

Protestantism in East Germany, 1949-1989: A Summing Up

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*Here [in the GDR] the clergymen sound like revolutionaries,
and the officials like clergymen — Stefan Heym (1982)*

The reunification of Germany in October 1990 brought an end to an era. For the 40 years of the existence of the German Democratic Republic, Soviet military occupation of East Germany was a fact of life, the East German state attempted to construct a communist system on the Soviet model, and — where religion was concerned — the protestant churches played an ever greater role in harbouring political opposition to the regime and its policies. With the dismantling of the GDR, however, the churches, which had been invigorated by their politicisation, lost their unique political role, and watched helplessly as their congregations rapidly shrank.

The GDR (1949-90) had the distinction of being the only communist country in which protestantism was clearly the predominant religious force. This fact, combined with the fact that Germany was a divided country, made for an almost unparalleled intensity of interaction between the churches of this society and churches in the noncommunist world, particularly West Germany and Austria. Clergy enjoyed an exemption from the general proscription against travel to noncommunist countries, and frequently travelled west for ecclesiastical and ecumenical meetings.

*This chapter is based in part on interviews conducted in East Germany, 20 June-12 July 1988. Interviews were conducted with appropriate clergymen and responsible officials of 17 religious organisations, as well as theologians and responsible state officials, in Berlin, Dresden, Herrnhut, Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt and Eisenach. I am grateful to the International Research Exchanges Board (IREX) for providing funding in support of this research.

Editor's note. This article renders the German 'Bund Evangelischer Kirchen' by the English 'Federation of Evangelical Churches'. Normal practice in *RCL* is to translate it as 'Federation of Protestant Churches'. I have decided to retain the alternative translation in order to avoid needless confusion within the article itself.

At first sight, church life in the GDR in the late 1980s looked vigorous. Public meetings organised by the Evangelical Church in particular drew large and interested crowds. Services were regularly attended. Vocations revived. And the churches themselves operated an impressive number of hospitals, homes for old people, and other facilities, and, thanks in part to subsidies from sister churches in the West, were financially relatively comfortable.

Yet East German pastors were aware that secularisation was eating away at the base of their support. The Evangelical Church, which numbered 14.2 million adherents in 1946, had only 10.1 million in 1964, and as of 1986, claimed only 6,435,000 members. A 1984 publication of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism suggested an even lower figure, estimating real membership of the Evangelical Church at 5-5.5 million.¹ Statistics for the Evangelical Church in Anhalt Province may be taken as illustrative of the trend. In 1955, the province counted 422,800 members, and recorded 56,591 communions, 5,406 baptisms, and 6,311 confirmations. In 1975, the province could count only 221,000 members, recording 31,684 communions, 628 baptisms, and 1,161 confirmations. Ten years later, the province counted 130,000 church members, recording 32,531 communions in 1985, 588 baptisms, and 549 confirmations. In Berlin-Brandenburg, to take another example, the church lost more than half of its members between 1962 and 1987. In villages as much as 90 per cent of the population may still be Christian, while informed sources estimate that only 10 per cent of the population in the big cities is Christian.¹

Pastors are also aware that while the church's ability to attract non-believers to its events has enhanced its prestige, in the long run the church cannot prosper on the basis of non-converts who attend specific events out of specific interest: to survive and prosper, a church must, at a minimum, maintain its base, if not actually expand.

The Religious Sector: An Overview

In every respect, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church dwarfs all other denominations in eastern Germany. Maintaining 7,347 parishes, it had 4,161 active clergy (in 1988), and operates 44 hospitals (with a total of 6,244 beds), 105 homes for the mentally and physically disabled, 200 homes for old people (with about 11,000 places), 19 orphanages, 310 communal service outlets, and 278 kindergartens and

¹Wolfgang Kaul, *Kirchen und Religionsgemeinschaften in der DDR — Eine Dokumentation* (Institute for Marxism-Leninism: Rostock-Warnemünde, 1984), pp. 5-6; and *Zahlenspiegel Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Deutsche Demokratische Republik: Ein Vergleich* (3rd edition), (Federal Ministry for Inter-German Relations: Bonn, 1988), p. 97.

day nurseries.² In addition, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church maintains three ecclesiastical training missions (in Berlin, Naumburg and Leipzig), two schools for preachers (in Berlin and Erfurt), and one pedagogical institute (in Potsdam). Six of the state universities include theological faculties, whose salaries in the years 1949-89 were paid out of the communist state budget (at the universities of Berlin, Halle, Leipzig, Jena, Greifswald, and Rostock). These faculties are specifically Protestant and are used essentially by members of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. And finally, the Evangelical Church was able to publish five regional papers: *Die Kirche* (Berlin, circulation 42,500; also in a Greifswald edition), *Der Sonntag* (Dresden, circulation 40,000), *Mecklenburgische Kirchenzeitung* (Mecklenburg, circulation 15,000), *Glaube und Heimat* (Jena, circulation 35,000), and *Potsdamer Kirche* (Potsdam, circulation 15,000).³ All these papers were printed on state presses, which made it easy for the state authorities to check copy prior to publication. This proved important in 1988, when the state repeatedly censored or banned specific issues of these newspapers. Aside from these publications, there was also the monthly journal, *Standpunkt*, which for years was viewed as no more than a tool of the regime, operated by pro-regime protestants. In the last years of the GDR, however, *Standpunkt* published a number of probing articles, and as a result, its standing improved somewhat.

The only other denomination with more than a million members is the Roman Catholic Church, which claimed some 1.05 million members in 1990, with 1,083 priests and 1,753 members of women's orders (as of 1987).⁴ Its most important periodical publication was the *St Hedwigsblatt*, published in Berlin, although as in the case of the protestants, there was also a pro-regime monthly journal (*Begegnung*).⁵

Leaving aside the Russian Orthodox Church, which maintains its headquarters for the Central European Exarchate in Dresden, the remaining Christian denominations can be divided into three broad groups. *Traditional protestants* would include the aforementioned Evangelical-Lutherans, as well as Methodists (28,000), members of the Baptist Federation (20,000), Reformed (15,000), Old Lutherans (7,150), Evangelical-Lutheran Free (3,200), Moravians (Unity of Brethren, 2,600), Free Evangelicals (1,000), Mennonites (250), and

² *Zahlenspiegel*, p. 97.

³ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 23 April 1988, p. 12, trans. in JPRS, *East Europe Report*, No. EER-88-040 (23 May 1988), p. 2.

⁴ *Keston News Service*, No. 279 (9 July 1987), p. 19.

⁵ For detailed discussion of the Roman Catholic Church, see Robert F. Goeckel, 'The Catholic Church in East Germany', in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies* (Duke University Press: Durham N.C., 1990).

Quakers (52). There are also *apostolic communities*, specifically: the New Apostolic Church (80-100,000 members), the Apostolate of Jesus Christ (12-14,000), the Shepherd and Flock (7,000), Community in Christ Jesus (Lorenzianer, 5,000), the Apostolate of Juda (3,000), Catholic-Apostolic (2,000), and Reformed Apostolic (2,000). And finally there is a rather heterogeneous collection of *other Christian churches*, including the Jehovah's Witness (not legally registered in GDR times, but numbering 25-30,000 adherents), Seventh Day Adventists (9,000), Christian Community (*Christengemeinschaft*, 5,000), Mormons (4,700), the Church of John (*Johannische Kirche*, 3,500), Old Catholics (1,000), Anderson Community of God (200), Reorganised Mormons ('a few'), and Darbyists (figure not reported).⁶ In addition, there are reportedly a number of Christian Scientists in eastern Germany; they were placed under ban by the SED in 1951 and remained illegal until November 1989, when they belatedly reacquired legal status.⁷

Finally, there are also some non-Christian religious groups, specifically the Muslims (2,000), the Jews (250 in 1988), and the Rastafarians (15, and as of summer 1988, awaiting registration). There may be a handful of Satanists in Berlin and Leipzig, but this is hard to verify.

Traditional Protestants

Two churches bear a special relationship to the numerically preponderant Evangelical Church. These are the Federation of Evangelical Reformed Communities in the GDR, and the Unity of Brethren.

There is no 'Reformed Church in the GDR' per se, but there are Reformed parishes, organised in one of two ways. Most of the parishes exist as organisational parts of the Evangelical district churches — a legacy of the Union Church created by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia in 1817. In some cases (e.g., in Berlin-Brandenburg), the separate origin of the Reformed parishes is recognised by according them the right to reject synodal decisions that contradict their teachings. Three parishes — Dresden, Leipzig, and

⁶Most of the figures given here come from interviews with responsible church representatives or with state officials in East Germany, June-July 1988, or from Kaul, *Kirchen und Religionsgemeinschaften*. . . Some statistics were taken from Hubert Kirchner (ed.), *Freikirchen und Konfessionelle Minderheitskirchen* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: East Berlin, 1987); and Helmut Obst, *Apostel und Propheten der Neuzeit: Gründer christlicher Religionsgemeinschaften des 19.20. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd Ed. (Union Verlag: East Berlin, 1981).

⁷*Christian Science Monitor*, 6 November 1989, p. 3.

Bützow — are autonomous units not integrated into Evangelical district churches. All Reformed parishes, whether integrated into the Evangelical district churches or not, are represented in the Federation of Evangelical Reformed Communities in the GDR, which was established in 1970. The Reformed communities share theological training institutes with the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Leipzig and Naumburg, and take advantage of the theological faculties attached to the state universities.

The Unity of Brethren (Moravian Church) is distinguished by having become an associate member of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in 1969. Associate membership leaves the Unity of Brethren theologically and financially independent, but enables it to take part in Evangelical Church deliberations and to associate itself with the Evangelical Church's posture vis-à-vis the state. Church life centres on the village of Herrnhut (population 2,000), where about a fifth of the church's 2,600 members live. In 1970, the community experienced a brief crisis when a Pastor Werner Morgenstern announced that he had had himself and his family rebaptised, and started to build a small circle of born-again Christians. Unity of Brethren parishes in Herrnhut, Niesky, Kleinwelka and Ebersdorf were affected by Morgenstern's preaching, and for a while the issue of rebaptism was hotly discussed in the church. The debate ended with the expulsion of Morgenstern from the church.

