ even more 'unofficial collaborators' to spy on church activities. Subsequently

in February 1985 the *Stasi* chief, Mielcke, issued new instructions, calling for more agents to be recruited principally from

active church members, including youth and students, from the protestant and catholic youth groups; students of theology, art or literature; relatives of the scientific, artistic and medical intellectual classes; individuals who are professionally engaged in ecological concerns, or others who devote themselves to nature and ecology in the so-called alternative life-styles.

The *Stasi* undoubtedly believed that such measures would enhance their control and manipulation of the church and its leaders. They failed to recognize that the church leaders were themselves under constant pressure from their followers, whose wishes they had to listen to if they were not to lose all credibility. At the same time the church leaders' hopes for a new atmosphere of Christian-Marxist dialogue and their pleas for a more open political climate were disappointed, especially after the regime refused to listen to demands for a liberalization of its travel and emigration restrictions.

One of the most significant demonstrations of the East German churches' social engagement came in the 1980s with their championing of the peace movement. The churches articulated and supported the widely-felt, if often sentimental, pacifist views of significant sections of the population. Numerous Synod declarations were issued, expressing moral outrage at the senseless slaughter and bloodshed of war, along with fervent protests against the folly of the arms race or the rapacity of armament manufacturers, demands that resources could be more profitably deployed than in military alliances, or the belief that war was incompatible with the commands of the Christian gospel. The East German churches refused to limit their campaign solely to denunciations of the West, as the regime demanded, but courageously called for concessions closer to home, such as respect for the rights of conscientious objectors. Such a stance was risky both theologically and politically, since Lutheran theology had traditionally repudiated Christian pacifism, and continued to do so in the west.

Predictably the SED regime and the *Stasi* closely monitored the churches' organization of the peace movement but were divided as to how to counteract any advantages the churches might seek to gain. On the one hand they welcomed the churches' pronouncements and those of the Christian Peace Conference, which denounced the remilitarization plans of NATO and in particular the decision to deploy rocket missiles on West German territory. On the other hand they refused to listen to the churches' objections to the introduction in 1978 of military instruction as a compulsory subject in all ninth and tenth grades in the GDR's high schools. In the following year the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and in 1980 the strong-arm intervention against the Solidarity movement in Poland were vigorously endorsed by the GDR government. Stringent measures were adopted to prevent any demonstrations of opposition or inflammatory statements on behalf of the victims which might have had a spillover effect. In November 1981 the churches proclaimed a Decade for Peace, when thousands of their followers spontaneously adopted the symbol of swords being beaten into plowshares to wear as patches or buttons on their clothing. These were promptly confiscated by the *Stasi*, and

orders were given to repress any activities which might weaken the readiness of the people to defend the G.D.R. militarily against its enemies.

Nevertheless despite this partial crackdown, the churches' initiatives in the peace movement gave them confidence that they could address other issues of concern to the citizens of the G.D.R. The churches' sense of autonomy and influence as a moral factor was strengthened. Groups and individuals otherwise quite outside the churches' liturgical life now found support and a common bond in prayer meetings for peace or in discussions about common problems in social life. Here, it can be said, the churches, especially at the local level and with the help of the Evangelical Academies, resolutely lived up to the ideals of *Kirche im Sozialismus*, by becoming the voice of the voiceless and by appealing to the regime to embark on an open and frank dialogue with the people.

It was principally because of this theologically-based conviction that the churches were not prepared to follow the path of resignation, cynical accommodation or withdrawal into the sphere of private life, which was so marked a characteristic of much of the general population. Indeed the inhabitants of the GDR had grown accustomed, from childhood up, to live schizophrenically, dividing their lives between what they thought or desired privately and what they were openly allowed to express. Seldom did anyone dare to voice his or her real opinions, and this taboo led to a resigned acceptance of the increasingly glaring contradiction between their actual situation and the glorified propaganda of the regime's pronouncements. But the churches, as Helmut Zeddies noted, were resolved, as the only institution independent of the bureaucratic centralism of the SED, to break through this deliberately enforced tissue of lies, and to muster whatever influence and credibility they still enjoyed, seeking to become the advocate of all those who had been for so long excluded from the significant decision-making process of this 'socialist' society. Increasingly, therefore, the churches provided not only the physical facilities, but more importantly, the organizational encouragement for a large number of other popular initiatives, sponsoring discussion of human rights, ecology, women's issues, the position of homosexuals, or the problems of underdevelopment in Third World countries. Such groups offered opportunities for wide-ranging debate, free from the ideological and political regimentation of the State and Party. Particularly for the young, these gatherings were an alternative social meeting ground in an atmosphere of open and friendly solidarity, which then became a crystallization point for political protest. In church halls and basements in Leipzig, Dresden, Magdeburg, and East Berlin, the churches put themselves at the front of popular pressures for reform.

