



EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

VOL. 29, NO. 1, 2021

Special Issue: Christians in the Former East Germany

October 2020 marked 30 years since the reunification of Germany. Jubilant scenes at the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 usually illustrate that peaceful revolution, which precipitated the dissolution of the Communist G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic) the following year. Yet the key role played by

East German Christians in these events—heralding the swift collapse of the entire Communist bloc—is often overlooked.

East German Christians faced formidable barriers—typified by the Berlin Wall, but extending to numerous less concrete social and legal obstacles. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—this, an astonishing feature of their church life was a keenness to reach out across divisions to a range of people branded hostile by the regime. Formally within a familiar

church setting, such encounters in fact took place in a virtual “no man’s land” where the environment was extraordinarily diverse and challenging, as highlighted in this issue by Ruth Aardsma-Benton and Rev. Jane Holslag.

The courage shown by East German Christians, as well as the largely unsung contribution of their initiatives to Germany’s Peaceful Revolution of 1989-90, may prove inspirational to Christians seeking positive social transformation 30 years later.



One of the last remaining stretches of the Berlin Wall, along Bernauer Straße (G. FAGAN)

Cultivating No Man’s Land: Church Initiatives and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

GERALDINE FAGAN

Religious activity was closely watched in all Communist states. The G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic) was no exception—indeed, its churches were surveilled to an inordinate degree by the Ministry for State Security, commonly known as the Stasi.¹ Paradoxically, however, the G.D.R. authorities’ desire to present their westward-facing country as a promotional storefront for the entire Eastern Bloc led them to grant churches unusual leeway for community organization.

A landmark March 1978 meeting between head of state Erich Honecker and East German church representatives—the first since the G.D.R.’s foundation in 1949—resulted in greater church autonomy for activity such as media broadcasts

and importing literature. In return, churches were obliged to keep out of political affairs.²

But as the only institutions not fully integrated into the state apparatus, East German churches attracted a broad range of dissenting groups, particularly activists with an overlapping concern for peace issues, the environment, and fundamental human rights. In this way, congregations came into close contact with parts of society they might never have encountered in free conditions.

The most unlikely example was the punk subculture. By the early 1980s a significant number of young East Germans were playing raucous music and/or dressing

(continued on page 2)

Cultivating No Man's Land *(continued from page 1)*

defiantly as part of an indigenous punk movement. This drew fierce government opposition, including arrests. The response of some Lutheran ministers was to shelter the punks. Despite its disorderly behavior, Pastor Siegfried Neher of Christ's Church in Halle saw punk as an existential scream echoing Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"³ At St. Nicholas' Church in Leipzig, Pastor Christian Führer [d. 2014] permitted the punk band Wutanfall [German: Rage Attack] to play in a chapel used for youth work.⁴

Now retired, Pastor Curt Stauss ministered in Merseburg—close to both Halle and Leipzig—and was active in the *Offene Arbeit* [German: Open Work] church youth initiative. He recalls the church being the only safe place for punks. "They were culturally so extremely different! How they found one another: the church had a treasure—large premises—and also another: employees with big hearts, with a strong sense of solidarity for people who were persecuted or discriminated against." These church workers were typically *Sozialdiakone* [German: deacons for social welfare], in addition to a small minority of ministers: "The vast majority of pastors and even more congregations were moderately sized, middle-class, and 'orderly'—exactly what the punks rejected."⁵

Risky ministry

Harboring punks was definitely outside the Lutheran comfort zone. While applauding Deacon Lothar Rochau's efforts to minister to the children of chemical plant workers in a new part of Halle, church member Mechthild Hofmann also recalls that, "the ordinary congregation was actually fearful of the young people whom Rochau gathered—how they looked, the punk groups."⁶ Pastor Führer's daughter Katharina Köhler recalls him taking her along to meet



Stasi secret police identity photos of a punk, 1985
(Source: STASI MUSEUM)

Wutanfall because he expected—as someone who loved Bach—that he would not tolerate their music, but still "felt that these young people were searching for something."⁷

Such ministry was doubly risky. Local officials branded Pastor Neher an enemy of the state, and Stasi intimidation reached a point where his young son needed psychiatric help. When Deacon Rochau began to organize events away from church premises, he was arrested, jailed, and expatriated to West Germany.⁸ Despite these efforts, there is no indication that the largely atheist punks found Christian faith. Pastor Stauss is not aware of any church influence, citing two godchildren who became punks. "They do not wish to have anything to do with the church (except for me); their father was a pastor. They reject anything that looks like ritual." (According to Pastor Stauss, one point of contact does exist, however—the church's working group against right-wing extremism. "Against Nazis' is also their struggle."⁹)