The largest traditional Protestant Church in the GDR, after the Evangelical Church, was the Methodist Church. With some 120 active pastors and more than 1,000 lay workers, the Methodist Church was a minority church in the GDR, but has played a larger role in the province of Saxony, where many of its adherents are concentrated. (Saxony is, in fact, confessionally the most diverse province in eastern Germany, and a number of groups operate there which have no base elsewhere in the country.) The Methodist Church was actively involved in ecumenical activities in the GDR, and the Secretary of the Working Community of Christian Churches in the GDR (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in der DDR*), the most important forum for ecumenical activity in the country, was (as of 1988) a Methodist (Martin Lange). Pacifism is strong among Methodists, and some 40 per cent of young Methodists volunteered for the construction brigade, in preference to regular military service. The Methodist Church operates a theological seminary at Bad Klosterlausnitz, and has published a bi-weekly bulletin, *Friedensglocke*, in 10,000 copies.

With some 20,000 members in all, the Federation of Evangelical-Free Church Communities in the GDR unites three distinct denominations: the Baptists, the Evangelical Brethren, and the Elim

Community. The Baptists and the Elim Community combined in a joint Baptist Federation in 1938. The Brethren joined three years later. All three component groups are very much lay movements, in which ordained ministers do not enjoy anything like the authority exercised by priests of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, or even like pastors of the Evangelical Church.⁸ For all three, emphasis is on parish life. But there are also some differences in orientation: the Baptists are rather more concerned than the others about developing parish life in accord with a strict interpretation of the New Testament; the Elim Community places greater emphasis than the others on the role of the Holy Ghost. Like many church organisations, the Evangelical-Free Church Federation has experienced a decline in membership, down from a post-war level of 30-35,000. Retreats for young people are regular events, and emphasise Bible study. The Federation operates a four-year theological seminary at Buckow, a one-year Bible school for lay persons at Burgstadt, a nursing home for the mentally disturbed (140 beds), and three homes for the aged (Berlin-Hirschgarten, Crivitz and Sonneberg). The Federation also issues a monthly periodical, *Wort und Werk*, in 12,000 copies, and publishes eight to ten books a year.

Of the remaining traditional protestant churches, only the Old Lutheran Church has more than 5,000 members in eastern Germany. Formed by Lutherans who refused to go along with the administratively decreed amalgamation of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in 1817, the Old Lutheran Church has become sceptical of ecumenism, fearing that there is a danger that in searching for 'common ground', Christian doctrine becomes reduced to just Christ and love. A representative of the church attended an ecumenical meeting in Dresden in early 1988 and found he objected to some of the conclusions: peace and justice, he felt, cannot be the *primary* tasks for the church. The Old Lutheran Church (affiliated with the Missouri synod) views itself as a very conservative church, and criticises the main Evangelical Church for having modified its doctrines. The church's 27 parishes were organised into three dioceses, served by 25 pastors.⁹ It sought permission for a number of years to publish a newspaper — without success until the communist regime collapsed. State permission was not, however, required to print an informational bulletin 'for internal use only' — and this the Old Lutheran Church did.

The Free Evangelicals, with 1,000 members, enjoy close working relations with the Baptists, sending their seminarians to the Baptist seminary at Buckow for theological training. The Free Evangelicals

⁸Ulrich Materne, 'Der Bund Evangelische-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in der DDR', in Kirchner (ed.), *Freikirchen*. . . , p. 51.

⁹Werner Klan and Johannes Zellmer, 'Die Evangelischlutherische (altlutherische) Kirche', in Kirchner (ed.), *Freikirchen*. . . , p. 134.

are actively involved in social work, concentrating their efforts on work with the psychologically disturbed, alcoholics, the aged, and the socially isolated (e.g. those recently released from prison). A church bulletin for internal use only, *Glaube und Dienst*, appears seven times a year in 1,700 copies.

The Mennonites did not inhabit the territory of the present-day GDR until after the Second World War, when the Mennonite communities of East and West Prussia were forced to leave their native lands. Most of them settled in West Germany, but about a thousand remained in the GDR. Today there are about 250 Mennonites in eastern Germany, dispersed across 200 different towns and villages. Normal parish life is impossible. But the Mennonite community holds monthly religious services in Berlin, and additional services two to three times a year in Halle, Erfurt, Schwerin, Rostock, Torgau, Potsdam and Dresden.¹⁰ The community publishes a monthly bulletin for internal use, *Gemeindebrief*, in 240 copies.

And finally, there is the small Society of Friends (Quakers), able to survive with scarcely more than four dozen adherents, because of their independence from any hierarchy or structure. Considering their size, the Quakers have been surprisingly active in social issues, lending their support to the initiative to introduce the construction brigade alternative in 1964 and backing the drive for a social service alternative to military conscription in any form.

Apostolic Communities

The bulk of this article will be concerned with those churches I have listed as 'traditional protestants', and their experiences under communism. However, it will probably be useful to say a few words about the churches in the other two groups.

The Apostolic Churches trace their origins to the early 19th century, when a feeling among some European Christians that the churches had decayed spiritually gave rise to a hope that a New Age was dawning. Between 1832 and 1835, these impulses took institutional shape in England, when 12 Englishmen were named 'Apostles'. They built up a community, which soon spread to the Continent, and taught that other churches had become the tools of Satan, and that it was therefore necessary to resurrect the 'original' Church. The members of the Apostolic community were also convinced that they would see the Second Coming of Christ within their lifetimes, and specifically during the apostolate of the 12. By 1861, six of the 12 apostles had

¹⁰Knuth Hansen and Hubert Kirchner, 'Die Mennoniten-Gemeinde', in Kirchner (ed.), *Freikirchen*. . . , p. 32.

died, and a sense of crisis began to grow within the community, in which some members favoured electing new apostles to replace those who had died, while others considered this unthinkable. This led to a schism, with those favouring the election of new apostles forming what is now the New Apostolic Church. The original community, which is today known as the Catholic-Apostolic Community, continued to refuse to elect new apostles, even after all of the original apostles had died (the last of them died in 1901). Since the community is hierarchically organised, with apostles required to consecrate bishops, bishops required to ordain ministers, and so on, the Catholic-Apostolic Community has steadily atrophied, and as of 1988, its leading official in the GDR was a lower deacon (*Unterdiakon*). In the 1960s, the Catholic-Apostolic Community still numbered 8-10,000 adherents in the GDR, but by the late 1980s, the number had shrivelled to about 2,000.

The remaining Apostolic communities resulted from splits within the New Apostolic Church. The first of these splits gave birth, in 1902, to the Apostolate of Juda, which split again in 1923, giving rise to the Apostolate of Jesus Christ.

All of the Apostolic Churches believe that the Second Coming is a historical fact and that it will occur soon. A prominent member of one of these communities told me that his church expected the Second Coming to occur in the year 2000. All of them are socially and politically conservative, and view the other churches (even within the Apostolic movement) with condescension. The Apostolic Churches have, therefore, with the sole exception of the Apostolate of Jesus Christ, essentially no interest in ecumenical dialogue.

As for the communist state, their relations with it were correct but not characterised by that kind of effusiveness which occasionally marked, say, the attitude of the Evangelical Church to the state after 1978. Members of the Apostolic Churches view earthly monarchy as a reflection of the divine monarchy, and organise their own churches on a monarchical basis. This seems to have coloured the attitude of the New Apostolic Church towards the GDR in the early years, when it was openly critical of the proletarian and social-democratic tendencies unleashed by the new regime.¹¹ But this criticism never assumed a political aspect, because, like the other Apostolic communities, the New Apostolic Church has felt that the church should stay out of politics entirely. This attitude, of course, also has consequences as far as the regime's Christian Democratic Union is concerned. As a member of another Apostolic community told me in 1988, 'A Christian cannot be in a party. A Christian party is, in our eyes, not

¹¹Christian Pietsche, 'Im Benehmen mit dem Staate: Die Neuapostolische Kirche in der DDR', in *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 12 No. 3 (June 1986), pp. 123-24.

possible. Christian teaching teaches one to love one's neighbour; and party life is narrowed to serve partial interests.'

Other Christian Communities

If one asks clergymen of various churches whether they consider other churches to be Christian, one finds that some churches which consider themselves to be Christian, in particular the Church of John, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and the Jehovah's Witnesses are often not recognised as Christian by the clergy of other churches. Of the six 'larger' churches I listed in this category, one (the Jehovah's Witnesses) never succeeded in obtaining legal registration from the GDR's communist authorities, and was granted legal status only in March 1990, by the coalition government of Lothar de Maiziere.¹² The Jehovah's Witnesses were therefore unable to engage in ecumenical contacts (which they would surely have spurned in any case). Two other churches (the Old Catholic Church and the Mennonites) joined the Working Community of Christian Churches in the GDR which was dominated by the Evangelical and Methodist Churches. In addition, the Seventh Day Adventists enjoyed observer status in the Working Community (alongside the Roman Catholic Church, the Central European Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Quakers, and the Apostolate of Jesus Christ). The small Christian Community (*Christengemeinschaft*) thinks of itself as ecumenically oriented, although it does not take part in the work of the Working Community; its clergy argue that ecumenism is better fostered at the parish level, between individual pastors and lay persons, than at the level of ecclesiastical leaderships.

These churches vary quite considerably in degree of social engagement. The Seventh Day Adventists, for example, mobilised their ranks in 1972, when a law legalising abortion was being passed, and contacted the State Secretary for Church Affairs. The Seventh Day Adventists have also been interested in environmental questions, but chiefly in an ecumenical context, taking part in the ecumenical assemblies devoted to 'Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation', and at one time sent medical supplies, automobiles and other items to several African countries (Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Tanzania). The Seventh Day Adventists also reported profitable contacts with the East German CDU — one of the few religious organisations to express a positive view of the CDU. The Seventh Day Adventists

¹² DPA (Hamburg), 19 March 1990, trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 20 March 1990, p. 33.

were allowed, by the GDR authorities, to publish a monthly newspaper, *Adventgemeinde*, in 6,000 copies.

