

Plain Speaking at GDR Protestant Synods

During the spring sessions of the various "Land" Synods of the Protestant Churches there has been some unambiguous comment. At several of them the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War has been the subject of lively discussion.

Members of the Synod of the Görlitz district stressed their anxiety to keep alive the church peace initiatives, which had lost ground during 1984. Suggestions were made for steps toward peace to be taken by individuals. The idea was not to withdraw into the private and personal realm, but to overcome a feeling of utter hopelessness and suggest measures that were practicable and reasonable.

At the Synod of the Thuringian Church Bishop Werner Leich was at pains to contradict some of the myths of official propaganda: in May 1945 only a tiny proportion of the population of the then Soviet Zone of Occupation could fairly reckon themselves to be "on the side of the victor"; all the same, 8 May was not a catastrophe, it was a liberation, and those who denied that fact did not understand the essential nature of Nazism. However, he added, the sufferings of the German people at the time of this liberation should not be passed over in silence; there were the experiences of the Germans from the eastern provinces, and the use until 1950 of the Buchenwald concentration camp by the new masters to house political prisoners. The victors were, after all, human beings who had suffered unspeakably at the hands of the Nazis.

At the April meeting of the Berlin-Brandenburg Synod great concern was expressed about the methods which were being used by the GDR *Staatssicherheitsdienst* (State Security Service). A minister from a small town in the Potsdam area described how young church members were repeatedly summoned (or indeed fetched from their homes) to be interrogated about the activities of their congregations. Another minister gave examples of young people who had been offered inducements, such as university places, in an attempt to persuade them to work for the State Security Service. These conversations took place in school, it was said, and indeed in the presence of headmasters. The harass-

ment of church members by obvious surveillance, or the noting down of car numbers, was very worrying. The reduction of ecumenical contacts through the restriction of entry permits for foreign visitors was another troublesome tactic. The latter part of the debate concentrated on the difficulties experienced by young Christians in the educational field. Things being as they were, it was meaningless to talk of "equal rights for believers and non-believers".

At the Berlin-Brandenburg Synod General Superintendent Richte from Cottbus, voicing the views of the whole Protestant Church leadership, called upon the state authorities to relax the existing conditions for foreign travel. He insisted that Christians make quite unsuitable employees for the State Security Service. Everybody had the right, he said, to refuse such collaboration. It was his conviction that people should face the unwelcome consequences of such a refusal rather than go against their conscience. It should be clearly understood that church people might show readiness to listen to any proposals made by representatives of the State Security Service, but ought at the same time to make clear that such conversations would be reported to the relevant church authorities.

Concern was expressed at the Berlin-Brandenburg Synod about the present shortage of ministers. Of the 840 parishes in the area, only 125 were filled. Apart from the effects on congregations, a number of important mediaeval church buildings were falling into neglect. On the other hand, the past six years have seen a number of hopeful signs. There is more interest among the young in the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. The state media have been showing a great deal more interest in Christian affairs. Books published in the GDR, too, have shown a greater awareness of the part played by Christians in society. Though the registered number of church members continues to decline, attendance at services is increasing. The increase in the numbers of baptisms of young people and adults is especially noteworthy.