

THE REVOLUTIONARY CHURCH?

THE ROLE OF EAST GERMAN PROTESTANTS AMID POLITICAL CHANGE

By Todd W. Harris

Todd W. Harris (United Methodist) received the B.A. degree in religion from Birmingham-Southern College. He studied a year and half at University of Tübingen at the time when the Berlin Wall fell. He intends to continue his studies at Frankfurt University as a Rotary International fellow.

Methodological Issues

This study was begun during the months of March and April of 1990 during the course of travel through Eastern Europe. Working under the support of the Highlands United Methodist Educational Foundation of Birmingham, Alabama and the Dixon Foundation, I visited four countries--The German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Subsequent research and writing was then conducted at the University of Tübingen, West Germany.

The method of investigation was straightforward. I began my study in East Berlin with visits to the offices of the *Ökumenischer Jugenddienst* and the administrative headquarters of the Berlin-Brandenburg district of the *Bund der evangelischen Kirchen* in der DDR. With the few names and contacts that I found there, I began making interviews. I asked repeatedly for suggestions from each person I interviewed, and to my good fortune, most of them graciously provided me with further contacts. Thus, I found myself with a steady flow of appointments. Furthermore, this method of "following the lead" took me throughout East Germany, both to larger cities and into the country. I was also able to accumulate a small list of names and addresses which gave me direction when I headed to the other countries on my tour.

Because I found it important to also hear some opinions of persons who were not related to the church, among those interviewed were political leaders, university students, and members of citizens' and activists' groups. Primarily, however, interviews were conducted with people within the churches. Though the majority were pastors, whenever possible I spoke with members of congregations, church administrative officials, seminarians, or those who otherwise participate in the church. Thus, I attempted to interview people who might provide perspectives from widely varying backgrounds and experiences.

The content of the interviews was equally as straightforward. I made it clear that I was not in search of any particular information, that I was instead interested in hearing the personal perspectives of each interviewee. I asked general and open-ended questions, usually following these three lines:

1. What kind of role(s) did the churches play, both over the past years and more recently, in the political changes in the GDR?
2. Is the situation now, since the "peaceful revolution" of Fall, 1989, in any real sense different for the church? Have things changed for the church? If so, how?
3. What kind of role(s) will the church have in the future? What issues will be important or determining?

As a rule, I allowed the conversations to follow where the interviewees led. Rather than steering the discussions through a preplanned series of questions, I purposely asked broad questions in order to give my dialogue partner the chance to speak about those issues which were important to him or her. Once again, in this manner, I felt I would more likely hear a wide range of perspectives.

Thus, this study can make no claims to systematic accuracy with regards to its correctness in representing "the church." It would be impossible to make a claim which adequately represented the opinion and experience of all Christians in East Germany. Naturally, there will be those whose experience contradicts some material presented here. For example, I met a young man in Dresden who was absolutely convinced that the churches had done nothing more than plead for nonviolence during the course of the fall demonstrations. As far as he was concerned, however, the church had played no other significant role. Whether his standpoint was merely a reflection of ignorance of the situation, or whether he had simply judged all other church actions as insignificant, is here beside the point. More important is the fact that from the varying perspectives of others interviewed, the church had indeed played other roles in the political changes. Therefore, this paper will not attempt to make statements which are supposedly valid for the single entity "church," because 1) admittedly the method employed in research was of an unsystematic nature, and 2) had the method indeed been more systematic, it would still hold true that any such statement might be disputed by the experience of another. Instead, this paper must be viewed as a *systematic attempt to reflect upon that information* and those perspectives which I did in fact receive through the interviews, an effort to understand and comment upon the perspectives which were available from the research. Only then, in light of systematic reflection upon past and present perspectives within the church, can and will attempts be made to discuss issues which will effect the church--as a whole--in the future. (Projected political roles of East German Protestants in the future will be discussed in another article currently being researched.) Here again, these attempts are not intended to represent the opinion of all East German Christians and every East German church without exception; instead they represent my own response and commentary to the collection of thought and experience which the study provided.

Therefore, the nature of the material which is here presented must be made clear, in order that general biases may be taken into account. The most striking of these biases is the fact that none of those interviewed in East Germany were members of the Catholic Church. Thus, when speaking of perspectives which I witnessed in the church, I am referring to the perspectives which I heard from Protestants. That is not to say, however, that the

presentation and discussion of those perspectives have no claim to validity with regard to the Catholic Church. Where the discussion concerns only matters of fact, or where commentary is being made regarding issues that will confront the church in the future, the statements made should be considered valid for the Catholic Church as well as the Protestant. For instance, anyone--be she or he Catholic or Protestant--may tell me of the Catholic Church's participation in the ecumenical assemblies of 1988 and 1989. Obviously, for information of that sort, one need not be Catholic, and such "empirical" data will not be colored by virtue of the interviewee's faith.