The Church of John is treated as a kind of pariah by most of the other churches, because it teaches that God the Father manifested himself through Moses, God the Son through Christ, and God the Holy Ghost through Joseph Weissenberg (1855-1941), the founder of the Church.¹³ As a result, it did not take part in the Working Community of Christian Churches and has no official ecclesiastical contacts with the Evangelical Church, although the clergy of the Church of John have personal contacts with individual clergy of various churches. On social issues, the Church of John considers military duty a matter of individual conscience, and showed its ecological commitment by organising volunteers to clean up the long-polluted Blankensee tributary.

By contrast, the Christian Community and the Mormons decline to become involved in environmental issues and other social questions, arguing that 'this is the sphere for the state, not the church.' The Mormons also do not object to military service *per se*, although some members of that church have opted for alternative service in the construction brigade. The Mormons have kept their distance from the other churches in the GDR, abstaining from the ever-increasing number of ecumenical forums — unlike the Christian Community which, incidentally, accepts the Church of John as a fellow Christian church.

The Structure of the Evangelical Church

The Evangelical Church in the GDR is not a unified body, but rather a federation of eight district churches (*Landeskirchen*) having somewhat different traditions. In five of these districts (Berlin-Brandenburg, Görlitz, Greifswald, Anhalt, Saxony-Magdeburg), the church is heir to the Union Church established by the Prussian government and unifying Evangelical and Reformed Churches. These district churches are therefore influenced in part by the Reformed tradition, which in the political arena translates into a greater tendency to become involved in social and political affairs. The other three district churches (Mecklenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony-Dresden) are in the pure Lutheran tradition, and have inherited in a less diluted form Luther's view that church and state have different tasks and that the church should acknowledge the state as God's instrument in the secular realm (a sentiment which contributed to the

¹³For an account of Weissenberg's life and of the early experiences of his community, see Obst, *Apostel und Propheten*, pp. 326-44.

state's enthusiasm over Luther during the 1983 quincentenary celebrations).¹⁴ In concrete terms this was illustrated in a controversy which developed within the church in 1988. Bishop Gottfried Forck of Berlin, of the 'Union' tradition, responded to pressures from East German citizens seeking emigration by opening his offices to consultations with would-be emigrants. Others in the church criticised Forck, saying that in so doing he had overstepped the bounds of legitimate church activity.

There are some differences in style among the bishops of the district churches, which at times can translate into differences in posture vis-à-vis the state, or differences in orientation and effectiveness vis-à-vis the local congregation. Bishops Werner Leich (of Thuringia) and Horst Gienke (of Greifswald)¹⁵ were described as more conservative than others, while Bishops Forck, Christoph Stier (of Mecklenburg) and Christoph Demke (of Magdeburg) were more liberal — which sometimes translated into a greater readiness to confront the authorities over social issues. But Stier and Bishop Rogge (of Görlitz), the latter a trained historian with special expertise on Martin Luther, are described as very ecumenically-minded and very open to dialogue.

The Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR was created in June 1969 and lasted until April 1991.¹⁶ Its highest organ was the Synod, which consisted of 80 members: 72 from the eight district churches, and eight from the Conference of Church Leaderships, which was responsible for the administrative and business affairs of the Federation. In 1970, the Unity of Brethren affiliated with the Federation, and from then on it was represented in the Conference.

Much of the responsibility for coordinating operations fell to the Secretariat, which oversaw 11 standing commissions. These commissions were responsible for: theology, parish work, social questions, information, radio and television, ecumenism, work with children and candidates for confirmation, work with adolescents, training of pastors, administration, and finances.

¹⁴See: Dan Beck, 'The Luther Revival: Aspects of National *Abgrenzung* and Confessional *Gemeinschaft* in the German Democratic Republic', in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (revised and expanded edition; Duke University Press: Durham, N.C., 1989).

¹⁵Bishop Gienke aggravated the members of his church in 1989 by joining Honecker in reaffirming the continued validity of the 'Church in socialism' concept at a time when church members were increasingly critical of this concept. As a result, the district synod voted 'no confidence' in him in November, by a majority of 32 to 30. The vote impelled the bishop to resign his office the same month. See ADN International Service (East Berlin), 14 November 1989, trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 14 November 1989, p. 27.

¹⁶See *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 September 1990, p. 3; 24-25 February 1991, p. 4; 27 February 1991, p. 4; and 30 April 1991, p. 2; and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 23-24 February 1991, p. 5.

From 1971 the Federation, along with all of its component district churches, belonged to the Ecumenical Council of Churches and took an active part in its work.¹⁷

The Evangelical Church in the Early Post-War Period

The Nazis had destroyed the institutional structures of the churches and they had to be rebuilt after the Second World War. But many clergy emerged from the War with great prestige, due to their resistance to the Nazis and to the so-called German Christian movement, through what had come to be called the 'Confessing Church' (*Bekennende Kirche*). New synods had to be elected, although the Confessing Church had maintained an illegal Council of the Brethren, which had held synods and carried out administrative tasks parallel to the administration being conducted by Nazi-controlled church offices.

After the Second World War, the traditional district church structures reemerged, and all the Evangelical churches in the Soviet zone of occupation reestablished episcopal offices (or, in the case of Anhalt, the office of church president). Dr Otto Dibelius, ousted from the post of general superintendent of the Kurmark by the Nazis in 1933, had been active in the Confessing Church throughout the Nazi period, and on 7 May 1945 (when Germany surrendered) he took the lead in establishing the consistory of the church in Berlin-Brandenburg.

Pastors and communists had been together in Nazi concentration camps, and strong personal ties had developed. This contributed to creating a kind of honeymoon which lasted about three years from 1945 to 1948. During this period, for instance, a Conference on Culture, sponsored in January 1947 by the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or, hereafter, SED), declared that

the brave conduct of a part of the clergy in the struggle against the barbarism of Hitler has also earned the recognition and respect of socialist labourers. Faith and socialism are not the antagonists that some would arbitrarily make them. The position of the party toward religion is one of absolute tolerance. That which Christianity seeks from faith, socialism seeks from

¹⁷For details, see Hans-Martin Moderow and Matthias Sense (eds.), *Orientierung Ökumene: Ein Handbuch* (2nd edition; Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: East Berlin, 1987), especially chapter 7.

knowledge. In their efforts to achieve their eminently secular objectives, the socialists have no desire to misuse the church in a propagandistic manner.¹⁸

The church began eliminating Nazis from its ranks immediately after the War and was able to carry out its de-Nazification without the interference of any of the occupation authorities; in this weeding-out process, the church was particularly concerned to remove pastors who had been involved in the German Christian movement.

At times there was pressure exerted on local pastors to endorse the new communist authorities. In July 1946 the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Saxony responded by issuing a circular letter to its pastors, asking them to refrain from open political activity lest their spiritual-pastoral role be compromised.¹⁹ The church's own position was 'that Christian life would only be possible at all if the state were constructed on democratic principles of organisation and if the churches received constitutionally anchored guarantees that they could fulfil their Christian mission.'²⁰

By 1948, there was a change in the atmosphere. Villagers and townspeople in many municipalities were, for instance, ordered to report for work on farms and in factories on Sundays: they were thus prevented from attending church. In addition, the authorities interfered with religious instruction in some communities. The churches grew apprehensive. In a Pentecostal letter dated 1 June 1949 Bishop Dibelius wrote:

More than anything else, we are concerned with the fact that the pattern of the state which is arising here is already showing signs of the same things which we struggled against under Nazi rule: power which overrules law, inner deception and untruth, and enmity to the Christian Gospel.²¹

Shortly after the establishment of the GDR in October 1949, two so-called 'progressive' pastors, Mehnert and Kehnscherper, were foisted upon the church's weekly radio broadcasts, as a result of which the church decided to withdraw from the programme.

Subsequently, the government issued orders forbidding schools to commemorate Christmas in any way and requiring them to celebrate the birthday of Stalin on 21 December. Christmas vacation was renamed winter vacation, and the Christ Child was renamed the

¹⁸Quoted in Richard W. Solberg, *God and Caesar in East Germany: the Conflict of Church and State in East Germany since 1945* (Macmillan; New York, 1961), p. 30.

¹⁹*ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰Horst Dähn, *Konfrontation oder Kooperation? Das Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1980* (Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen, 1982), p. 28.

²¹Quoted in Solberg, *God and Caesar*. . . , p. 74.

'Solidarity Child'.²² At one point, a history textbook was issued in which one passage denied that Christ had ever existed; in the face of strong remonstrations from church officials, a revised edition was issued in 1950 with this passage deleted.

At about this time, schoolteachers began requiring children to write essays expressing a materialist point of view. Bishop Dibelius repeatedly protested to Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl about this, as did bishops in the various district churches. Such expressions of concern were unavailing however, and in summer 1952 the state authorities went further and banned almost all Bible study groups.²³ The authorities also obstructed the church's work with young people, on the grounds that it involved an 'illegal' youth organisation; this was vigorously denied by the church. There was systematic discrimination against Christians at all levels of socio-political life.

On the other hand, there was no state interference in religious services or diaconical work. There were no show trials of bishops, as in other communist countries; and relatively few believers had to suffer imprisonment for their faith (although more than 70 Evangelical pastors and lay workers were imprisoned from January 1953 — some, such as Erich Schumann, after show trials — while Manfred Klain, an ardent young Catholic, was likewise imprisoned without just cause).