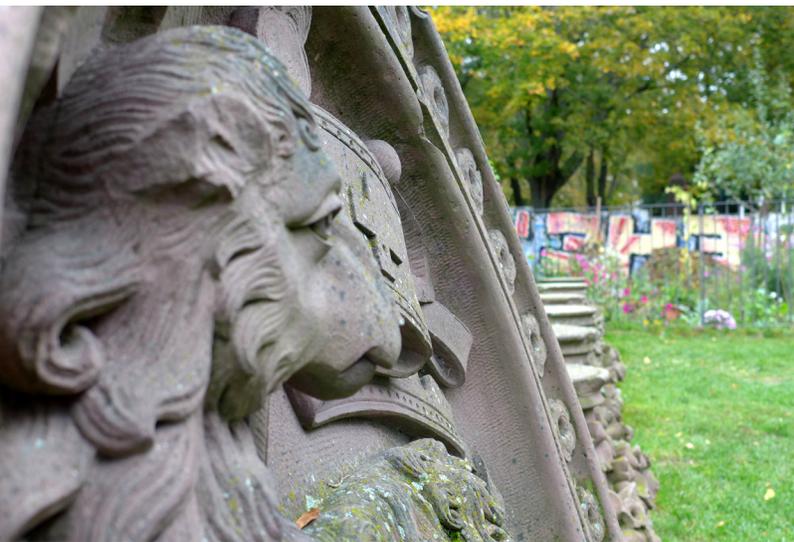
Yet in a further paradox, it was the friction between the churches and the various groups they sheltered which ended up generating a viable opposition movement to the Communist regime. Without the church's protection, such activists would never have been tolerated by the state. Without the church's failure to fully integrate such groups, their activities would not have spilled over into the public square. Perhaps most crucially, without the churches' nurturing of a commitment to non-violence, the massive demonstrations of the 1989-90 Peaceful Revolution might not have posed such a quandary for East German law enforcement. As retired church worker Albrecht Kaul notes, "They were ready for everything, except candles and prayer."¹⁰

Leipzig peace prayers

The church at the epicenter of those demonstrations was St. Nicholas in Leipzig. Regular *Friedensgebete* [German: prayers for peace] began there in September 1982, shadowing the emergence of a broader autonomous peace movement in East Germany.¹¹ The prayers for peace were the



St. Nicholas' Church, Leipzig. The sign reads "open for all".
(G. FAGAN)



Lamb of God sculpture, a remnant of the demolished Reconciliation Church. The original inner enclosure of the Berlin Wall and *Garten im Niemandsland* are in the background. (G. FAGAN)

church's response to youth dissatisfaction with the growing militarization of society.¹²

A conflict over the prayers flared up in 1988, when Pastor Christoph Wonneberger—who worked closely with the environmentalists', women's, and human rights' groups that coordinated the prayers—spontaneously allowed a collection to be taken for a jailed opposition activist. Fearing the prayers were becoming too political and could endanger other church activities, Dean Friedrich Magirius and Pastor Christian Führer reasserted control over the format of the prayers, prompting a protest by dissenting group members during congregational worship. The dissenters then began to gather for the peace prayers on the square outside the church rather than within.¹³

By September 1989, the city authorities were pressurizing St. Nicholas' Church to cancel the peace prayers, now held every Monday evening at 5 p.m. On Monday, 11 September, police violently attacked a crowd of some 600 gathered on the square. Church representatives formally objected to the mass arrests and fines that followed.¹⁴ Week by week, the crowds at St. Nicholas' grew: 1,000 on 18 September; 5,000 on 25 September; 10,000 on 2 October.¹⁵ Emphasizing peace, the prayers always closed with a reading of the Beatitudes, including "Blessed are the peacemakers"; outside, participants sang the hymn *Dona nobis pacem* [Latin: Lord, grant us peace] and countered provocations with calls of *Kein Gewalt!* [German: No violence!].¹⁶

Solidarity vigils

In early October thousands also began to attend nightly vigils in East Berlin in solidarity for those arrested in Leipzig. These were centered on Gethsemane Church, where a hand-painted banner announcing "Watch and Pray: Intercession and Vigil for Those Unjustly Arrested" hung above the entrance, referencing Matthew 26:41. In Leipzig, the Monday peace prayers continued despite an

ominous threat of a violent police response: On 6 October, a local newspaper published a letter from a combat group commander declaring readiness to use weapons against "these counter-revolutionary actions." On Monday, 9 October 1989 the authorities tried to thwart the peace prayers by occupying most of the pews in St. Nicholas' Church with plain-clothes state personnel during the afternoon. However, three other nearby churches opened their doors; that evening also saw a peaceful procession through the city with an unprecedented 70,000 participants.¹⁷

Together with mushrooming protests in East Berlin and elsewhere in the G.D.R., University of California Berkeley Professor of German History John Connelly assesses this vast Leipzig demonstration on 9 October to be "the decisive moment in the East German revolution."¹⁸ The Berlin Wall opened a month later, on 9 November.