Such a bias in the interviews does leave one unignorable shortcoming, however. Although those perspectives provided by Protestants in the interviews may allow statements to be made about the Catholic Church as well, there are undoubtedly many other perspectives which Catholics might have provided, which upon systematic reflection would have in turn allowed commentary to be made concerning protestants as well. There will always be other perspectives which remain unheard, both of Protestants and Catholics, and also those of the much smaller, though quite alive "free churches."

Further, it should be acknowledged that this analysis of the role of East German Christians in recent political changes has been conducted after similar studies among the churches in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Whereas much of the commentary regarding future issues would also be relevant to a discussion of those countries, much would not. Exactly because of my exposure to these other churches, their histories, their opinions and outlooks, I have been better able to examine the East German situation and to comment on issues which I identify to be specifically applicable to Germany.

Finally, this commentary is written from the standpoint of an outsider looking in. This paper seeks to be a presentation of perspectives which are either foreign or unknown to most American readers. Thus, on one hand this paper serves as an informative report. But this paper is also an introductory attempt to understand those differences in thought and action which will become apparent from the details of the church's roles before and during this period of political upheaval. On the whole, the East German churches understand themselves in a distinctive manner. This paper is therefore, on the other hand, an introductory attempt to understand this self-understanding among East German Christians. Thus, after outlining some of the most important roles which the Protestant Church has played, my ongoing research and writing is attempting to discuss this German self-understanding as they themselves have explained it to me. Of course, any analysis or discussion of pertinent issues for the future must only be made in the light of this understanding. These matters will be addressed in future articles.

The Active Role of the Churches

Over the past several years, the churches in East Germany have played many political roles, and they have actively participated in the efforts to bring about change in their country. Whether serving as host for the activity of opposition groups, explicitly campaigning against party policy, or preaching politically oriented messages within their

own services, the churches have been involved in the political processes within the GDR. This section will outline some of those roles.

[1] A Roof Over the Opposition's Head

Perhaps the most obvious and easily observable role of the churches in the past years has been as an open forum for opposition groups. Only in the church was one allowed to speak openly against the government. For that reason, from the early 1980s, the church increasingly became the meeting place for opposition groups of all sorts, both Christian and non-Christian. Whether inside the church or not, though, any and all words critical of the system were viewed by the SED as *staatsfeindlich*--as hostile to the state. Church members report that it was therefore not uncommon for *Stasi* members, the secret police, to attend or observe church functions or meetings. Although unaware of their identity, church members were certain that *Stasi* agents were present. Once at home after meetings, many reported receiving threatening phone calls concerning their participation in church affairs, and some received photographs in the mail, portraying themselves entering church buildings, as a reminder that the *Stasi* were watching. But apparently the state was unwilling to take any further steps to stop such activity in the church. As one Berlin pastor told me, "That's all they did. They would watch us with their spies." And so the church remained a place where one could freely voice his or her opinion, where one could be critical. Thus, the church served as the home of the opposition.

The church's involvement in this respect did not arise from pious, religious grounds. It was a simple, practical matter. Without the churches as a roof over the heads of the opposition, there would have been little if any opportunity for one to speak freely. There would have literally been no room for discussion, at least no place where the state would not have interfered. This must not be understood to say that the churches were forced into this role or that they did not freely offer their facilities. But more importantly, one must recognize the fact that the church's involvement as "foster home" was a practical necessity, if the opposition movement was to survive. Therefore, the statement of one congregation member becomes understandable: "This was no pious revolution."

It also is understandable, then, that at times there arose conflict within many congregations concerning their involvement with non-Christian, politically-oriented opposition groups. Since their contact to these groups was understood neither as an opportunity for evangelism nor as an interest on the part of the outsiders to become a part of the church, some church members saw no reason why the church should open its doors to them. However, the fact that so many of the churches did allow such groups the use of their facilities is proof that the majority of church members, or at least the more influential church leadership, supported this involvement.

Some congregations, however, did shut their doors to opposition groups out of fear that meetings might someday escalate into violent demonstrations or open confrontation with the state. This sentiment was understandably to be found primarily among larger, better known churches. Political activity within smaller churches was not as threatening to the state because it was not necessarily of a highly public character. Accordingly, it elicited

less government attention, and escalation was therefore less of a risk. Large or well-known congregations had to take such risks into consideration. "We had to be careful as to what we supported," remarked one East Berlin pastor, explaining that because of the central location and high visibility of his church, he and his congregation had always feared that holding politically oriented meetings might provoke retaliation from the state. They had therefore refrained from involvement with opposition groups. Yet, even this congregation and apparently most others became willing to take that risk by the late 1980's. In the past couple of years, political discussion was therefore much more the rule than the exception.

[2] The Explicitly Political Activity of the Churches Over the Years

Aside from supporting the political discussion and activities of non-church opposition groups, the church itself played many active roles of a political nature. This has been the case throughout the history of the GDR. It would undoubtedly be impossible to discuss or even to know all of the services that the churches performed in each of their respective parishes. Here, I will briefly discuss three specific political functions of the churches which were more national in scope.