The SED was intent, in the early 1950s, on breaking the inter-German links of the churches, and on pressurising the Evangelical Church into docile cooperation. In particular, the SED wanted the church to cooperate with its National Front and to give prominence to the 'progressive' pastors. In 1950 the SED press published a series of defamatory articles alleging that Bishop Dibelius was a western agent. Until then the SED had faithfully honoured the obligations assumed by the state in the 19th century to make regular payments to the churches; but in 1952 payments to the church of Brandenburg were reduced by 20 per cent, and in early 1953 all subsidies to churches were (temporarily, as it turned out) discontinued. Lest the churches turn elsewhere to make up the difference, they were hindered from making street collections (for each of which a special permit was required), and barred from making house collections. In addition, several West German church periodicals, which had up to then freely entered the GDR in the mail, were banned, including the official Lutheran Church organ *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*.

In these years the state authorities regularly interfered in church events, harassed student congregations and student pastors at the

²² *ibid.*, p. 90.

²³ Dähn, *Konfrontation oder Kooperation*. . . , p. 44.

universities, and at times published defamatory articles in the press. But on 10 June 1953 Grotewohl promised an end to reprisals against Christian students, the reinstatement of teachers fired for their support of expelled students, and a retraction of certain limitations on religious instruction introduced the previous January. These assurances improved the atmosphere temporarily, but by July 1954 the situation was deteriorating again and pastors in particular were being subjected to police surveillance. Even as the church papers experienced difficulties in obtaining adequate paper supplies, a new religious monthly magazine made its appearance: *Glaube und Gewissen*, printed on high quality paper, was produced by East Germany's 'progressive pastors'.

The SED was especially interested in weaning young people from religion, and introduced a requirement that school teachers had to be Marxists, dropping the requirement under pressure in 1953, only to reintroduce it later. In 1954, the SED introduced a youth dedication ceremony (*Jugendweihe*), at the culmination of which each adolescent was presented with a book entitled *Weltall, Erde, Mensch* (The Universe, the World, Humanity), which, among other things, explained that religion was a tool for 'holding down the masses and oppressing them'.²⁴ The SED exerted strong pressure on young people to take part in this nominally voluntary ceremony, widely interpreted as an atheist alternative to the church sacrament of confirmation; and by 1958 the *Jugendweihe* had established itself as a norm for young people.

On 15 February 1956, the City Council of East Berlin issued the so-called Fechner Decree, forbidding the conduct of religious instruction *before* school, requiring at least a two-hour pause between regular school and any after-class religious instruction, and requiring parents who wanted their children to obtain religious instruction to secure a written permit, renewable on a three-month basis. At about the same time Hilde Benjamin, the Minister of Justice, issued a decree making the payment of church taxes voluntary. (Up to then the GDR state machinery had enforced individual payments of this tax!)

In these years, the state's relationship with the churches was entrusted to the care of Deputy Prime Minister Otto Nuschke, head of the CDU-East, who was also a member of the Evangelical Church. Nuschke presided over a special Office for Church Relations, established within the framework of the CDU. In March 1957, however, this Office was eliminated, and a new State Secretariat for Church Affairs was created, headed by Werner Eggerath, former GDR ambassador to Romania. This organisational change was accompanied by an intensification of pressure on the clergy in East

²⁴ Quoted in Solberg, *God and Caesar*. . . , p. 196.

Germany to sever their organisational connections with clergy in West Germany. More specifically, the government announced that it would no longer hold consultations with clergy who were not GDR residents. Bishop Dibelius, who as Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg had been living in West Berlin, was suddenly ostracised and would in fact no longer be allowed to enter the GDR. The same applied to Dr Heinrich Grueber, the official representative of the EKD to the East German government, who was likewise a West Berlin resident. Dibelius was not merely ostracised, but vilified, and posters were put up linking the bishop with Hitler's henchman Heinrich Himmler, and with a convicted sex criminal named Balluseck. For the time being, however, the Evangelical Church refused to divide itself along state lines.

In his first letter to all bishops in the GDR Eggerath asked them to devote their Easter sermons to a rejection of the atomic bomb and to advocacy of the peaceful use of atomic energy: compliance would have signified subservience to the government. Bishop Moritz Mitzenheim of Thuringia, as the senior Evangelical bishop resident in the GDR, replied that the church had long ago rejected the use of atomic weapons and that he construed Eggerath's request as an attempt to discredit the church leadership and divide the church.

It was not only the bishops who were put under pressure. Police started to put pressure on pastors to report on the political attitudes of their parishioners, and on one occasion, tried to persuade a pastor visiting West Germany to observe western military installations and troop movements and provide a report.²⁵

On 5 April 1957 came the arrest of the popular Dr Siegfried Schmutzler, a pastor at the University of Leipzig. After a show trial he was imprisoned for five years, on the charge of 'agitation to boycott the republic'.²⁶ He was also accused of having expressed sympathy for the Hungarian revolt and of having favoured the Evangelical Church's agreement with Bonn to establish a chaplaincy in the West German army.

Meanwhile, the *Jugendweihe* was creating a crisis within the Evangelical Church. Some church members suggested that the church simply abandon confirmation, since it had no Biblical basis anyway; others suggested postponing confirmation until the more mature age of 17; still others suggested splitting up confirmation into its component parts, with the completion of instruction, vow-taking, and the grant of constitutional rights no longer associated. A rift now emerged within the hierarchy over what posture to adopt toward the *Jugendweihe*. Dibelius led the majority who felt that church confirmation and the *Jugendweihe* had to remain mutually exclusive,

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 235.

even if that meant a shrinking base. Mitzenheim was the principal voice of a group which felt that refusing confirmation to those taking part in the *Jugendweihe* would needlessly contribute to the shrinkage of the church; he recommended tolerance of the atheist youth dedication ceremony.

This controversy adumbrated a deeper rift between Mitzenheim and most of the rest of the hierarchy. Mitzenheim believed that the church had to choose between a prophetic/critical role and an effective protective role, and felt that only the latter choice could be justified. He accordingly tried to maintain cordial and supportive relations with the regime, and to seek concessions from the regime through persuasion and consultation. Typical of Mitzenheim's controversial style was his acceptance of an invitation in October 1959 to attend a CDU rally in Dresden, even though the local bishop had declined. The Bishop of Dresden was angered and took 'revenge' by refusing to allow Mitzenheim to speak in one of the large Lutheran churches in Leipzig. Mitzenheim, who served as Bishop of Thuringia from 1945 to 1970, would be rewarded by the regime in August 1961, when it decorated him with the Order of Service to the Fatherland in Gold.

Mitzenheim was, however, terribly isolated, and had little following outside Thuringia. He himself spoke of a 'Thuringian path' (*Thüringer Weg*) and it was said that his concessions were calculated to help to preserve the strongly Christian character of life in the villages. While Mitzenheim was bishop, a number of church people from Thuringia joined the CDU, and Mitzenheim's son, the director of the District Church Office, became a member of the *Volkskammer* (People's Chamber). In 1964, Mitzenheim himself was elected an honorary member of the CDU-East.

Mitzenheim was no longer so controversial by the late 1980s (let alone in post-GDR Germany), chiefly because the controversies of the 1950s and 1960s were no longer relevant by the late 1980s. Once branded in some circles as the 'red bishop', Mitzenheim has more recently been honoured by the Thuringian Church. The street leading up to the District Church Office in Eisenach is in fact named after him. In Thuringia, some clergy told me in 1988 that Mitzenheim was a precursor of the 'Church in socialism' concept developed in the 1970s. Outside Thuringia this was disputed: other clergy recall theologians Günter Jakob and Johannes Hamel who in the 1950s and 1960s spoke about the need for a kind of critical solidarity with the state — with a strong accent on *criticism*, and with no word of trying to obtain special concessions for the church (on which Mitzenheim placed stress). They represented an opposition to Mitzenheim, who, as already noted, felt that the church had no critical role to play. Yet it was Mitzenheim who, as early as 1964, said 'We don't want to be a

church against socialism, but a church for the people who want to be Christians in a socialist order.'²⁷

It was, moreover, Mitzenheim's efforts which brought about the church-state accord of 21 July 1958, which produced a softening in Party Secretary Ulbricht's policy toward the churches. In the communique then issued, Mitzenheim put his signature to a text which among other things declared that 'the churches. . . are in fundamental agreement with the peace efforts of the GDR and its regime.'²⁸ The communique itself was controversial within the church. But it was quite a change to hear Walter Ulbricht declare in the wake of this communique that 'Christianity and the humanistic ideals of socialism are not in contradiction.'²⁹ Again, it was Mitzenheim's efforts which led in 1962 to permission being granted for pensioners to travel to the West. And on 18 August 1964 Ulbricht and Mitzenheim met again in the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach and signed a follow-up document on church-state understanding. Ulbricht commented on that occasion: 'We have no basis for differences. . . In the basics, in the questions of securing the peace and building socialism, we are of one mind. . . The common humanist responsibility unites us all.'³⁰

Splitting The Churches From The West

As long as the question of German reunification remained open, it was reasonable to argue that there was no point in hurrying to make organisational changes to conform to what might prove to be transient political realities. But with the creation of the GDR in 1949 and the failure of the last Soviet initiative on German reunification in 1957,³¹ it became clear to all concerned that the division of Germany was going to last for some time. Perhaps the first to adapt to the new situation was the German Unity of Brethren which had already divided its organisation in two in 1945, establishing one organisation for the Soviet zone of occupation and one for the other three zones. The Federation of Evangelical-Free Church Communities soon followed. And soon after the GDR was established, the Federation of Free Evangelical Communities severed its organisational ties with congregations in West Germany and in 1950 established a separate

²⁷ Quoted in Florian Ehlert, "'Suchet der Stadt Bestes!": Bischof Mitzenheims Bemühungen um Einvernehmen mit dem Staat', in *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 14 No. 3 (June 1988), p. 97.

²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

³¹ Stephen R. Bowers, 'East German National Consciousness: Domestic and Foreign Policy Considerations', *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (Summer 1979), p. 148.

organisation for the GDR. In 1954 the Old Lutheran Church in the GDR likewise set up a separate organisational structure.