The churches' pivotal role in the outcome of these events is rarely recalled today. Surviving 1980s church initiatives continue quietly, such as Gethsemane Church's regular *Wachet und Betet* [German: Watch and Pray] worship services in Berlin. When this author visited in October 2019, around 30 prayed for prisoners of conscience in Turkey, contemplated Psalm 102, and joined in a rendition of a popular 1970s hymn, *Der Himmel geht über allen auf.* [German: The heavens are above everyone].¹⁹ In Leipzig, prayers for peace continue at St. Nicholas' Church every Monday at 5 p.m., albeit requiring registered attendance, masks, spaced seating, and no singing in 2021 due to the spread of COVID-19.

Wall commemorations

Although central to the commemorative space at one of the last remaining stretches of the Berlin Wall, church contributions are also understated. Dedicated in 2000, the solemn Reconciliation Chapel stands on the site of the 19th century Reconciliation Church. This found itself in the death strip between outer and inner enclosures following the Wall's

(continued on page 4)



Reconciliation Chapel, Berlin (G. FAGAN)

Cultivating No Man's Land *(continued from page 3)*

construction in 1961, and was blown up by the G.D.R. authorities in 1985. Nearby is *Garten im Niemandsland* [German: Garden in No Man's Land], a project begun in 2018 by the Chapel congregation. This sees gardeners with varying degrees of church involvement cultivating flowers and vegetables in the former wasteland of the death strip: an apt symbol of the mundane yet meaningful Christian outreach underpinning the seismic social transformation of 1989-90.

Pastor Stauss warns against seeking strong visible evidence of the church's work, however. "*Offene Arbeit* and the work with punks was constantly being questioned by the congregations and church leaders as to whether they had baptized people or brought them to faith. ... The church workers answered that social welfare ministry had to be without intent; that it is not missionary, but diaconal. What comes out of it lies in God's hands."²⁰ Also at the Berlin Wall commemorative space, a memorial erected by the nearby Church of Sophia is engraved with Zechariah 4:6: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." For Pastor Christian Führer in Leipzig, the events at his church in 1989 were "a shocking confirmation" of the truth of this very verse. "It was a spiritual process which took us into world history... the incredible experience of the power of powerlessness."²¹ ♦



Gethsemane Church, Berlin (G. FAGAN). The church's October 2019 flyer for "Watch and Pray - Freedom Now!," prayer every evening "for those unjustly arrested" is above right.

Notes:

- ¹ Elisabeth Braw, *God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign inside the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019.
- ² Jane Holslag, *Berlin Fellowship: East German Perspectives and Missional Encounter 1961-1989*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013, 118; Matthias Hinkel et al (eds.), *Die Friedensgebete in der Leipziger Nikolaikirche*, Leipzig: Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchgemeinde St. Nikolai zu Leipzig, 2017, 43.
- ³ Tim Mohr, *Burning Down the Haus: Punk Rock, Revolution, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2018, 111.
- ⁴ Hinkel et al., 56.
- ⁵ Pastor Curt Stauss, email to the author, 27 January 2021.
- ⁶ Mechthild Hofmann, interview with the author, Halle, 23 October 2019.
- ⁷ Hinkel et al., 116-7.
- ⁸ Mohr, 80, 115, 118.
- ⁹ Pastor Curt Stauss, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Albrecht Kaul, *Wegen Gefährdung des sozialistischen Friedens: Bewegende Schicksale von Christen in der DDR*, Gießen: Brunnen, 2019, 127.
- ¹¹ John Sandford, *The Sword and The Ploughshare: Autonomous Peace Initiatives in East Germany*, London: Merlin Press/END, 1983, 22-3.
- ¹² Hinkel et al., 55.
- ¹³ Ibid., 120, 142.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 81.
- ¹⁵ Mohr, 320-1.
- ¹⁶ Kaul, 115.
- ¹⁷ Hinkel et al., 119-28.
- ¹⁸ John Connelly, "Moment of Revolution: Plauen (Vogtland), October 7, 1989," *German Politics & Society* 20 (Summer 1990), 71. Notably, a Lutheran dean, Thomas Küttler [d. 2019], was instrumental in keeping the peace during a protest by 20,000 people in the city of Plauen on 7 October 1989.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APCOOUTKpCV8>.
- ²⁰ Pastor Curt Stauss, op. cit.
- ²¹ Kaul, 128.

Geraldine Fagan is editor of the East-West Church Report.

Punks in the Church: The Relationship Between the Punk Subculture and Church in East Germany

RUTH AARDSMA-BENTON

An abridged extract from the author's 2018 Western Michigan University master's thesis with the above title.