As of January, 1962, all young men in the GDR were required to spend eighteen months in the army. This was considered by the administration to be civil duty and fulfillment of obligation to the state. Objections of conscience against carrying weapons by no means freed one from this obligation. Almost immediately after the law's introduction, strongly opposing sentiment arose among political pacifists and within the churches. By 1964, under continued pressure from the church, the party amended the requirement. Those who declined armed military service "for religious or similar reasons" were from that point allowed to fulfill their obligation as *Bausoldaten*, soldiers who participated in building projects. Even this unarmed alternative, however, often involved work on weapons plants or missile installations. Thus, there continued to be protest against the required service. After further pressure from the church in the late 60's, more and more objecting *Bausoldaten* were reassigned to building projects which were not of a strictly military nature.

The government did little to inform young men about this branch of the service. Government publications about required military service often made no mention of this alternative. The church therefore made efforts to inform the population through its own publications, though government censorship often stopped these efforts from being effective. Still, the church was the primary source of information and support for the *Bausoldaten*. Although churches were effectively unable to "go to the people" with their publications in order to make young men aware of their options, many young men came to them. Many who had previously had no contact to the church joined its ranks so that they could then legally choose unarmed military duty. The result was that over the years more and more young men chose the *Bausoldat* option.

Just as the churches became the main source of publicity for this alternative within the military, they often played similar roles of providing information to the general public.

For instance, it was the churches who made data available concerning the worsening environmental situation in the GDR. Because the government refused to release statistics concerning the environment, numerous citizens' groups formed to research and collect data themselves. However, these groups were not able to publish their findings. Such publication would have been viewed as antagonistic by the state, and their activities would have been ended altogether. Many churches therefore supported these groups by displaying the environmental data inside the church buildings. The government was unwilling to stop the churches from publicizing such material, apparently because the data were to be found inside the church. The church found itself in the perfect position to play this role, and thus it often became the source of politically related or activist information for the East Germans.

The churches also took the responsibility of working to insure that elections, although not wholly democratic, were conducted without deceit. Acting as poll-watchers during elections and participating in the counting of votes afterwards, representatives of the church acted as a check for the government-run proceedings. After much voting fraud in the May, 1989 elections, it was the church who was able to show the public the actual extent of government manipulation. To understand this work of the church, though, one should first know something of the past election procedures in East Germany.

Before the Fall revolution, GDR government was run solely by the Communist Party. Although candidates had to be elected by the people, only the party nominated the candidates. When an East German citizen was handed a ballot at a voting location, he needed only to drop it into the ballot box--without making any mark whatsoever--in order for it to count as a "Yes" vote for the entire list of party-nominated candidates. According to the experience of several interviewees from different locations, if one wished to vote against the party choices, he had to strike through each and every name individually. Even if only one name was left without being crossed out, the entire ballot--and with it every name -- was registered as a "yes." Of course, it would seem that dissatisfied citizens could have easily voted against the party candidates by taking the time to cross through each of their names. But there was considerable pressure not to do this. Because the earlier common practice had been to simply drop one's unmarked ballot into the box, anyone who actually stepped into a voting booth was making public his dissenting vote. And the *Stasi* were most certainly taking names. Under fear of the consequences, relatively few used the booths. After voting hours ended, votes were counted publicly; citizens were allowed to be present as tallies were made. The state, therefore, appeared to have every claim to legitimacy because no one had been "forced" to vote for party candidates, and citizens had themselves verified that votes were counted correctly.

In the past several years, more and more citizens began to use the voting booths. Church congregations organized themselves to insure that members were present at every voting location. These members encouraged voters to exercise their right to use the voting booths. After polls were closed, church members participated in the counting and recording of tallies. The government was actually happy to have the church representatives present. For as long as the churches certified the results, the government had even more reason to claim legitimacy.

In May, 1989, however, it was exactly the church who destroyed the government's credibility. Popular unrest was rising, and many more citizens were willing to voice their dissatisfaction with their votes. At the May 7th elections, church members were once again present to insure fair play. On the next day, state-controlled newspapers published only overall vote totals for larger metro areas without providing totals from each local poll. The results claimed commanding support for the government. Church members, in disbelief of the high percentage of supporting votes, began collecting counts from other local churches who had been present at other local polls. Their totals proved that the government reports were false.

The government fraud came as the last straw for many East German citizens. It was shortly thereafter, when Hungary opened its borders, that disillusioned thousands began to flee the country. The discovered voting manipulation served as perhaps the greatest catalyst in bringing about the revolution at that time. Had the churches not acted as a guard against this deception, party candidates would have held their claims to legitimacy. It is probably impossible to speculate as to how the story might have unfolded from there.

[3] The Insurance of Nonviolence

The most evident role played by the church during the political revolution of 1989 and 1990, and perhaps the most important role, was its concerted effort to deter violent uprising among the people and to prevent violent reaction against the people by the state. It would not be unfair to cite the church as the primary reason why many have been able to refer to the events of this period as the "Peaceful Revolution." The church was not only present at the most volatile moments when violent confrontations were most likely, that is, at the mammoth demonstrations but was usually the leader and organizer of the demonstrations. As such, the church had the ability to determine the peaceful tone of what otherwise might only have been ineffective riots.