The authorities were, of course, most interested in splitting the Evangelical Church. In 1967 they stepped up the pressure. At a conference of the CDU-East in Jena on 10 February CDU Chairman Gerhard Götting spoke of an 'independent' Evangelical church in the GDR which could 'not be mentioned in the same breath' with the Evangelical Church in West Germany.³² This sounded like praise, perhaps, but church leaders reacted with alarm. Church President D. M. Müller of the Evangelical Church of Anhalt wrote a letter to Götting, dated 4 March 1967, in which he said that the supposed ecclesiastical division was only a case of wishful thinking on Götting's part and argued that the GDR churches' abstention from the West German chaplaincy agreement of 1958 could scarcely be interpreted, as Götting seemed to think, as evidence of ecclesiastical secession. Bishop Hans Joachim Fränkel of Görlitz was of the same mind and declared 'We would be repudiating God's call for Christian unity if we were to allow ourselves to be separated from our sister churches in the Fatherland.'³³ An Evangelical church synod was convened from 2 to 7 April in Fürstenwalde, and on 5 April it issued a statement rejecting pressures to split the German organisation in two. In a key passage, the Fürstenwalde synod declared 'We Evangelical Christians in the GDR have no reason to destroy the community of the EKD. We have good reasons to preserve it.'³⁴

The new GDR constitution of 1968 specified that the churches had to conduct their activities in conformity with the legislative and administrative parameters of the GDR. This seemed to narrow the churches' options. In April 1968 the district churches of Saxony, Mecklenburg and Thuringia dissolved their organisational ties to the western churches of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany and on 1 December established a new association, the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the GDR. For a while, the five member churches (*Landeskirchen*) of the Evangelical Church Union held back; but by mid-1969 the separation was complete and a new organisation, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, was set up on 10 June. The Quakers, Reformed, and Methodists likewise separated from their West German co-religionists at about this time.

Organisational adaptation led to ideological adaptation. Meeting at Eisenach in July 1971, Evangelical church leaders accepted the

³²Quoted in Peter Fischer, *Kirche und Christen in der DDR* (Verlag Gebr. Holzappel: East Berlin, 1978), p. 28.

³³Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁴Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 89.

programmatic formula associated with the Evangelical Federation's Chairman at that time, Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, that the church did not want to be a church alongside socialism, or a church against socialism, but a church *in* socialism.³⁵ What this meant was, to some extent, left vague. It clearly signified a pledge of loyalty, while at the same time implying that some reciprocation was expected. It did not entail 'ideological coexistence', as the church made clear.³⁶ Even so, some clergy and believers feared initially that the church was somehow 'selling out', and the concept stirred some brief controversy. The other protestant churches divided over the concept. Some (such as the Unity of Brethren, the Baptist Federation, and the Seventh Day Adventists) applauded the concept. Others were sceptical. (The Catholic Church repudiated the concept altogether.)

Shortly before the Eisenach synod of July 1971, Bishop Schönherr met the State Secretary for Church Affairs, Hans Seigewasser, who had succeeded Eggerath in that post in 1960. Schönherr complained on that occasion of continued discrimination against young Christians in entrance to universities, and of the fact that persons fulfilling their military service in the construction brigade were simply barred from university education altogether.³⁷ Discrimination against believers, both in these forms and in hiring and promotion, remained an issue as long as the SED was in power. The church might have been *in* socialism, but its members were, in a number of ways, made to feel that they were only *alongside* socialism.

The Social Engagement of the Church

After the massive destruction of the Second World War, pacifist sentiments were naturally widespread, especially among young people. The church responded to these sentiments and as early as 1962 became engaged in political debate by promoting the idea of a social service alternative to the then newly introduced military conscription.³⁸ The introduction of the construction brigade in 1964 was the state's reply to this pressure. On the surface, the situation seemed calmer after that. But voices were repeatedly raised within the church — such as that of Dr Heino Falcke, Evangelical Provost in Erfurt, at a Dresden meeting in 1972 — urging involvement in the concerns of the

³⁵See *Kirche als Lerngemeinschaft: Dokumente aus der Arbeit des Bundes der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: East Berlin 1981), pp. 161-62.

³⁶*ibid.*, pp. 202, 206.

³⁷*ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁸Theo Mechtenberg, 'Die Friedensverantwortung der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR', *Deutsche Studien*, Vol. 19 No. 74 (June 1981), p. 176.

society.³⁹ In fact, Falcke himself became deeply involved in promoting pacifist and ecological activism on the part of the church and addressed a church assembly in Buckow (28-29 January 1978) on the subject of a 'Theology of Nature', arguing that the Old Testament lies within the environmentalist tradition.⁴⁰

Ironically, it was on the eve of a dramatic escalation in the church's involvement in peace-related and ecological concerns that Bishop Schönherr was received by General Secretary Erich Honecker for a kind of 'summit meeting' on 6 March 1978. The meeting came at the church's suggestion, and was carefully prepared in negotiations between responsible parties for months in advance, in order to ensure that the meeting would have not merely a formal and ceremonial character but some real substance.⁴¹ The church wanted access to television and radio, to obtain a pension for clergy over age 65, to be able to construct church facilities in so-called 'socialist cities' (churchless cities built after the War). There was also a more specific issue: ownership of the Augustine Monastery in Erfurt was shared equally between church and state — the church wanted full ownership. All these requests were granted. In addition, the meeting created an atmosphere of trust between church and state, and led directly to the establishment of contacts, in which outstanding problems came to be resolved on an issue-by-issue basis. The State Secretariat for Church Affairs came to see itself increasingly as a 'go-between' between the state apparatus of which it was a part and the church. Officials at the State Secretariat were highly knowledgeable, understood the needs of the churches, and liked to think that they were of use to the churches.

Other churches likewise benefitted from the new atmosphere, and almost every clergyman with whom I talked said that his church was an indirect beneficiary of the March 1978 meeting between Schönherr and Honecker.

What did the state gain from this meeting? First of all, it represented the culmination of Honecker's efforts to set church-state relations on a new footing. Honecker wanted to break with the confrontational policies of his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht, and to see church-state relations become more tranquil. Secondly, the authorities were already planning to introduce obligatory 'pre-military' training at upper secondary school level in September of that year. They may well have welcomed the chance to work out a kind of *modus vivendi* with the church, before embarking on a course that

³⁹ *Kirche als Lerngemeinschaft*. . . , p. 208.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 255.

⁴¹ See Albrecht Schönherr, 'Nach zehn Jahren: Zum Staat-Kirche-Gespräch am 6. März 1978', in *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 14 No. 1 (February 1988), p. 5.

was certain to anger many church people. And thirdly, the Honecker regime was already beginning to show a new approach toward the German past, 'rehabilitating' long-denigrated giants of German history. Martin Luther, as will be shown, was central to this project. The state was going to celebrate the Luther Quincentenary in 1983, and Honecker himself would chair the official Martin Luther Committee of the GDR, which was established on 13 June 1980. The *modus vivendi* achieved in March 1978 established a kind of trust, on the basis of which church-state cooperation in celebrating Luther would become possible. The Luther Year celebrations will be discussed in the next section.

Meanwhile, the church reacted very quickly to the announcement of the introduction of pre-military training. Already at a national conference on 14 June 1978, the Evangelical Church Federation warned that the planned educational changes would encourage young people to think in terms of 'enemies', cultivating prejudice and hate in them. In July the Conference of Church Leaderships adopted an 'Education for Peace' action programme, underlining the church's duty to work for peace, broadly conceived. And in September 1978, a church synod at Berlin-Weissensee urged the regime to scrap its pre-military training programme and introduce a 'peace education' programme instead, with emphasis on independent thinking on moral questions.⁴² The SED was not interested.

In 1980, on the initiative of young people in the church, the first 'Peace Decade' was organised under the auspices of the Evangelical Church. This 10-day event mobilised Christians and non-Christians for discussions and seminars on peace, environmentalism, the arms race, and other issues of social concern. Small groups of pacifists began forming spontaneously in late 1981 in the larger cities of the GDR, and by 1983 numbered 2,000-5,000 activists and 30,000-50,000 sympathisers and supporters. These groups, with anywhere between five and 80 members each, continued to exist in all the larger cities of the GDR. Perhaps as many as 95 per cent of these groups were church-linked (until late 1989), because church-associated activities were the sole exception to the official requirement (up to late 1989) that citizens register any 'large' gatherings in advance — this even included regular meetings of as few as half a dozen persons. Despite the high dependence of these groups on the churches for the use of church premises, 30-50 per cent of the members of these groups were non-Christians, some of the activists were in fact antipathetic to the church in general terms, and some of the groups themselves had no particular Christian character. In this respect, the church was quite receptive to independent initiatives. In 1987, a group of punks came to

⁴² *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 27 September 1978, p. 1.

Berlin's Church of the Samaritan and asked for the use of a room, in order to set up a punk club. The church turned down their request. However, some members of a peace group already making use of the premises of the Church of the Samaritan were sympathetic and allowed the punks to join their group.

In 1981, the Evangelical Church commissioned an East German graphic artist to design an emblem with the scriptural words 'Swords into Ploughshares' (*Schwerter zu Pflugscharen*). The resulting emblem was used on shoulder badges distributed by the church at its second 'Peace Decade' in November 1981. The authorities initially seemed to approve of the emblem, but in April 1982 banned the badge, and ordered the police to stop young people wearing it and force them to remove it.⁴³

Some churches, such as the Apostolic communities and the Mormons, have been interested neither in ecumenism nor in the environment. Other churches, including the Methodists, the Reformed Church, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of John, did become active in environmental concerns, however, and organised volunteers to help clean up polluted streams and to plant trees. The environment came to be a central theme of ecumenical meetings in the GDR, and thus involved all churches taking part in such meetings. As for the Evangelical Church itself, it made the environment a focus of its 'Peace Decades' in the late 1980s.