When people ask me about my thesis topic, I often get a strange look or slight chuckle at my response. While some of this might be because I do not look like someone familiar with punk music, I think these reactions have more to do with the odd combination of my topic. The image many people have of punks seems antithetical to Christian religious beliefs, and it seems unlikely that a punk subculture might have had any sort of relationship with a church. However, that is what happened in East Germany. I believe that studying this relationship can provide a different perspective for understanding youth culture, marginalized groups, and the churches within East German society, and the events that led to the collapse of the East German state.

A punk subculture emerged in East Germany during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was an expression of some youths' disillusionment with life, their frustrations with the government, and their pessimistic view of a future that seemed pre-planned. Drawn to music that was raw and at times belligerent, the punks refused to conform, disengaged from the established system, and expressed their views through song lyrics and other acts of defiance.¹

Unlikely allies

In the eyes of the state, punks were a threat. They “suffered harassment by East German police—identification verifications, interrogations, and orders to leave public spaces.” As time went on, the government had a more difficult time explaining why youths would turn to the punk subculture, and the conflict between punks and the state increased.² Ultimately, this led to a crackdown on the punk subculture by the Stasi secret police in 1983, known as *Härte gegen Punk* [German: hardness against punk].

Due to the state's efforts to eliminate the punk subculture, punks turned to what may seem to be an unlikely ally for shelter: the Protestant churches. The churches

occupied a unique place within East German society because the government had granted them limited free space for religious purposes. This was a liminal space between what constituted “public” and what was “private.” The churches were a private institution, yet also functioned like a “counter-public,” or “a public outside the official public sphere that, while lacking official political power, nonetheless exercises agency.”³

There is no simple answer that describes the relationship between punks and the churches, because the punk subculture and different groups within the churches had different points of view. The churches were already providing

shelter for other dissident groups, such as pacifists and environmentalists, and the punk subculture began to become involved with some of them. As people were turning to the churches for social and political reasons rather than for religious reasons, the traditional role of the church as a religious organization appears to have diminished.⁴

For some members, this was acceptable as the churches were meant to be a “church for others,” to minister to those marginalized by the state,

and to provide a safe place for alternative communities to develop. In particular, the legacy of the *Bekennende Kirche* or Confessing Church's opposition to Hitler during the Nazi period was very influential for Protestant churches in the G.D.R. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a leader in the Confessing Church, and the theologian Karl Barth were among those who believed that the church was called to engage society and politics. The Confessing Church argued that when the ideology of the state and church disagreed, the church needed to stay true to its beliefs rather than conform to the state. Part of this involvement in society meant that the church was not only for Christians, but was to “become a ‘church for others’

(continued on page 6)



Concert by the punk band Antitrot during the first Church Day from Below, East Berlin (Source: Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft/Siegbert Schefke/RHG_Fo_HAB_18472).

Punks in the Church *(continued from page 5)*

and would speak openly in the public sphere about questions of social justice.”⁵

Musical interactions

Other members, however, worried that their churches could compromise themselves in terms of their beliefs. Some of the leadership within the churches wanted to minister to East German youth, but they feared that working with punks might create a situation where the churches in East Germany would be restricted by the state and become unable to minister to anyone. Some people felt the churches were simply going beyond their proper role in engaging East German society.

A key avenue through which the punk subculture began interacting with the churches was music. According to Hayton, “already by 1981, Protestant churches had begun opening their doors to punk, providing spaces for youths to gather, share ideas, listen to music, and even stage (rare) concerts.”⁶ Although the

S.E.D. [Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, the G.D.R.’s ruling political party] controlled who was legally allowed to perform concerts or record music, churches could offer punks and other musicians who did not have state approval an opportunity to play, as long as it was incorporated into part of a church’s religious activities.⁷ One type of service that punks participated in were known as youth services. These began in 1971 and continued after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rauhut states that “through their vitality, these special services

celebrated actual tidings of joy and attracted as many as 3,000 believers and non-believers from all over the G.D.R.”⁸ Punks also participated in the Blues Masses, religious services that were created in the late 1970s when a blues musician, Günter “Holly” Holwas, approached Rainer Eppelmann, a youth pastor at Samariterkirche [German: Samaritan Church] in Berlin, about performing at that church.⁹

There was also a diaconal aspect to the Blues Masses. On the one hand, as Rauhut summarizes, the Blues Masses were supposed to help “young people who had been pushed to the margins of society or even criminalized due to their attitude to life and political stance” to find a community. Rauhut continues by noting that on the other hand, they were also supposed to introduce these youths to the Christian faith

as “an alternative form of finding meaning and truthfulness in life, a way of being that the atheistic worldview of socialism had erased.”¹⁰ Youth attendance at these events grew. The 13 July 1979 service at Samariterkirche included 500-600 youth, and the 14 September service had 1,000 youth.¹¹ Eventually, the concerts had to be moved because Samariterkirche could not hold all of those who tried to attend. The services, with their blend of music, skits, and religious elements, attracted a wide range of people, including punks.¹²