Particularly notable in this connection was the series of meetings called to discuss the project, adopted world-wide by the World Council of Churches, to promote Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation. These initiatives were significant not only because they served to build a bridge between the prudent stance of the church leaders and the radicalism of the more outspoken protesters. They also achieved an ecumenical involvement of the Roman Catholic Church, hitherto a rather withdrawn community. But above all the explicit concern for world peace and justice and the emphasis on environmental protection undermined the regime's long-standing claim that the churches had done nothing to oppose the exploitative capitalism of western countries.

The rapid growth and often spontaneous success of these activities, however, resulted in a considerable dilemma for the church leaders. Some of the more activist pastors, such as Rainer Eppelmann of the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin, welcomed these 'basis groups' as the means for a critical evaluation of the regime's performance and endorsed their demands for the church to show solidarity with their often utopian ideas for the renewal of society. But the bishops, although sensitive to the reformers' accusations that their seeming half-heartedness was betraying their own biblical and theological premises, were also very conscious of the likelihood of the state's repressive reactions. The uncontrollable activities of such 'basis groups' endangered the 'modus vivendi' which the church leaders believed they had established with the state since 1978. Their practice of trying to settle all outstanding difficulties by diplomatic means through confidential talks with the state authorities was not being openly challenged from below.

Outwardly the church leaders sought to claim that the protests of these church-sponsored 'basis groups' were constructive and positive in intent, as they enabled the citizens to contribute to the national life. But in the following years it became clear that this kind of eirenic approach was not enough. The church leaders found themselves criticized for their supposed reluctance to adopt a more explicit political stance in opposition to the regime. Yet open support for such 'basis groups' conflicted with their obvious unwillingness to countenance a return to the embattled situation of earlier decades.

This radicalizing tendency received even greater impetus after President Gorbachev's proclamation of the advantages of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Expectations were aroused that this 'wind of change' from the Soviet Union would extend to East Germany and resulted in an enormous escalation of popular support for the lead offered by the churches in articulating and mobilizing the desire for a more humane form of socialism in the daily life of the people.

In this tense situation the contradictions in the regime's church policy became more and more apparent. In November 1987 just when the GDR's Secretary for Church Affairs, Klaus Gysi, was paying an unprecedented visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva to express his government's support, the hardliners at home were preparing to take even stronger measures to suppress any dissent. At the end of the same month the *Stasi* conducted a forcible search of the Zion Church in East Berlin, confiscated large quantities of books and papers from its library, and arrested two of the church workers. It took all the tact and diplomacy of the church's officials to secure their release.

Despite the evidence that some of the *Stasi* leaders opposed any moves which would draw critical reactions from abroad, the hardliners won. Gysi was summarily retired, and in February 1988 the Presiding Bishop, Werner Leich, was summoned to meet with the Politburo member responsible for church affairs, Jarowinsky, who forthrightly accused the churches of encouraging open opposition to the regime's policies.

For their part the bishops prudently avoided any statements which could be seen as inciting their followers to open resistance. Theologically they reaffirmed the Confessing Church's view of 1934 that the church was not called to interfere with the state's

legitimate task or to see itself as an opposition party seeking the regime's downfall. Instead they soberly appealed to the existing state authorities to provide for justice and peace and to adopt the kind of policies which would gain acceptance and support from ordinary church members. At the same time they resisted demands from their more strident supporters for even more sweeping changes. Some of the more utopian and irresponsible remedies proposed clearly troubled the church leaders. As Bishop Leich remarked: "The Church is there for everyone, but not for everything."

This new political momentum, however, and the evidence that the government was unwilling to alter its entrenched position, raised doubt in many quarters about the continued validity of the movement *Kirche im Sozialismus*. What kind of 'socialism' had the churches been endorsing, and should they continue to do so? Had they not lent too much moral authority to the regime whose repressive character, bureaucratic ineptness, and failure to satisfy the economic and social desires of its citizens was not only too apparent? Some observers believed--as western churchmen had already claimed--that the church leaders had been too ready to compromise with the authorities or even that they had been suborned into complicity with the infamous *Stasi*. It was notable that, already by the mid-1980s, following Bishop Schönherr's retirement, his successors took pains to distance themselves from the earlier optimism of the *Kirche im Sozialismus* movement as they became more aware of its negative political implications. These reservations, to be sure, were related more to the ambiguity of the slogan than to the validity of its theological presuppositions. Nevertheless the bishops had to face increasing opposition from within their own ranks to this whole attempt to steer the church through the troubled waters of church-state relations by careful mediating navigation.