As the peace work of the Evangelical Church developed, it became clear that there were six contentious issues between church and state. First, the church remained opposed to what it termed the militarisation of East German society, and in particular to the programmes of pre-military training in schools. Yet the regime repeatedly extended and expanded these pre-military programmes, both in school and in the Pioneers youth organisation (for boys and girls aged 6 to 14).⁴⁴ Second, the church continued to plead for the introduction of a social service alternative to military service, and protested against discrimination against young people who fulfilled their military duty in the construction brigade. In 1984, a panel discussion in St Sophia's Church in Berlin revealed that more than 100 former members of construction units had been admitted to university study and concluded that discrimination against veterans of the

⁴³For further discussion, see Pedro Ramet, 'Church and Peace in the GDR', *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (July-August 1984), especially pp. 51-53; also reprinted as chapter 5 in Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: the Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 1987).

⁴⁴*De Tijd* (Amsterdam), 16 December 1983, trans. in JPRS, *East Europe Report*, No. EPS-84-015 (30 January 1984), p. 20; and Ulrike Enders, 'Erziehung zum Hass: Zum staatlichen Erziehungsprogramm für Kindergarten', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (April 1987).

construction brigade was no longer a problem.⁴⁵ Third, the church continued to remonstrate against more widespread discrimination against Christians in employment and elsewhere in education or in jobs or in other areas. Fourth, the church continued to plead for the right of emigration and established a consultation service in Berlin for those seeking to emigrate.⁴⁶ Fifth, the church's protection of the independent peace groups opened it to the charge of harbouring political opposition, and made the holding of what Bishop Werner Krusche once called 'the narrow space between opposition and opportunism' a much more complex task.⁴⁷ And sixth, as already noted, the church increasingly addressed environmentalist concerns and identified itself with those who believed that the SED's economic policy was leading to ecological disaster. Peter Gensichen of Wittenberg has played a special role here: as head of the Wittenberg Church Research Centre, he has edited a series of information bulletins about environmental questions.⁴⁸

When Erich Honecker received the then Chairman of the Federation of Evangelical Churches, Bishop Johannes Hempel of Dresden, for a meeting in February 1985, the conversation centred on the church's peace activism and the SED's policy on peace. Honecker pointedly reminded Hempel of the GDR's alliance with the Soviet Union, and acknowledged the contribution of East German Christians to the building of socialism in that country.⁴⁹ The compliment implied a warning.

The Luther and Müntzer Celebrations

In the early post-war years, the SED drew a sharp contrast between Martin Luther and his contemporary Thomas Müntzer. Luther was criticised for serving the interests of princes and nobility, while Müntzer, a chiliastic zealot who stirred up a peasant revolt in Germany in 1525, was hailed as 'the true representative of the revolutionary forces' in Reformation times.⁵⁰ In a 1947 publication,

⁴⁵ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 5 September 1984, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 9 February 1988, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Gisela Helwig, 'Zwischen Opposition und Opportunismus: Zur Lage der Kirche in der DDR', *Deutschland Archiv*, Vol. 9 No. 6 (June 1976), p. 578.

⁴⁸ Wolfgang Büscher and Peter Wensierski, *Null Bock auf DDR: Aussteigerjugend im anderen Deutschland* (Spiegel Verlag: Hamburg, 1984), p. 42; also *Glaube und Heimat* (Jena), 18 May 1986, p. 4, trans. in JPRS, *East Europe Report*, No. EER-86-103 (17 July 1986), pp. 98-99.

⁴⁹ *Neues Deutschland*, 12 February 1985, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Mittelalter, Beginn der Neuzeit* (Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag: Berlin 1958), a history textbook for senior schools in the GDR, as quoted in Arvan Gordon, 'The Luther Quincentenary in the GDR', *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 12 No. 1 (Spring 1984), p. 78.

Luther had been cast as the spiritual ancestor of Hitler,⁵¹ while another East German historian, writing in 1946, had charged Luther with being 'counter-revolutionary'.⁵² By the mid-1960s, however, Luther was being credited with contributing to the early 'bourgeois' revolution against 'feudal' Roman supremacy, a position which conceded that his influence had been progressive, relative to his time and context. As Luther's star rose in East German historiography, Müntzer's declined somewhat. As the GDR prepared to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967, a rough consensus was reached in elite circles that

... it is neither scientifically nor politically justified to content ourselves with this 'Babylonian captivity' of the progressive Luther heritage. Marxist historical research has, on the contrary, through the exposition of the legitimate (*gesetzmässig*) inter-relationship of the Reformation and Peasant War as phases of the bourgeois revolution, uncovered the progressive meaning of the Lutheran Reformation and with it has created the scientific basis for the national jubilee marking the passing of 450 years since the Reformation, which appreciated Martin Luther as belonging to the good traditions of our republic.⁵³

The decision to celebrate the Luther quincentenary in 1983 entailed a further rehabilitation of Luther, even though the SED continued to insist that Luther had been unable to perceive the full social ramifications of the revolutionary upheaval which he had helped to stir up. The state's new interest in Luther provided a basis for a deepening of church-state *rapprochement*, although some church persons were critical of the SED's transparent attempt to adopt Luther as a forerunner of socialism.⁵⁴ Indeed, Luther was now described as 'one of the greatest sons of the German people.'⁵⁵

For the SED, celebrating Luther reinforced its more general effort (which can be dated to 1978) to reclaim its German past and to establish historical precedents and roots for the present-day socialist system. In this way, the SED hoped to convert German nationalism, which had long been a source of contempt for the East German state, into a source of support. Moreover, Luther's theology explicitly

⁵¹ Wolfram von Hanstein, *Von Luther bis Hitler* (Dresden, 1947), pp. 22-23, as cited in Stephen P. Hoffmann, 'The GDR, Luther, and the German Question', *Review of Politics*, Vol. 48 No. 2 (Spring 1986), p. 250.

⁵² Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg einer Nation* (Berlin, 1950), first published in 1946, as cited in *ibid.*

⁵³ Gerhard Brendler, 'Reformation und Fortschritt', in Leo Stern and Max Steinmetz (eds.), *450 Jahre Reformation* (Berlin, 1967), p. 67, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 256.

⁵⁴ Robert F. Goeckel, 'The Luther Anniversary in East Germany', *World Politics*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (October 1984), p. 119.

⁵⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 121.

traced temporal authority to divine ordinance, leading Luther to preach obedience to secular authorities, whoever they might be, under most circumstances. (He preached passive resistance to authorities whose actions were contrary to Christian teaching.) Luther could thus be reinterpreted in the first place as a forerunner of 'progressive' thinking, even of socialism, and in the second place as an advocate of rendering unto Caesar's what is Caesar's.

Church representatives took part in the work of the official Martin Luther Committee, and the state provided funds for the restoration of a number of churches and sites of historical importance. The state even provided logistical support for church-sponsored events connected with the Luther celebrations in 1983. In the wake of the celebrations, there was a new trust in the relationship between the state on the one hand and the Evangelical and other traditional protestant churches on the other. (Since the Apostolic and other Christian churches placed no particular importance on Luther, the quincentenary had no effect on their relations with the state.)

Thomas Müntzer was a very different matter. A utopian and political radical who entertained dreams of realising far-reaching equality in an earthly republic, Müntzer has far less importance for the church than Luther. Indeed, both the church and the SED tended to see Müntzer as a 'theologian of revolution'⁵⁶ — which explains both the interest of the SED, and the lesser interest of the church, in commemorating his birth. In a three-page set of 'Theses on Thomas Müntzer', the party organ *Neues Deutschland* declared that Müntzer

aspired, on the basis of his revolutionary understanding of Christian teachings, to bring about a radical transformation of society in the interest of the exploited and subjugated people. He developed a theology of revolution with the goal of overcoming every form of class rule. He perceived in simple people the agent and revolutionary instrument of this transformation.⁵⁷

Honecker himself was even more explicit, claiming that Müntzer's legacy lived on in GDR socialism, and that his legacy was 'especially valuable' for the SED.⁵⁸

The Evangelical Church established a committee to organise its commemoration of Müntzer's quincentenary in 1989, and appointed three 'observers' to attend sessions of the state committee (headed, as

⁵⁶Friedrich Winterhäger, 'Thomas Müntzer und die Gegenwart in Beiden Deutschen Staaten', *Deutsche Studien*, Vol. 24 No. 96 (December 1986), p. 386; and Arbeitsgruppe *Thomas-Müntzer-Gedenken 1989* des Kirchenbundes, 'Orientierungshilfe zum Gedenken des 500. Geburtstag von Thomas Müntzer im Jahre 1989', *EPD Dokumentation* (1987), No. 52, p. 44.

⁵⁷'Thesen über Thomas Müntzer', *Neues Deutschland*, 30-31 January 1988, p. 9.

⁵⁸*ibid.*

in the case of the Luther celebrations, by Erich Honecker).⁵⁹ The state, following the model it had established in its Luther celebrations, commissioned a number of biographies of Müntzer as well as musical and dramatic works celebrating him, prepared a series of conferences and ceremonial events in his honour, and renamed the town of Stolberg after him (hereafter, Thomas-Müntzer-Stadt Stolberg). Yet the Müntzer celebrations were to have no particular impact on church-state relations, because the church by and large views Müntzer as a '*Schwärmer*' (a fanatic), on the fringes of its tradition. The church therefore approached the Müntzer quincentenary with marked reserve.