Open Work youth program

Another church-affiliated program that the punk subculture participated in was *Offene Arbeit* [German: Open Work]. This was a youth program that began in the late 1960s in Thuringia and by the 1980s had spread across East Germany.¹³ A July 1983 *Offene Arbeit* document in central church archives focuses specifically on working with punks. After describing the punk subculture and the problems punks

faced, it argues that the church should be working with them, because it was the church’s duty to minister to all people, regardless of the social group to which they belonged. As part of its diaconal and outreach work, the church should be guiding and mentoring these young people to help them improve their lives. This requires people to witness to punks primarily through caring for them, being understanding of them, and accepting them without prejudice. It also recommends teaching others about the punk subculture in order to explain why punks behaved

as they did. The document asserts that the subculture’s first need was to have a place where punks could gather without fear, not be judged by how they looked, and address the issues that they were upset about.¹⁴

Here again, there were tensions within the churches over what their role should be in engaging society and whether or not church space was being used appropriately. The question of whether or not a service was religious was important, because if it was not religious, the church was running the risk of overstepping the boundaries set by the state. One archival account of a service held at Berlin’s Galiläa-Kirche [German: Galilee Church] with the theme *Traum und Wirklichkeit* [German: Dream and Reality] illustrates related questions about the use of space in churches. During



“‘Miracles keep on happening’ CHURCH FROM BELOW” reads a homemade banner held aloft by activists during the closing event of the official Church Day in East Berlin on 26 June 1987 (Source: Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft/Siegbert Schefke/RHG_Fo_HAB_16463).

the service, a punk band performed and sang nihilistic lyrics that challenged church doctrine. The account's author, Peter Wensierski, records these lyrics as: *Laßt Euch nicht verführen, es gibt kein höheres Wesen, laßt Euch nicht verströsten, denn hinterher kommt nichts*, which can be roughly translated as, "Stop being seduced, there is no higher being, stop being misled, because nothing comes after this." In response to their performance, the worship pastor gave a "spontaneous sermon" that explained the problems with the philosophy the punks expressed. The punks stormed off. In his description of these events, Wensierski sums up the "mixed feelings" of those who remained as desiring dialogue with non-Christian youth while not wishing to attract them to the church superficially.¹⁵ There was a desire to include non-Christians such as punks, but not at the cost of compromising core beliefs and values.

Friction

Punks could also bring unwanted attention to other opposition groups because of their behavior and the fact that there were many I.M.s [German: *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, or unofficial collaborators with the Stasi secret police] within the subculture. Dennis and LaPorte provide the example of a punk band in Jena that

consisted mainly of I.M.s. It took advantage of the good offices of Ulrich Kasparick, the minister responsible for youth work (*Jugendpfarrer*), in allowing it to use church rooms in order to undermine his work on behalf of the peace and human rights groups in the city. The band's loud noise, drunkenness, and damage to property led to so many complaints from the public that an exhausted Kasparick gave up his post.¹⁶

After similar friction resulted in an *Offene Arbeit* program at Berlin's Pfingstkirche [German: Pentecost Church] attended by hundreds of punks being closed down in 1983, the punk subculture continued to be involved with Protestant churches. However, there is a sense that they did not truly feel welcomed that runs through many of the narratives told by former East German punks. According to Moldt, very few real relationships were developed between punks and church ministers. He writes,

Christians in the G.D.R. were citizens of the G.D.R. after all and thereby no less narrow-minded, intolerant or arrogant than their atheist co-inhabitants. Maybe they'd subconsciously developed a heightened sensitivity for marginal groups. Mostly this sensitivity—if it existed at all—did not show. If it showed, it mainly did because supporting such people could help [in] gaining mercy from the lord.¹⁷

Often those who tended to be higher up in the church hierarchy were concerned that the churches were straying too far from their religious purposes and needed to rein in the activities taking place in the churches in order to preserve the

freedoms already won by the churches. In fact, a key reason the S.E.D. had given the churches some of the freedom they had was because the state assumed that the churches would be able to police and maintain order of the groups located within the churches. According to Ozawa-de Silva, "church leaders were instructed by their state interlocutors to 'discipline' and 'integrate' their rank-and-file. They were to deal with outspoken pastors internally." However, the loose structure of the Protestant churches made this difficult. Ozawa-de Silva also explains that within the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen* [the federation of Protestant churches in the G.D.R.] "the primary role of superintendents and bishops was to provide spiritual care, or *Seelsorge*, for pastors, not to tell them what to do."¹⁸