Such criticisms were expressed not only by Lutheran traditionalists who objected to the alleged left-leaning proclivities of the church leadership, whose tacit endorsement of the lies and absurdity of 'real existing socialism' they found to be appalling. More radical churchmen, too, sought to revive the long-suppressed but inherently Protestant thirst for justice. They now publicly called on their leaders to adopt an unambiguously challenging stance towards the regime. Already in 1982 the valiant but abrasive Ranier Eppelmann had issued his 'Berlin Appeal--Creating Peace without Weapons' which was critical of his superiors' accommodating policies. And in 1987 Friedrich Schorlemmer, head of the theological college in Luther's monastery in Wittenberg, had been even more outspoken in speaking of "the ruins of the concept of *Kirche im Sozialismus*," and in denouncing the prevarications of the bishops. The reformist initiative of the 'basis groups', he declared, had too often been frustrated by the careful calculations of the church authorities, who were looking over their shoulders to see what would be the likely consequences, asking themselves: How would the ruling Party react? How would such protests be exploited by sensationalist treatments in the western press? What would be the consequences for their own followers?

While Schorlemmer's protests may have been inspired by Luther's well-known hunger and thirst for righteousness, his demands were secular and concrete:

We demand that the communists abandon their monopoly of truth which they exercise with force and also give up the claim to have a superiority of judgement in principle in matters affecting society because only a lively culture of debate about the truth and the best way to constitute human co-existence leads to a humane and just world capable of surviving into the future.

He no longer held out any hope for the kind of rapprochement which *Kirche im Sozialismus* had once represented since:

As the development of socialist states has shown, the bureaucratization, corruption of officials, conformism, dogmatism, the caprice of officialdom and fear of those in power, have given rise to depression in the community, and the very essence of socialism is discredited. We regard it as a matter of urgency not only to expose such things but also to correct the abuses in our country.

These discontents mounted to a critical pitch after the communal elections of May 1989, when the duplicity of the regime's carefully stage-managed results was revealed through the churches' own observers. No longer was the population prepared to tolerate the long-enforced dichotomy between outward acceptance and inward denial. Their pent-up feelings of outrage and betrayal led to open denunciations of the state's falsifications and united all sections of community in their resolve to obtain change and renewal.

Despite these striking developments the bishops were not yet prepared to abandon their previous stance. Their prudence led them to seek to preserve the church's autonomy in order to fulfill its primary liturgical and pastoral tasks. The church was called, first and foremost, to worship God not to organize political protests. The bishops were moved more by a Lutheran theological conservatism than by any attachment to the existing regime, whose slings and arrows they had suffered at first hand for so long. Their fears that the state authorities would use their power forcibly to stamp out all opposition were not unjustified and were only enhanced when the German Communist hierarchy gave its public approval to the Chinese government's bloody suppression of the student uprisings of June 1989. If some of the bishops now had second thoughts about their earlier endorsements of the regime or were dismayed that their hopes for improvement in church-state relations were being so openly disavowed by their own followers, the blame seemed clearly to lie in the bankruptcy and failures of the state's policies.

As the atmosphere in 1989 became daily and palpably more dangerous, the church leaders' advice to their pastors was therefore to seek to find means of both harnessing and yet controlling this potentially explosive situation. It was in no small part due to the interventions of the churches that bloodshed was averted and the waves of public resentment were directed into constructive channels. The clergy made repeated and united pleas for peace and for the abstention from all forms of violence. This was perhaps the most significant contribution the churches made to the whole process of revolutionary change.

The traumatic events of the autumn of 1989, the collapse of the Communist Party's authority, and above all the spectacular breaching of the Berlin Wall, unleashed an enormous wave of public jubilation and relief. At last it seemed the time had come to affirm a very different destiny for Germany and to institute a new era of political and cultural self-determination, which would lead to a more humane and democratic form of socialism, freed from the Stalinist distortions and oppressions of the past forty years.

Church reformers, such as Friedrich Schorlemmer, or Heino Falcke, now pleaded for a return to the roots of Christian socialism, based on the biblical vision of righteousness, whereby the ideals of the Gospel could be realized in peace and freedom. They urged their fellow churchmen to accept Bonhoeffer's notion of 'deputyship' (*stellvertretendes Handeln*) and to take up the task of responsible political leadership in the search for a new reformed identity for the German Democratic Republic.