The revolutionary mood of the East German people reached explosive proportions during the Summer of 1989. Unrest over exposed election fraud continued to anger the population. Hungary had opened its borders, and thousands had left their homes to flee the GDR. Western embassies were filled with East Germans wishing to leave. Demonstrations began to grow.

The point which must be understood about the protests is that they grew out of church-sponsored events. Since the early 1980s, groups had been gathering weekly on Monday evenings to pray for peace. This began in four major churches in Leipzig, but soon others followed suit in Dresden and East Berlin. In the early years, members of these groups report that only thirty to forty attended. Prayers concentrated on rights for citizens, such as the ability to travel freely outside the East Block. But in the late 80's, as it became apparent that the SED government was not going to follow the lead of the Soviet Union to implement *Perestroika*-like restructuring of the Communist system in the GDR, the emphasis of the prayers changed with the tide of dissatisfaction among the people. The Monday meetings became known as the "peace prayers," and attendance grew. By the Summer of 1989, thousands were crowding churches all across the country every

Monday evening from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. After the prayers, instead of the usual politically-oriented discussions which had followed the prayer time for several years, the crowds filed from the churches into the streets, where demonstrations were staged. These were the battles that were fought in East Germany's revolution; the battlefields were the city streets.

Not all churches were in support of the demonstrations, however, citing their fears of being associated with something which might escalate into violence. But as one pastor told me, when he witnessed a brutal police crackdown on demonstrators in central East Berlin's Alexander Square, he realized that "this system didn't have a future." His church, an historic landmark located right in the middle of the square, which out of fear had previously not opened its doors for large peace prayers or supported the demonstrations, now became a leader. Only four weeks later, on November 4, it is estimated that one million East Berliners demonstrated on that very square around the church. It was this pastor, Joachim Koppehl, who led the processional which marched around the several-mile-long perimeter. Behind him was drawn a wagon which carried an instrumental band, playing "When the Saints Go Marching In." Pastor Koppehl reported that the event had an air of victory about it. It was but five days later that the SED government announced the opening of the Berlin Wall.

The state authorities were evidently aware of the church's leadership role in the demonstrations, as suggested by its attempts to undermine the church's credibility by discrediting church leadership: *Leipziger Stadtfunk*, the state-run radio, asked Pastor Gottfried Schleinitz if he would be interested in recording a statement which would be broadcast to the public in the event that peaceful demonstrations evolved into violent confrontations between citizens and police. Pastor Schleinitz is a rather well-known minister in Leipzig, who at the time was involved in organizing and facilitating the meetings of underground opposition groups. It was reasonable to assume that a recording of a statement by him might influence some of the public. If riots broke out or a bloody crackdown occurred, a request from Schleinitz might convince some to quit their violence. On the single condition that any such recording be broadcast *only* in the case of a violent escalation, Pastor Schleinitz agreed. He recorded the following statement, calling for peaceful demonstration:

My document is the Bible. There I read, "Seek the city's best." A few of you, perhaps a couple hundred of those who are now underway in the streets, know me. To you I can speak personally. Before you go farther, even one more step, think whether or not that which is supposed to happen now on the street is really the city's best. I read in the Bible, "Seek peace and hunt after it." After what are we hunting? Are we hunting peace? Or what are we hunting? The prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul, who formulated those sentences thousands of years ago, were exactly as powerless as I am at this moment. For me remains only the urgent request: No violence of any sort! But really, no violence of any sort! The unarmed hope is what remains for us.

On the evening of October 16th, even as Gottfried himself was on Karl-Marx Square, participating in a very *peaceful* demonstration, State Radio broke its promise and

broadcast the statement which was heard by all, including Gottfried Schleinitz, over loudspeakers before the crowd of an estimated 120,000. On that day, however, the demonstration was proceeding very calmly. Thus, the statement was not only unnecessary, but it also appeared as though Schleinitz was sympathetic to the SED government, which was naturally interested in maintaining order. Pastor Schleinitz lost much of his credibility, and he had been used by the *Leipziger Stadtfunk* in an attempt to protect the government from potential violence.

When on the following day Schleinitz delivered a letter to the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, explaining what had happened, the newspaper refused to print it, demonstrating once again state resolve to disgrace one of the leaders of the demonstration movement. Only after Schleinitz had taken the letter to the Bishop, who in turn distributed it among the city's churches, who then in their turn read the explanation before beginning the peace prayers the following Monday, did Schleinitz regain his credibility. Ironically, the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* printed the text in its next edition, claiming that it had intended all along to publish the statement. Backed against the wall by the public readings of his letter, it was the radio, not Schleinitz, who suffered a loss of credibility.