Church from Below

In September 1987, tensions within the church about appropriate use of church space and debates about how far the churches should engage society caused a segment of the church to form the *Kirche von Unten* [German: Church from Below]. That June, the dissident group event *Kirchentag von Unten* (Church Day from Below) took place during the official church *Kirchentag* in Berlin.¹⁹ Some have placed attendance at the alternative event at 6,000 people.²⁰ According to Hayton, it was a blend of "religious sermons, public information forums, art installations, and performances by a number of punk bands." The *Kirche von Unten*'s founders were individuals and groups that had a long history of involvement with dissident groups or had important roles within the dissident movement, including a number of religious and youth outreach figures from the *Offene Arbeit* programs.²¹

One essay in a volume collected by the *Kirche von Unten* refers to the churches as being *duckmäuserisch* [German: groveling], compromising too much with the state, and not really living out the concept of being the "church for others." Another essay raises the point that, rather than addressing the reasons why some of the youth had become marginalized, churches instead were focusing on rehabilitating them.²² From the perspective of the *Kirche von Unten*, churches were not ministering to the needs of the youth and were not addressing the underlying social issues. This was the same problem that a document on *Offene Arbeit* work had pointed out earlier: an attempt to rehabilitate these young people would only alienate them.²³

Not surprisingly, the punk subculture tended to work more closely with this *Kirche von Unten* portion of the church. The relationship between the punk subculture and Protestant churches in East Germany thus contributed to growing activism within the punk subculture. The churches provided the shelter necessary to survive the government's crackdown, and this was where the punk subculture was socialized into other dissident groups, thus making it an active component in the opposition movement that developed in East Germany in the 1980s. ♦

(continued on page 8)

Notes:

- ¹ For example, “L’attentat - Ohne Sinn,” *APPDKrebszelle/YouTube*, 10 September 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sbn9Zwc9Aj0>.
- ² Jeff Patrick Hayton, *Culture from the Slums: Punk Rock, Authenticity and Alternative Culture in East and West Germany*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013, 427, 437.
- ³ Alison M. Furlong, *Resistance Rooms: Sound and Sociability in the East German Church*, Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2015, 43.
- ⁴ John P. Burgess, *The East German Church and the End of Communism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 51.
- ⁵ Furlong, 10, 20.
- ⁶ Hayton, 467.
- ⁷ Furlong, 44-45; Hayton, 417.
- ⁸ Michael Rauhut, “With God and Guitars: Popular Music, Socialism, and the Church in East Germany,” *Popular Music and Society* 40, no. 3 (2017), 297.
- ⁹ Furlong, 44.
- ¹⁰ Rauhut, 297.
- ¹¹ Dirk Moldt, “Die Blues-Messen (1979-1986). Mehr als ein Kapitel der kirchlichen Jugendarbeit in der DDR,” in *Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische*

- Oberlausitz*, Archivbericht Nummer 16 (Berlin: 2006), 142-3.
- ¹² Furlong, 43.
- ¹³ Hayton, 470-71.
- ¹⁴ Evangelisches Zentralarchiv [EZA], Berlin, 101/3493, Vorlage für die KL am 1. Juli 1983 betr.: Punk-Arbeit, 2-3.
- ¹⁵ EZA 101/1871, epd ZA Nr. 141 vom 28. Juli 1981, “Punker in Ost-Berlin” by epd-Redakteur Peter Wensierski, 5.
- ¹⁶ Mike Dennis and Norman LaPorte, *State and Minorities in Communist East Germany*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2011, 166.
- ¹⁷ Moldt, 104, 107.
- ¹⁸ Brendan R. Ozawa-de Silva, “Peace, Pastors, and Politics: Tactics of Resistance in East Germany,” *Journal of Church and State* 47, no.3 (Summer 2005), 513-18.
- ¹⁹ Hayton, 490-92.
- ²⁰ Furlong, 74.
- ²¹ Hayton, 490-92.
- ²² Kirche von Unten, ed. *Wunder gibt es immer wieder—das Chaos ist aufgebraucht, es war die schönste Zeit. Fragmente zur Geschichte der Offenen Arbeit Berlin und der Kirche von Unten*. Berlin: Eigenverlag, 1997, 7-12, 18.
- ²³ EZA 528/61, “Offene Arbeit”/Sozialdiakonische Jugendarbeit, 3.

Ruth Aardsma-Benton is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

“If you had not come to us, we would never have gotten out of here”: An Interview with Rev. Jane Holslag

A retired Presbyterian minister and mission co-worker from the United States, Jane Holslag initially served in Orange County in southern California after her ordination in 1982. She first visited the G.D.R.—indeed, Europe—in 1980 as a team member of Berlin Fellowship, with repeat visits in 1982, 1984, and 1986. Continuing to work with the Fellowship, she spent 1987-88 as assistant minister to a local congregation in West Berlin. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) commissioned her as a mission worker in the newly unified city, seeking to encourage partner relations with Reformed congregations across the former Communist bloc.