In the immediate aftermath of the *Wende*, this appeal was widely heeded. Pastors, theologians and church officials were entrusted with political and communal responsibilities at all levels, largely to fill the political vacuum. They were frequently invited to chair 'Round Table' discussions at which all points of view for political and social renewal were eagerly debated. In the first free elections for the East German parliament in March 1990, many such churchmen and women were called to fill high positions, including the Prime Minister, Lothar de Maiziere, and two of his Cabinet, as well as the leader of the majority Socialist opposition party, and later and more controversially, Manfred Stolpe, legal director of the central church office, who became the socialist premier of the newly-created state of Brandenburg. It was to be their finest hour.

But already this bold experiment was doomed to failure. The unstoppable demand for reunification with West Germany and for the entire liquidation of the East German state forced the abandonment of any hope for an independent, self-determining, and reformist East German community. The advocates of such a programme, including those in the churches, could only regard the precipitate rush into the arms of West German 'mammonism' as a disaster. The subsequent disappointment and disillusionment among many churchmen in the east was notable. The whole attempt to foster a separate and better identity for a 'reformed socialist' Germany was shown to be an illusion. Spokesmen for this point of view, who continued to uphold this ideal even after the decisive events of the *Wende*, now once again became prophets in the wilderness. Their belief that such a new order would be morally superior, not merely to the past, but to any future arrangement with West Germany, was perhaps their most valid point, but their refusal to acknowledge the overwhelming desire for improved economic conditions was self-defeating. Even more crucial was their unwillingness to recognize the impracticality of their vision of society, with its puritanical appeal to 'higher' gains through self-restraint and self-denial. As was pointed out,

the collective desire to be reunited with the other 'better' half of a divided nation proved far more effective than any attempts to breathe life into the tired and reluctant phantom of a socialism with a human face...The suggestion that the GDR should be the site of yet

another socialist experiment . . . was not surprisingly unpalatable particularly given the recent experiences of the East German population with similar chiliastic promises of fulfillment.

No less damaging were the revelations of how far complicity with the former *Stasi* had extended, even in the churches. Coming to terms with the record of the Communist past now threatened to become as divisive and painful as the still unresolved earlier attempts to deal with the Nazi years.

It is still too early to tell whether history will judge *Kirche im Sozialismus* to have been a failed political experiment or an over-idealistic theological aberration. On the one hand its supporters are right to claim success in shaking off the ties which had for years so long associated the Lutheran church with the aristocratic landed establishment and its political structures. The church leaders accepted the loss of their previous status and identity and resisted the temptation of becoming a politically-hostile minority in a socially irrelevant ghetto. Instead they sought a positive, if limited, engagement in society by stressing Bonhoeffer's ideal of being a church of service and witness available to all. They attempted to build bridges of understanding between Christianity and Marxism, in the hopes of overcoming the social and political divisions which had characterized a hundred years of hostility between the church and Germany's working classes. They made strenuous efforts to preach repentance for the church's failure to withstand Nazism more faithfully, and laid the groundwork for a totally new relationship between Christians and Jews. In short, they introduced a new stance into Lutheran practice by emphasizing openness to the world, concern for the suffering and marginalized, and a commitment to personal and social liberation, and thereby sought to overcome the narrowness of horizons of earlier years.

But at the same time these endeavors did not succeed in preventing the steady erosion of church support in East Germany. As John Burgess has noted, between 1949 and 1989, nominal affiliation with the church fell from 82% to 31%, and the number of active participants was far fewer. How far the particular theological stance of *Kirche im Sozialismus* contributed to this decline will be a matter of debate. Even more disputed will be the current perception that, by seeking to become a positive force in the 'real existing socialist' society, its advocates made too many compromises. Undoubtedly the search for a pragmatic working relationship with the state led to a readiness on the part of the church leaders to accept the legitimacy of the Marxist-Leninist political order. The church's defence of the victims of political injustice often appeared inconsistent and tempered by opportunism. The leaders' dealings with the State and the *Stasi* seemed--at least in retrospect--to have been too often marked by equivocation. Furthermore they showed a willingness at times to accept the view, often propagated by sympathizers abroad, that the East German church was a church of suffering, which by its renunciation of the material wealth of the capitalist world, had demonstrated a spiritually superior form of discipleship. There was certainly an element of wishful thinking in the belief that Christians and Marxists could together build a more perfect society, despite all the evidence of the corruption and failure of idealism which marked the GDR's totalitarian regime. It was even more of an illusion for the church leaders to believe that such a

system was reformable or that 'socialism with a human face' could be produced by a regime, which, from its enforced establishment in 1949 to its hapless end in 1990, had never obtained democratic endorsement from the people.

Whether the course adopted by East German Protestantism, and in particular the *Kirche im Sozialismus* movement, was a path-breaking pattern for the church's future discipleship or alternatively only encouraged an illusionary utopianism, are concerns which will preoccupy theologians and churchmen alike as the church now struggles to find a new identity for its religious and political witness in the years ahead.