Trends And Developments In The GDR's Final Years

The increased involvement of the church in pacifist and ecological concerns after 1978 was associated with a mobilisation of people at grass roots level. Indeed, the bishops have often taken stands because of pressures generated from below. In 1986, this grass roots mobilisation reached the point where one could speak of a rebellion at the base — a rebellion aimed at the laicisation of the church. In October of that year, a group of pastors, church workers and lay persons issued a declaration setting forth the principles of a 'Solidarity Church'. The laity, according to the authors of this declaration, could not allow themselves to become the passive objects of the church's pastoral care, but should take an active role in the formulation of church programmatic statements.⁶⁰

In June 1987 the Evangelical Church was convening a synod in Berlin on the theme of Christian-Marxist coexistence. Supporters of the 'Solidarity Church' decided that they wanted to hold an opposition synod, which they called the 'Church Congress from Below' (*Kirchentag von Unten*). Charging that the church hierarchy had become too quiescent vis-à-vis the state, advocates of the Church Congress from Below were nonetheless ultimately dependent on the benevolence of the church, since the only place where they could legally meet would be on church premises. Bishop Forck decided to make church facilities available to them, and the 'Counter-Synod' was held at Berlin's Church of the Pentecost, attended by some 1,200 persons, mostly young people.⁶¹ In general, the Church Congress

⁵⁹ Roland Hahn, 'Müntzer ein Sozialrevolutionär? Die SED und die Kirche vor dem 500. Geburtstag Thomas Müntzer', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 14 No. 4 (August 1988), p. 141; also *Thomas Müntzer Ehrung der DDR 1989* (Dietz Verlag: East Berlin, 1988).

⁶⁰ Rita Hermanns, 'Auf der Suche nach Freiräumen: über die Initiative "Kirchentag von unten"', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 13 No. 4 (August 1987), p. 145.

⁶¹ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 24 June 1987, p. 5, and 29 June 1987, p. 5.

from Below was dominated by the idea that the concept of a 'church in socialism' had become obsolete, and should be replaced by a new concept of a 'grassroots movement for a different socialism'. That is to say, some adherents of the movement did not see western parliamentary pluralism as attractive, but hoped instead to refashion socialism in accordance with certain humanist ideals.⁶² The 'Church from Below' also aspired to restructure the church — *from below*.

'Church from Below' groups appeared in other cities, although the strongest group was the original group in East Berlin. In general, these groups saw themselves as presenting an alternative to the traditional methods of the Evangelical hierarchy. In Erfurt, however, the local 'Church from Below' group enjoyed good relations with the hierarchy and the two sides cooperated in putting on a critical exhibit about the reconstruction of Erfurt after the Second World War.

In Berlin itself, the Church of Zion became deeply involved in environmental concerns, putting together an environmental library. The library published the *samizdat* journal *Umweltblätter*, and organised the first unofficial peace march in the country (in September 1987). On 25 November 1987, East German security police raided the library, confiscating copying machines and various publications and materials of a critical nature. Twenty-one persons were arrested there, and similar actions were carried out in Rostock, Dresden, Jena, Weimar, Wismar, and Halle. The raid on the Church of Zion was the first time that church premises had been searched in the GDR since the 1950s. The raid and arrests provoked widespread protests in East Germany, including a protest from Bishop Werner Leich, Chairman of the Federation of Evangelical Churches.⁶³

Two months later, an official parade in honour of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, founders of the German Communist Party, provided the spark for new tensions between church and state. Some 200,000 persons were taking part in the official parade. They were, however, joined by unofficial protestors who unfurled a banner bearing a quotation from Luxemburg: 'Freedom is always only the freedom to think differently.' These activists were quickly rounded up and imprisoned, and the church loudly protested.

The party had evidently had enough, and Bishop Leich was invited to a private meeting with Werner Jarowinsky, a member of the Politburo. In that meeting, Jarowinsky allegedly told the bishop:

⁶²'Grössere Freiräume für Basisgruppen' [Rüdiger Rosenthal, as interviewed by Matthias Harman], *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 13 No. 5 (October 1987), pp. 189, 191.

⁶³*Die Welt am Sonntag* (Bonn), 29 November 1989, pp. 1-2; and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 31 December 1987, p. 2.

Recently, the number of occurrences and events in the sphere of [the] Evangelical churches has increased, which cannot be left unchallenged and in some cases exceed the limit of what can be tolerated. These events must be taken very seriously. They are in direct contrast with the form and understanding of togetherness which has proved its worth for a long time, respect for what is due the state, the parties, and the social organisations, and respect for the church's constitutional tasks and duties. It must be clear that in the church too, there cannot be any zones exempt from [the] law. We must take very seriously such occurrences as the provocations on the fringes of the Rosa Luxemburg demonstration, and the obstructionist and virulent campaigns against the GDR, that are connected with the Church of Zion and the subsequent series of events in some Berlin churches. . . Churches are organising purely political agitprop events, and anti-state slogans and calls for riots and confrontation are being tolerated there. . . The limit of what can be tolerated has been surpassed, the opposition groups have gone too far. We cannot allow things to continue like this. In a number of cases, events are organised without the knowledge of the allegedly competent municipal church councillors, under pressure from the outside and from above, over which the 'well-meaning' initiators no longer have control in the end. These are indeed signs of a disintegration of church structures, which, according to the wishes of people acting in the background, should apparently be replaced by different structures. If even church representatives openly admit that real substructures are forming, that there is discernible logistic control from outside and corresponding cooperation, this must be an occasion for reflection, for a reversal, for a necessary clarification, and for a change on the part of the responsible bodies. Attempts are being made to turn the churches into tribunals, lawyers' offices, or prosecutors' offices. At official offices, people answer the phone saying 'contact office', 'Solidarity office', or 'coordination centre'.⁶⁴

Tensions developed in the relationship between the Evangelical Church and the state from September 1986, when clergy attending the Erfurt synod sharply criticised the regime's policies in the field of education and once again demanded a social service alternative to military service. Klaus Gysi, State Secretary for Church Affairs from

⁶⁴*Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 14 November 1988, p. 7, trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 17 November 1988, pp. 19, 21. The statement was allegedly read to Leich and distributed, in written form, only to the first secretaries of SED *Bezirk* and *Kreis* leaderships.

October 1979 to July 1988, finally agreed to take up these issues with appropriate church representatives, but he was overruled by higher authorities, and no such meeting took place. In 1987, a state official attending one of the church congresses was asked about the prospects for Gorbachev-style democratisation in the GDR. When the official ruled it out, he was loudly booed.

The example set by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union was probably largely responsible for encouraging church leaders in their outspoken course. Already in early June 1988, in a document circulated at the church congress in Görlitz, activist cells of the 'Church from Below' said that 'current events in the Soviet Union have prompted us to consider certain fundamental questions concerning a social and political renewal.'⁶⁵ The six-page letter called for initiating action to bring about democratisation from below. Later that same month another regional church congress, held in Halle, heard explicit calls for the introduction of Gorbachev's programmes of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the GDR.⁶⁶ Participants in the latter congress also raised the key question as to what the churches might be able to do to 'alleviate the glaring injustice of the division of our fatherland.'⁶⁷ Subsequently, at a synodal meeting in Dessau (16-20 September 1988), Bishop Leich criticised what he called the development of a two-class system in the GDR, consisting of people allowed to travel to the West and people denied that prerogative, and called for a society with a 'human face'⁶⁸ — a phrase strikingly reminiscent of Czechoslovak reformer Alexander Dubček's calls, in 1968, for 'socialism with a human face'. Other congresses in 1988 took up other sensitive issues.

The authorities responded by barring West German television crews from taping or filming the proceedings in Dessau, and by censoring a series of issues of church newspapers which sought to report on the various church assemblies. This was the first time since the early 1980s that church publications had been censored. All five regional church papers as well as the Evangelical news service were affected. On one occasion, the Berlin newspaper *Die Kirche* was banned because it attempted to reprint, in German translation, an article on religious policy in the Soviet Union originally published in the Soviet paper *Moscow News*.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Quoted in Barbara Donovan, 'Church Groups Call for Democratic Reforms', *Radio Free Europe Research*, 10 June 1988, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 27 June 1988, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Quoted in *Die Welt*, 7 June 1988, p. 10; trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 8 June 1988, p. 36.

⁶⁸ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 20 September 1988, p. 3; and Matthias Hartmann, 'Hier ändert sich nichts — Zur Synodaltagung des Kirchenbundes', in *Deutschland Archiv*, Vol. 21 No. 10 (October 1988), p. 1025.

⁶⁹ On this case, see *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 20 June 1988, p. 1.

On 24 June, Bishop Leich met representatives of the State Secretariat for Church Affairs to discuss these interventions by the authorities, but the meeting failed to resolve anything. Bishop Leich subsequently made a formal protest to East German Prime Minister Willi Stoph. Meanwhile, two independent groups (a peace group and a working circle of the 'Solidarity Church') likewise sent a letter of protest to state authorities. As the censors' intrusions continued, Berlin Pastor Wolfram Huelsemann led a silent protest march of some 200 persons on 10 October; the march was broken up forcibly by the security police after it had gone about 200 yards, on the grounds that it was an unregistered, and hence illegal, assembly.⁷⁰ During 1988 alone, the authorities had censored *Die Kirche* 15 times; the other Evangelical church papers were also affected.⁷¹

As tensions grew, the GDR authorities banned an international church congress scheduled to start in East Berlin on 12 November. Sixty-five representatives from Evangelical churches in ten European countries had planned to discuss peace issues and Moscow's reform policy. The authorities said that the meeting would have put 'pressure' on the church-state relationship in the GDR.⁷²

The Church and the Revolution

Meanwhile, the formula 'church in socialism' came under fire within the Evangelical Church itself in 1988. Writing in the West Berlin periodical *Kirche im Sozialismus*, East German theologian Richard Schröder criticised the formula for suggesting that the church was somehow incorporating socialism into its self-image, and suggested that 'church in the GDR' might be a more appropriate, and politically less loaded, formula.⁷³ But the latter would also have been politically less useful to both church and state. Moreover, although developed within Evangelical church circles, the formula was widely accepted among other Protestant churches, as well as by the Church of John, though not by the Apostolic churches, the Mormons, or, of course,

⁷⁰ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 July 1988, p. 2; *Die Welt*, 5 July 1988, p. 1, trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 6 July 1988, p. 29; *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 23 July 1988, p. 4, and 9 August 1988, p. 3; and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 October 1988, p. 2, trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 19 October 1988, p. 18.