Although such attempts were apparently not uncommon, it was clear that the state and its functionary organs were unwilling to publicly confront the church. Dr. Peter Zimmermann, then Professor of Theology at Leipzig's Karl Marx University, recounted for me his experience on November 11, 1989, when police cracked down--in some instances brutally--on peaceful demonstrators. Because the demonstration had followed the peace prayers at the *Nikolaikirche*, it seemed likely that police would have been interested in arresting those who had spurred on the protest: the pastors. Zimmerman's witness, however, clearly shows otherwise. He testified,

No, the clergy weren't arrested. As a matter of fact, I watched as two policemen tried to take one pastor in, and an officer yelled from the side, "Not him, he's a pastor!" So from the very beginning, there was an attempt to avoid this confrontation.

That there was conflict within the party as to how to deal with the church is suggested by another of Zimmerman's accounts. It has been shown that the state attempted in some cases to remove the church from its leadership role (e.g. Gottfried Schleinitz) but that the state was reluctant to defy the church publicly (Zimmerman's account of pastors' exemption from the crack-down). These reports in themselves point to an uncertainty within the party as to policy concerning the church. This suggestion is confirmed by limited incidents of cooperation on behalf of party members with church leaders and with church endeavors.

The best example is Dr. Zimmerman's experience: On Monday, October 2, 1989, for the first time riot police, wearing helmets and carrying clubs and shields, broke up the Leipzig demonstration. Similar events took place on Wednesday and Thursday in Dresden. On Friday, October 6, the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, while Erich Honecker entertained special guest Mikhail Gorbachov with an impressive military parade in East Berlin, police forces brutally engaged approximately 10,000

demonstrators. On October 7, the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* printed a statement from a military commander, claiming that his troops were prepared, weapons in hand, to once and for all crush the counterrevolutionaries, if need be. Dr. Zimmerman said, "One knew that if it stood in the newspaper, then it wasn't the opinion of one man for his 100 troops, but rather the opinion of the party and the state." Later that day, in Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig, the threat was carried out with fire hoses, and many arrests were made. Everyone knew that "on Monday shots would probably be fired."

Over the weekend Dr. Zimmerman worked frantically to prevent a bloody confrontation between protestors and security forces. He assembled a group of six men, including himself, for the purpose of writing a statement to the public. Zimmerman explained that

what was needed in Leipzig was a group of people who were so well known, or who were so representative for the groups involved, that everyone would listen, so that the preacher in the pulpit and the riot policeman and the *Stasi* and every woman on the street would have at least one or two names which they could associate with political or moral influence.

The "Leipzig Six," as they became nicknamed, consisted of Zimmerman, who represented the church, Leipzig's most prominent citizen--orchestra master Kurt Masur, a well-known artist, and three local officials of the SED. After meeting and writing the brief statement, Zimmerman delivered copies to each of the area churches, to be read at the peace prayers on Monday before the demonstrations began, and Kurt Masur recorded the statement for *Leipziger Rundfunk*. When Monday came, as tensions were high, the churches delivered the message, and Masur's recorded voice was played repeatedly over the radio throughout the evening. The message was as follows:

Our common concern and responsibility have brought us together today. We are moved by the development in our city and seek a solution. We all need the free exchange of opinion about the further course of socialism in our country. Therefore, those named above today promise to all citizens, that they shall exercise all of their power and authority, to see that this dialogue is carried on, not only within the district of Leipzig, but also with our administration. We urgently request your prudence, in order that peaceful dialogue will become possible.

This was an important statement. It was received by the masses as a sign of hope. To them it meant, "Yes, we *will* continue to demand change. Yes, we *will* continue to demonstrate. We *will* find dialogue." But peacefully. Despite its brevity and lack of weighty rhetoric, this small statement was to become one which will live in history books into posterity. Did it work? Zimmerman remarked that after the regular protest march, when all had proceeded smoothly, even though police and troops had been present, "We knew then that on this Monday *we* had won."

I recount this story primarily for three reasons. First, the text is of historic significance, being credited by many as the principal reason that a massacre never occurred at the height of tensions in Leipzig. Secondly, this text is of particular relevance to this study

because it was, at least in great part, the result of efforts of the church, both in its distribution and publication and its authorship by one of the best-known representatives of the church in Leipzig, Dr. Peter Zimmerman. Thirdly, the brief statement would most likely never have effected such an impact had not district SED officials comprised three of the "Leipzig Six." To be sure, their participation played some role in securing the help of state-run radio. This represents a rare instance of cooperation by party members with the church, or at minimum with the church's cause, since the short document was perceived as having been initiated by church leadership. This statement appears to have been a meaningful aid to preventing violence in Leipzig. By extension, due to its central role, the church may likewise be designated a meaningful assistance.

Thus, we have seen that the church acted as a major force in the maintenance of peace throughout the "Peaceful Revolution." Since the early 1980s, the churches had focused their attention on issues of peace, as evidenced by the weekly gatherings to pray for peace. Church pastors led the protesting public through the streets, demanding political change. Those who stood for the church enlisted even party functionaries in the cause of nonviolence. Church leadership spoke most loudly, most clearly, as the voice of peace.

