

The Role of the Lutheran Church in the Democratic Movement in the GDR

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When the famous Monday demonstrations began in Leipzig in September 1989, spreading quickly to many cities and communities both large and small with the shout 'We are the people', and bringing the old political system crashing down just two months later, the world was not just impressed, it was astonished. Virtually nobody had thought that the people of the GDR, with their reputation as being amongst the worthiest and dullest in Europe, would have been capable of a powerful expression of democratic will like this. What the world generally failed to understand was that the revolutionary movement of autumn 1989 in the GDR did not start up out of nothing. It had been preceded by the ten-year development of an opposition movement for peace, human rights and the environment under the protection of the Lutheran Church in our country.

That such a development was possible was a consequence of the peculiar nature of church-state relations in the GDR, which were unique in the Eastern Bloc. The ruling SED was the only Communist Party to guarantee religious freedom to its members. The reason for this was that the SED had originated in the union of two workers' parties, the Communist Party and the Social-Democratic Party; and ever since the campaign 'Clergy into the SDP' in the 1930s, the latter's membership had included hundreds of pastors and church workers and thousands of believers. The reason why the SED did not promptly expel these Christians was because the newly-founded state of the GDR did not at once enjoy international acceptance. The only way the GDR could succeed in gaining access to international negotiating tables was by sending Christians to them. Christian members of the SED thus played a relatively significant role in the first years of the GDR's existence.

In return the state guaranteed the church a certain independence and substantial rights. The church has always been a big landowner. It has always been able to run hospitals, theological colleges, kindergartens, a few schools, and educational and meeting centres.

And — something which was to be of decisive importance in the later development of the GDR — it has retained control over its own premises. All this naturally did not prevent the state from waging ideological campaigns against the church. The most significant move was the introduction in 1955 of a state ‘Youth Dedication’ (*Jugendweihe*) ceremony which was held every year on Palm Sunday and which was intended as a rival to Confirmation. This and similar strategies against the church were indeed successful. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s the church steadily lost influence and by the end was hardly playing any role in East German society. The state seemed to have won its struggle against the church, the more so since in the wake of increasing recognition in the 1970s the GDR no longer needed to use Christians in its foreign diplomacy. The church for its part contributed a defensive stance, scrupulously avoiding comment on political issues of the day, with one exception: in the early 1970s it opposed the introduction of compulsory military service, and the compromise was the setting up of unarmed construction units for Christians. This phase ended in the late 1970s when the government decided to introduce defence studies into every school in the country. The church reacted with a decisive public rejection of the proposed subject and thus became overnight the champion of parents, both Christian and non-Christian, who were opposed to defence studies for their children. The church’s stance brought it its first moral credit and its first increase in numbers. In order to preserve their children from defence studies, parents took thought for their Christian traditions and began to join Christian parishes again. Shortly afterwards came the Warsaw Pact decision to station nuclear rockets in the GDR. It was in the struggle against these rockets that the first opposition movement in the GDR was born. It deserved its name: the independent peace movement.

Peace groups quickly began to appear in one church parish after another, first in the cities, then in many towns and villages. The membership of these peace groups included not only Christians but also people of other faiths, atheists, and even members of the SED who were no longer able to support the policies of their party. These peace groups very quickly recognised that peace does not simply mean disarmament, but living at peace with nature and concern for human rights. These themes were thus intimately associated with each other from the very start of the opposition movement in the GDR. The peace groups developed all their activities on church premises. That is where they met and held their events: parish meetings, seminars, peace workshops, conferences on the environment and human rights, and travelling exhibitions which were shown in different churches throughout the country. In all this the church took on a protective

role. Many church representatives also cooperated actively, as organisers, moderators, speakers, advisers and pastoral counsellors. The first independent newspapers were produced on church duplicating machines in parish rooms. It was in church rooms that the first independent libraries in our country appeared, where as well as the publications of the peace and environmental movements you could also read and borrow western publications which were inaccessible or even forbidden in state libraries. These libraries quickly developed into centres where people could meet, exchange information and coordinate the activities of the various different groups. By the mid-1980s the independent groups in our country were well networked together. There were annual meetings of delegates and big regular events, like the Berlin Peace Workshop in June, which attracted thousands of visitors, and the Mecklenburg Mobile Peace Seminar in August. There is no space here to go into details about the debate between the opposition movement and the state, except to note that in all these conflicts the church courageously and publicly defended the opposition. All this brought the church so much moral credit that it became a significant political factor in our country. Three years before it fell, the Honecker government was already unable to take any political decision without considering how it would be received by the opposition and the church.

The opposition continued to grow steadily despite all setbacks and repressive measures on the part of the state. Two events in particular impressed themselves on society's consciousness: the raid by state security organs on the environmental library in Berlin in November 1987, and the arrest of members of the opposition at the official rally in honour of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in January 1988. The raid on the environmental library was conducted under cover of darkness in the worst Stalinist manner, and four of the library staff were arrested. This sparked off the first big public demonstration of solidarity: a four-day vigil in the Zionskirche in Berlin, during which services of solidarity were held. The population and the international media followed this event closely. After four days the state security organs made a small concession: they released the prisoners. This raid marked the start of open confrontation between the state and the opposition. Unable to accept their recent defeat, the state security organs went on in January to arrest nine leading members of the opposition. This time they were intending to adopt a hard-line policy. Trials and sentences for 'unlawful assembly' followed. Other trials for 'high treason' were being prepared. There was another wave of national and international solidarity. In the end services of solidarity with the prisoners were being held every evening in 30 different towns and cities. The churches were packed everywhere, with hundreds of

people in the streets outside. The confrontation ended with a partial victory for the state. Influenced by their solitary confinement and by the false picture of the situation provided by their lawyer Schnur, who as President of '*Demokratischer Aufbruch*' was to be exposed after the change of regime as an agent of the secret police, the prisoners decided to emigrate to the West. This was a setback for the democratic movement from which it took a long time to recover.

One outcome of the services of solidarity was, however, the formation of a human rights group in the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig. This group resolved to continue its work and to hold public prayers for peace in the church every Monday. This Monday prayer service for peace and human rights was later to become the starting-point for the Monday demonstrations. As the demonstrations gained strength, the other inner-city churches in Leipzig opened their doors to the demonstrators. The demonstrations always began with prayers for peace, and as there was always the danger that the police would resort to violence, Red Cross stations were also set up in the churches.

After the fall of the Honecker government, church representatives organised debates at the Round Tables throughout the country, which ensured that the country continued to be governed at all levels until elections should take place. It is partly thanks to the wise and sensitive way in which these church representatives led debate that the old parties and new groupings gathered at the Round Tables were able to reach such a high degree of consensus. As is well known, it is thanks above all to the work of these Round Tables that the social structure in our country did not slide into chaos. Now, after the elections, the percentage of ministers of religion and church workers in parliament and other representative bodies is above averagely high. We can expect that the first freely elected President of our country will be a church dignitary. This, as I have tried to show, is the logical consequence of the church's determined involvement in the process of democratic renewal.