A ministry of American Christians visiting East German congregations, Berlin Fellowship was initiated in the fall of 1961, soon after the Berlin Wall was built. From 1967 onwards, groups of up to a dozen American Presbyterians traveled as tourists twice annually to the G.D.R. for 10-day visits to multiple congregations, for which they broke into several smaller groups. The Fellowship program was formally celebrated and closed in 1996.

Rev. Holslag now lives in Berlin. In late 2019 the editor of the East-West Church Report met her in the former Eastern



Rev. Jane Holslag (G. FAGAN)

sector of the city to discuss the work of the Fellowship, which forms the focus of her thought-provoking 2013 doctoral dissertation, *Berlin Fellowship: East German Perspectives and Missional Encounter 1961-1989*.

You note in your dissertation that there were many international church partnerships with East German congregations between the end of the Second World War and 1989. What was noteworthy about Berlin Fellowship?

The founders of the Fellowship were very concerned that the East Germans would have a say in what happened and be willing to take the risk. We were never an unannounced presence, but we were always in a group of three to five people, and in some villages ours would be the only Western car. People who participated came back on repeat visits, but they were not guaranteed to return to the same places. In fact, that was something we tried not to do. It was so hard to leave and never see folks again, to leave and not be able to pick up a phone and call them, or to write to them.

That was one of the Fellowship's rules?

We assumed letters would be opened, and they were. Every piece of mail that came into the country was opened.

So the visits were very informal.

Organized, but not according to any program. When we went back to our congregations, or the people who supported us to go, they would typically ask, "Well, what did you do?" "We talked. We walked in the woods. We looked at old churches. We had meals together. We worshipped together. Sometimes we did a Bible study, but only if there were two translators, because it was too hard for one person." "So you didn't do anything?" You can see there the difference in mentality. It was more just about Christian fellowship. There was no agenda—if we had an agenda, it got killed around the second day. As much as we trained and tried to help Americans to be sensitive, culturally aware, and so on, everyone thought, on the second or third day, "I'm going to be here for seven more days. How am I going to do this! I'm not *doing* anything."



Stasi secret police surveillance photo of Berlin Fellowship coordinators Pastor Ted Schapp and Pastor Ralph Hamburger (Source: Stasi archives)

We did not speak German—we were stupid Americans! (Laughs.) We tried to educate ourselves before we came, but often we had to look on a map to see where East Germany was as we flew into it. I am being a bit critical, but that is my experience. We did not have more than the mission mentality of "We're going to go and take to them what they need to hear. We're going to bring them the good news of the Gospel. Yes, they're Christians, but they're behind the Iron Curtain, and we're not." I'm drawing this out, but that was a big piece of it.

So we knew we were not going to do anything other than getting to know each other. We went wherever the discussion led, or wherever the pastor or other host in charge of our visit chose to take it. Often, there were questions about why the United States and the Soviet Union had to have missiles pointing at each other across the [East-West German] border. We had discussions that went long and hard at these issues, but there were questions about everything from the issue of preventing war with weapons to, "How do you solve problems on your church council?"

Above all, we went to smaller towns and villages that had less exposure to Americans or other Westerners. We were often the first Americans people had ever met. In one case, a man came up to me with tears in his eyes and thanked me for being a good host. I understood that much German at the time. I said to him that I was never a host, what did he mean? "I was a prisoner of war in Virginia for almost three years. It was the best time of my life."

How far were you surveilled during your visits to the G.D.R.? Your dissertation describes how the Stasi secret police had one person informing on Berlin Fellowship for most of its existence, but that does not seem to have had a huge impact on its operations.

It had no impact, in my estimation, until the whole thing was over after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. And then the impact was that this informer would not talk or meet with any of us. I have written to him four times and never received an answer, but my letters never come back. To our knowledge, he is still alive.

(continued on page 10)



Berlin Fellowship team meeting its hosts for the weekend, 1980s (Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE, Fuller Theological Seminary)

Holslag Interview *(continued from page 9)*

I have read as much as I will ever care to read of the Stasi files—maybe a thousand pages. There was no file on Berlin Fellowship, so I had to go through different people’s individual files. I had thought—my mistake!—that I was going to get some kind of take on the Stasi’s perspective, but the files were pure bureaucracy. It was people being employed to keep a tab on something they knew was “meaningless” within two years of their informant being sent into the Fellowship. It was labeled meaningless—*bedeutungslos*—by a Stasi officer I interviewed who signed off on all these reports. We were not big, and we didn’t make a splash. We were somewhat suspect but not very, because we always went through the church leadership—the bishops knew about us. I asked this official pointedly: If they knew that we were *bedeutungslos* soon after they sent in their I.M. [German: *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, or unofficial collaborator] to spy on the Fellowship in 1970, why did they keep on doing it? “Why not? We had a quota to produce. We needed so many pieces of paper.”