[4] The Sermons

At this point, I will turn attention away from the public activities of the church -- away from its battle over required military service, its duties as poll-watcher, its role as guarantor of nonviolence during mass protests, etc.--and will focus briefly upon the life within the church itself. Was the church, in its internal routines, equally as concerned with politics as its public activities might suggest? The central act of the Christian community is its common worship. Thus, looking at some of the sermons which have been preserved from the period around the revolution reveals for us what was on the minds of congregations. Even at a glance, one becomes aware that the politically turbulent environment, in which the church found itself, served as a rich source from which sermon topics were drawn. Politics, or at least politically active Christianity, was being preached from the pulpit.

Before 1989 had drawn to a close, one book had been published containing sermons from mid-August to November. It demonstrates that pastors across the country were attempting to apply the gospel in a politically pregnant context. The very title of the book makes a political statement: *Räumt die Steine Hinweg* (Clear the Stones Away!). It is a quote from the 62nd chapter of Isaiah, a call to clear a path for the returning people of Judah, whom God is rescuing from exile in Babylonia. The preface to the collection contains the words

Go through, go through the gates,

prepare the way for the people;

build up, build up the highway,

clear it of stones,

lift up an ensign over the peoples. (Isaiah 62:10, RSV)

Here it is clear, however, that the people awaiting imminent rescue by God are not the Hebrews, but the East Germans, who have been "exiled" into a failed socialism. The preface to the book, like so many of the sermons which it contains, reads like living prophecy, a prophecy which, as we are now aware, was in a certain sense to come true, since the East German people did in fact return to a reunited German state.

All of the sermons in that one volume are politically oriented. Here, however, as an example, I will discuss only one: Bernd Albani, pastor of the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin, led a vigil on October 5, 1989 in remembrance of those who had been unjustly imprisoned. In his meditation, Pastor Albani lamented the recent story of thousands of young Germans who, having lost hope in their own land, had crowded into Western embassies until, after weeks of suspense, they were finally allowed to board trains bound for new homes, beyond the confines of the East Block. In frustration he exclaimed, "What's going on in this country, that makes its borders ever thicker...? What am I supposed to do with my sadness, my shame, my anger?" Reminding those assembled of the previous day's events, in which many who had not been allowed to board the West-bound trains had chosen to vent their frustration with violence, he quoted the words of Paul, saying, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1, RSV).

Paul had been concerned with freedom from rituals, rituals that had been forced upon others. "We, too, know such rituals," said Pastor Albani, "Rituals of a new religion, of an ideology, that sets itself as absolute." And then he listed the rites of socialism:

- The ritual of saying yes
- The ritual of raising a hand
- The ritual of dropping in the ballot at elections
- The ritual of holding one's mouth
- The ritual of "going along"

In what seems both a statement of personal conviction and counseling to his congregation, he then made a statement which surely found its way into his file at *Stasi* headquarters: "If this Jesus of Nazareth means something to me, then such rituals are for me no longer binding."

His words declared the status quo invalid, the reforms to date insufficient. His sermon was an attempt to translate the lessons of the gospel into political action in his particular context. And this sermon suggests that political motivation of church membership sprang from the pulpit.

I encountered many other such texts of sermons during my travels. In fact, politically-oriented sermons were still the order of the day in the Spring of 1990, months after the "Peaceful Revolution" had taken place. While in Dresden in March, I listened to one pastor's commentary on the political situation of the day. He began his sermon by saying

We want to live.

We want to live well.

We want to live well soon.

Thus, he characterized the mood of the East German people in a time when reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) looked imminent. It was a time in which East Germans, wearisome of years of Communist failures, looked with envy to the prosperity of their westward neighbor. They eagerly wanted to share in the good life, a more comfortable existence denied them by an ideology which forty years had proven bankrupt. They were jealous. At least many were, and this was the mood which drew Pastor Peter Meis' fire during the Sunday morning *Gottesdienst*.

His three statements, listed above, marked the progression of attitudes among the people. At first, before the revolution, citizens had been concerned with freedom and justice, with basic issues confronting their country and their lives. In a world where "Big Brother" watched over everyone's shoulder, daily existence could seem like a fight for survival. They just wanted to *live*. But as the prospects for a changed political structure brightened, East Germans began to peer around the iron curtain to glimpse the fabulous lifestyles of the West. If things were to change, why could they not take a few pointers from Western neighbors? The West must have been doing something right. It would never be enough to simply escape the daily hardship of bygone years. For many, nothing short of a life like the West would do. They wanted to live *well*. And of course, once it became apparent that reunification was simply a matter of time, time became very precious. The *sooner* the *better*.

These were the premises of the sermon I heard that March morning. Pastor Meis was preaching from a familiar text: "You shall have no other god before me." He was attempting to warn the congregation of the Redeemer-St. Andrew's Church, where he was a guest preacher that Sunday, not to fall prey to the "new religion" of the market economy. They should not worship the West German *Deutschmark* as their new god. As he said, "We know that this new way can bring good and more freedom, but we know that it is not without risk." He expressed a skepticism about the new economic system being imported into East Germany, and his sermon cautioned church-goers that everything was not necessarily green on the other side of the hill.