⁷¹ Vienna Domestic Service (30 December 1988), trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 30 December 1988, p. 25; and Michael Burg, 'Es geht nicht um die Kirchenpresse', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 14 No. 6 (December 1988), especially p. 218.

⁷² *Die Welt*, 14 November 1988, p. 1; and DPA (Hamburg), 14 November 1988 — both trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 15 November 1988, p. 27.

⁷³ Richard Schröder, 'Was kann "Kirche im Sozialismus" sinnvoll heissen?', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 14 No. 4 (August 1988), p. 137.

the Catholic Church. By March 1989, Schröder was no longer a 'voice in the wilderness', and Thuringian Bishop Werner Leich himself — chair of the Evangelical Church Federation — called the concept 'church in socialism' 'rather worn out'. Leich had come to agree that the concept suggested that the church was *for* socialism.⁷⁴ On the contrary, the church was becoming, ever more decisively, a leading force in the growing opposition to the SED regime. The church began to distance itself from the concept,⁷⁵ but the entire concept would soon be overtaken by events anyway.

On 7 May 1989, elections were held in the GDR. Opposition groups sheltered by the Evangelical Church monitored the elections closely, and when the results were announced the opposition charged the regime with fraudulent under-reporting of negative votes. In East Berlin's Prezlau Hill district alone, according to the opposition, some 2,659 negative votes had been confirmed; yet the regime had reported only 1,998 negative votes in the whole of East Berlin.⁷⁶ Some 200 young people demonstrated against the elections in front of the St Sophia Church; they were beaten up by security forces and 120 of them were arrested. They were released, however, after representations were made by the church.

In summer 1989, Hungary opened its borders with Austria and announced that it would no longer honour its earlier agreement to return to the GDR East German citizens seeking foreign asylum. The result was that within a matter of weeks, hundreds of thousands of East Germans fled to West Germany, most of them via Hungary and Austria, but some by scaling the walls of West German embassies in Warsaw and Prague. An Evangelical church synod, held in Eisenach in September, declared that fundamental political and social reforms were 'urgent' and in particular demanded the introduction of a multi-party system in the GDR.⁷⁷ The regime refused. The church leadership sent a letter to the Honecker leadership requesting bilateral talks on political and social reforms. The authorities 'took note' of this request, but shelved it until events forced their hand.⁷⁸

As is well known, the GDR's 40th anniversary celebrations on 7 October 1989 proved to be the final curtain on the East German experiment. The Evangelical Church organised peace prayers and vigils in support of reform in Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden. Hundreds

⁷⁴ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 13 March 1989, p. 4; trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 17 March 1989, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Heino Falcke, 'Stellvertretendes Handeln: "Kirche im Sozialismus" am Beispiel der DDR', *Kirche im Sozialismus*, Vol. 15 No. 6 (December 1989), pp. 232-37.

⁷⁶ *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 13 May 1989, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 21 September 1989, p. 2; also *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24-25 September 1989, p. 3.

⁷⁸ *Die Welt*, 16-17 September 1989, p. 4; trans. in FBIS, *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 19 September 1989, p. 28.

of thousands of people gathered in protest. The vigils ultimately brought the regime down. Erich Honecker, secretary of the SED since 1971, was forced to resign (and ultimately fled to the USSR), and Egon Krenz briefly took the reins. On his first day in office, Krenz had a private meeting with Bishop Leich — a clear sign of the political power of the church at that juncture. Later, in December, when round table talks on East Germany's future were convened in Berlin, Bishop Forck of Berlin-Brandenburg was chosen to chair the discussions.

New elections were held in East Germany in March 1990, bringing into office a coalition government headed by Christian Democrat Lothar de Maiziere and committed to German reunification. De Maiziere viewed himself as a caretaker for the brief transition prior to eventual reunification on 3 October 1990. His cabinet included four Protestant pastors — among them Rainer Eppelmann (Minister of Defence and Disarmament) and Markus Meckel (Minister of Foreign Affairs). Fourteen of the 400 members of the transitional parliament were pastors.⁷⁹

The transition government restored several church holy days (including Christmas and Easter) as state-holidays, removed pressures on the church, and released internal documents revealing the State Security's strategies for undermining and subverting the churches, including drawing Evangelical pastors into cooperation.⁸⁰ The reunification of Germany also made possible the reunification of the divided Evangelical Church, and this process, started in September 1990, was by and large accomplished by February 1991.⁸¹ Thus ended the independent existence of the 'East German Church'. However as Robert Goeckel, a seasoned American observer of the East German religious scene, noted:

despite its ideological conflict with the SED regime, the church is ironically more likely than other institutions to retain elements of its past experience of socialism. Little appears likely to remain of 'real existing socialism' in much of GDR society. . . The *Wende*, or transformation, has left no segment of society unaffected, even 'non-political' areas like sports and the music scene. Yet because the church was less affected by the Leninist system, its rejection of the GDR legacy is less sweeping than in these other institutions. There have been few purges in the church leadership and the church's calls for social justice stand in stark relief to the popular embrace (as of mid-1990) of West German-style

⁷⁹ *New York Times*, 18 May, p. A5.

⁸⁰ On the last point, see *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 3 September 1990, p. 12, and 24 September 1990, p. 14.

⁸¹ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 February 1991, p. 4.

capitalism. . . Nor is the resurgence of religion after the collapse of the Nazi regime likely to be repeated in the post-communist regime. The collapse of the Leninist system in the GDR was due in no small part to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. It too will fall prey to the greater diversity of German tradition and the pluralism of liberal democracy. Yet, more than other institutions in the GDR, the church is likely to embody elements of the past in the new Germany.⁸²

Conclusion

During the era of communist rule, 1949-1989, the Evangelical Church, by virtue of its preponderant size, to some extent set the tone for church-state relations more generally. But there were some important exceptions to this rule. In the early post-war period, while the Evangelical Church's relations with the state were difficult, other churches, which had been banned under the Nazis or had suffered severe limitations, felt relief at being able to organise themselves anew. Moreover, whereas earlier German governments had favoured the Evangelical Church, the SED treated all registered religious organisations more or less equally. The result was that the smaller churches often took a more positive view of SED policy (a perspective that was also encouraged by circumspection).

The Schönherr-Honecker meeting of March 1978, on the other hand, produced positive effects for all churches. Religious life became more normal, communities generally found it easier to build churches, and the entire church-state climate improved. By contrast, the falling out after 1986 was specific to the relationship with the state of the *Evangelical* Church, and did not affect other churches. Only the publications of the Evangelical Church were censored. Officials of other churches insisted that there was no particular tension in their relations with the state during the last years of the GDR, 1986-89. In fact, as tensions were growing between the Evangelical Church and the state in 1988, the Church of John sent an open letter to General Secretary Honecker warmly commemorating the March 1978 meeting and noting the 'positive effect of the separation between state and church and of equal respect to all churches and religious communities in our state.' The letter gratefully acknowledged the 'expansion of the publication of Church materials' and underlined acceptance by that

⁸²Robert Goeckel, 'The Evangelical-Lutheran Church and the East German Revolution', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 10 No. 6 (November 1990), p. 43.

church of the principle that the church is 'neither a political nor a social organisation.'⁸³

The churches I have discussed in this article are highly diverse; their theologies, ecclesiologies, and perspectives on politics have all differed considerably. Even within the Evangelical Church there have been differences — some traceable to differences between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, some associated with differences of personality, or differences in the experience of regional churches. As for the regime, it generally succeeded in presenting a more unified front.

Reunification presents the churches in the eastern part of Germany with a powerful challenge. Unlike the churches in the western part of the country, they have suffered a dramatic depreciation in membership as a consequence of regime-sponsored secularisation. Until reunification, their political role assured them of a continued role in society. Now shorn of that role, the east German churches will find it far more difficult than their west German sister churches to maintain a visible presence.

⁸³ *Neues Deutschland*, 31 May 1988, p. 2.

*Fact Sheet**(Groups with 2,000 or more members. All data are from 1988, unless otherwise stated)*

	<i>No. of members</i>	<i>No. of parishes</i>	<i>No. of pastors</i>
<i>Protestants</i>			
Evangelical (Werner Leich, Chairman)	6,435,000 ¹	7,347 ¹	4,161 ¹
Methodist (Rüdiger Minor, Bishop of Dresden)	28,000	400	140
Baptist Federation (Manfred Sult, President)	20,000	222	130
Reformed (Hans-Jürgen Sievers, Chairman)	15,000	24	20
Old Lutheran (Johannes Zellmer, President)	7,150	27	22
Evangelical-Lutheran Free	3,200 ²	?	?
Unity of Brethren (Christian Müller, Chair of the Directorate)	2,600	9	25
<i>Apostolic</i>			
New Apostolic (Fritz Schröder, President)	80-100,000	750	6,000 ³
Apostolate of Jesus Christ (Waldemar Rhode, presiding)	12-14,000	130-200	1,600 ³

¹ 1986² 1983³ lay preachers

Fact Sheet (cont)

Shepherd and Flock (Günter Hain ⁴ , presiding)	7,000	150	?
Community in Christ Jesus (<i>Lorenzianer</i>) (Gottfried Borner, Chair of the Exec- utive Committee)	5,000	60	60
Apostolate of Juda (Horst Gläser, presiding)	3,000 ⁵	14	More than 40
Catholic-Apostolic (Werner Zander, Lower Deacon)	2,000	35	1 lower deacon
Reformed Apostolic (Kurt Kretzschmar ² , Chairman)	2,000	56	70

Other

Jehovah's Witnesses	25-30,000	Illegal	Unknown
Seventh Day Advent- ists (Lothar Reiche, President)	9,000	280	160
Christian Community	5,000 ⁵	45 ⁶	40
Mormons (Henry Burckhardt, President)	4,700	27	79 ⁷
Church of John (Frieda Müller, Superintendent)	3,500	40	21

⁴1984⁵1981⁶15 regular parishes; 30 affiliate parishes⁷22 Melchisedek priests; 57 Aaron priests