Though the substance of sermons had changed since prior to the revolution, one thing remained clear: They continued to be political in nature. Pastor Albani had spoken of resistance to the established order, of laying aside the "rituals" imposed upon them by the party. Meis was no longer interested in political reformation, although his sermons in the

Fall certainly had registered that interest. Meis, however, was indeed interested in encouraging congregations not to quit their critical examination of the political, social, and economic orders in which they live. Thus, though the church's original goals had been met--the removal of central power from the party administration--they had not yet reached and would not reach a day when they would not have to react as Christians to their environment. This was the message of all the political sermons: East German Christians had to translate their faith into appropriate responses within their socialist nation. The sermons communicated this point long before internal pressure erupted into political revolution. Perhaps some of these very sermons were responsible for motivating many Christians to political activism. As demonstrated by their occurrence long *after* the revolution, however, these sermons were far more than an isolated ecclesiastical effort to change the particular problem of SED politics. Instead, they testify to the commitment of East German churches to be relevant to their context. The sermons are an expression of a self-understanding which equates to this commitment.

[5] The Conciliary Process

The "Conciliary Process" is a name which was given to an ecumenical movement among churches in the German Democratic Republic. Like its American counterpart, it was a cooperative effort involving Christian communities of differing denominations, differing traditions and differing confessions. Much of the impetus behind these ecumenical efforts seems to have originated in West Germany, where it was championed by well-known scientist Carl Friedrich von Weizäcker. The East German Conciliary Process, however, owed its success to something which other, similar efforts in different countries lacked -- that is, the involvement of nearly every large Christian group, notably the Roman Catholic Church, which has been reluctant to participate in most crusades of this sort.

The churches involved in the "council" were able to work together because they proceeded by asking themselves, "On what exactly *can* we agree?" In the contemporary world, they agreed, the most pressing problems are issues which lend themselves to three categories. There are questions concerning *justice* and human rights, questions concerning *peace*, and questions concerning the environment or the *preservation of creation*. Thus, the various churches laid their differences aside in order to deal only with those concerns which commanded the attention of each.

In East Germany, the churches found themselves in a context which, as stated earlier, demanded their active response as a Christian community. Therefore, these groups came together to discuss questions mentioned above as they applied specifically to East Germany. In February of 1988, 150 delegates from nineteen church communities met for the first full ecumenical assembly in Dresden. Those church organizations taking part were:

Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen (Evangelical/Lutheran)

Evangelische Landeskirche Anhalts

Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg

Evangelische Kirche des Görlitzer Kirchengebiets

Evangelische Landeskirche Greifswald

Evangelische-Lutherische Landeskirche Mecklenburgs

Evangelische Kirche der Kirche Provinz Sachsens

Evangelische-Lutherische Landeskirche Sachsens

Evangelische Brüderkirche (United Brethren)

Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche (Methodist)

Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden (Evangelical/Free Church)

Kirchenbund evangelisch-reformierter Gemeinden (Evangelical/Reformed)

Gemeindeverband der Altkatholischen Kirche (Ancient Catholic)

Mennonitengemeinde (Mennonite)

Römisch-Katholische Kirche (Roman-Catholic)

Mitteleuropäisches Exarchat der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirchen (Russian Orthodox)

Gemeinschaft der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten (Seventh-Day-Adventists)

Religiöse Gesellschaft der Freunde (Quakers)

Apostelamt Jesu Christi (Apostolate of Jesus Christ)

Again in October, this group met in Magdeburg, and finally, in April, 1989, delegates converged on Dresden for a third full assembly. These meetings proved to be of significant impact for the future of East Germany, due to the fact that many of the answers and innovations suggested by the churches found much influence in later politics.

In effect, the results of the three assemblies were a response to the question, "What do we, as the church, want for the political, social, and economic situation in which we find ourselves?" The meetings sought to explicitly state a platform which would confront the pressing issues of justice, peace, and environment. The results of the assemblies are contained in the form of resolutions published collectively after the conclusion of the third assembly. The following is an attempt to briefly outline much of that platform:

The document begins with several introductions--to the general reader, to the congregations, and to children. It then proceeds to lament the problems of East German society, which in many cases sound strikingly similar to our own. It condemns as unjust the forced "voluntary participation" in socialist and communist organizations, by which citizens have proven their loyalty to the state. Primarily children had been the victims of such pressure, being compelled to take part in the FDJ and activities of defense education. Denouncing the many methods by which citizens were coerced not to "rock the boat," the text states "One says what others want to hear, and has gotten used to saying something other than he thinks, and to acting differently than what corresponds to his convictions." The society provided no support for "outcast" groups such as alcoholics, the handicapped, and homosexuals. Youth were discouraged from expressing themselves, and their alternative modes of thinking, dressing, and talking were viewed by the state as criminal. Though provided by law, women had yet to achieve equal rights. The family was in crisis; fathers were never home due to industry demands. Children were forced to stay in inadequate day-care from a very young age because both parents had to work. Divorce rates were high, and there was simply insufficient care for the elderly. Certainly, these were problems in need of addressing. And yet, there were still greater, globally-oriented problems to be tackled.

In the military arena, the churches called for quite specific changes. The polarization of the peace organizations led by the Soviet Union and the United States (Warsaw Pact, NATO) was to be dissolved by massive restructuring with the goal of reducing first-strike capabilities and threats for all parties. This was to be prosecuted through calculated measures to reduce conventional offensive capacities in the Central European corridor. This reduction was to be accompanied by token acts signifying the political will to disarm: Nations were to increase the exchange of sensitive data; there was to be a step-by-step broadening of mutual observation activities (unrestricted fly-overs, etc.), and limitations were to be set on large-scale maneuvers and tactical exercises. In Central Europe, a zone was to be constructed which was free of all nuclear and conventional first-strike capabilities. Likewise, as a step toward their eventual world-wide elimination, all chemical weapons were to be removed from Central Europe. A ban on all nuclear weapons testing was to be declared.

The document calls for the construction of a Pan-European peace organization which would work in cooperation with the United Nations. It calls for a general troop realignment in Europe, so that imminent attack is perceived as less likely. Likewise, efforts must be made to insure pan-European recognition of the individual sovereignty of all European states. Cooperative research efforts were called for which would serve to build trust between nations, and channels were to be opened and broadened between citizens' groups from all European nations.

The Conciliary Process produced a great deal of political influence in the earliest days of the post-revolutionary East Germany. Many pertinent issues had already been discussed by the church, and thus the groundwork had been laid for progress towards East German democracy. In fact, several fledgling parties referred to the documents from the ecumenical assemblies as they built political platforms. Wolfgang Ullman, founder and

leader of the opposition party "Democracy Now," testified in an interview with me that those very documents had played an important role in the writing of his party's original platform. Other parties as well, such as the better known New Forum, were most certainly influenced by the careful work of the Conciliary Process.

[6] The Round Table Discussions

In the months following the dissolution of Communist Party control of the East German government, the church hosted the "round table discussions," which attempted to bring representatives from every political party together for dialogue. In the transitional stages from party-run government to the practical establishment of democratic government, it was the round table mechanism which led the political discussion and played a mediating role between new parties on key issues. Round tables existed on the local, regional, and national levels. Not until after the community elections of May, 1990 did official organs exist which could replace the round tables.

Pastors typically acted as the moderators for round table discussions, for no other institution occupied a position of trust as did the church. And whereas the church did exercise some degree of influence on the process of democratization by acting as host, it should be pointed out that the role of moderator also prevented the church from contributing much of a substantial nature to the actual dialogue. One pastor commented, "Because the moderator must take care that everyone has an opportunity to speak, and because [as moderator] he must keep his own position to himself, we justifiably have the impression that the church's social and political suggestions, that is, substantial suggestions, are not being heard."

Some moderators did create for themselves the opportunity to serve in future political positions. Most, however, expressed to me their desire to return to the business they know best. As one East Berlin pastor, who had served as moderator for a community round table, told me, "I'm no politician. I want to be a pastor again."

The role of the round tables should not be underestimated. These opportunities for dialogue helped to create a mood of cooperation among otherwise divided parties, and they helped maintain a political order amidst the power vacuum created by the communist demise. Their effectiveness was somewhat limited, of course, by the fact that they had no power to enact their decisions. Still, the results of dialogue among parties most assuredly included future cooperation, more effective representation by opposition party members, and a sense of direction for a people whose confidence and hope for government were short in supply at the time.

Conclusion

These are but a few of the many more numerous and documented roles which the protestant churches of East Germany played prior to and during the "Peaceful Revolution" of 1989. It is most important to realize that it was the church which acted as representative for the East German people and dialogue partner to the Communist Party.

It was the church which at last mobilized the people to peaceful action. Whether by support of non-christian opposition groups, explicitly political activity, work for nonviolence, timely and germane sermons, creation of political platforms through ecumenical assemblies, or encouragement of discussion and cooperation among political parties at the round tables, the Protestant church demonstrated its resolve to be "in the middle" of East German society and therefore relevant to the needs of its people.

The next years will see the church develop the position it has created for itself. It is now perhaps more trusted than at any time in several centuries. Popular regard for the church is now largely positive, and the church possesses the opportunity to speak with a remarkably louder voice than in several decades. If it is to maintain that position, however, it must do more than view the present as a chance for evangelism. One Berlin pastor put it, " We can't just say, 'Now we'll be pious again.' " The church cannot afford to change its character as a forum for thought and political or social innovation. It must continue its role as public educator and must endeavor to continue its role as a dialogue partner to the government on behalf of the people. Perhaps most importantly, said the same Berlin pastor, the church must not stop being "the speaker for the weak." "After all," he said, "that's what we've always been."