Two Fellowship friends from East Berlin, 1980s (Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE, Fuller Theological Seminary)

So there is no real analysis in the files?

Oh, no. “Frau Müller’s chicken soup was too salty today,” but nothing about the conversation at Frau Müller’s. This was about an East Berlin group that met monthly with staff from the West. The informer was in that group and a trusted member of it.

Everyone knew that churches were under scrutiny. People assumed that whenever we would gather in a home, or in a church for an open meeting, there would be someone there listening who would go home and speak a report into a tape recorder, or something like that. But we did not assume that this person would be among the most trusted in the Fellowship. Sometimes, Bärbel [Eccardt, a senior Fellowship co-ordinator] gave him the whole itinerary. He knew where we were, who we were with, whose home was whose, who was in charge of the meetings.



Berlin Fellowship was often hosted by a family for an evening (Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE, Fuller Theological Seminary)

Did you also go to your hosts’ church services?

Yes, we went to many worship services. They were standard services and very well attended. We never preached, because that was not allowed [by the G.D.R. authorities], and we were conscious of trying to keep a low profile. But we often brought readings of around 20 minutes for those congregations that tended to host us. People wanted to hear this—there were Westerners in town, someone from outside. The local churches did not use the kind of rhetoric that North American Christians use, even though it was a pretty conservative group of Christians that came. But they never made fun of us. They said, “We like the fact that you are different from us. We would never say things that way, but we know what you mean.” That kind of learning does not take place unless you are willing to cross the boundary of your prejudice, your fear, or your shyness, or of what you think all Americans are, or all East Germans are. You have to let that go.

Perspectives on missional encounter are the main theme of your dissertation. How did this research emerge from your involvement in Berlin Fellowship?

An open-ended question I asked when I was conducting interviews between 2003 and 2006 was, “Why was Berlin Fellowship important to you?” There were some pastors who only had us there once and did not want us back. There were others who fought every year to have a team come to their congregation. When I asked one pastor, she just looked at me and said, “Well, Jane, if you had not come to us, we would never have gotten out of here.” She was not talking about leaving. She was talking about the experience, the encounter, of being met by fresh air.

So it was like an internal escape to meet someone from outside the G.D.R.?

Yes, and she said that with such emotion and self-evidence, as if it was a stupid question. At that point I was reminded of an answer I had heard from a friend who had

been near death with a form of cancer. He was talking about a man who had come and sat with him for days and days when he was too weak even to talk. He said, “If Jim had not been there, I may not have made it.” I asked what Jim had said to him. “Nothing.” He was just there, present.

For me, that was an “Aha!” experience. The starting point of my research had been that I was tired of reading stories by Westerners talking about their experience. I thought, “Well, what about these other people, what did they have to say?” Why did they keep participating? Was it all that wonderful? Ten years or more later, no one was trying to make it seem more wonderful than it was, and they knew that sometimes there were boring conversations that never went anywhere. But there were also good friendships that happened for an hour. If there was a teenager who knew both English and German, they translated for you and the mother of the family. You had a magic half hour in the kitchen with a person you had never met and would never see again.

I think that is part of the nature of fellowship that is transformational if we allow it to be. And so the question of my dissertation became: Is fellowship—what we are doing here—in some way a missional presence, a *missio Dei*? Is God in the midst, in the mix? And how do we know it? Perhaps we do not recognize it at the time, but when we look back we think, “Oh wow, I am different, I have learned something” or “I want to go back and talk to her again.” You return to your home setting after those encounters and you look at it a little differently. You begin to be more aware of what is there that you have never seen. I speak as a Westerner—I do not know if the Eastern participants would say the same, but I have heard indications of that.

Much of mission history is our take on it. Not all of it, by any means, and it is not necessarily bad, but it is only one

Visit to a former church building
(Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE,
Fuller Theological Seminary)



A picnic and a hike in the hills, 1980s
(Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE,
Fuller Theological Seminary)

side of the story. Fellowship, or *koinonia*, is one of the classical signs of the Christian Church as the Body of Christ. We might think of fellowship as being a coffee hour or shared meal after worship, which it is, but is it not more? In that case, what do those at the other end receive, and what were they able to give? Here, some of my findings were very surprising. For instance, I was surprised—or taken aback by my own ignorance—when I realized that the East Germans had put work groups together and invested a great deal of time in deciding what they were going to do when we visited.

In another situation, the American side might have gone in with various plans and programs...

And we did, sometimes!

...but the fact that the East German state created artificial conditions in which you could not do things easily meant that you were forced to be open to the circumstances.

We were forced to accept what was offered to us. We sat down to meals or *Kaffee und Kuchen* [German: coffee and cake], we went for a walk in the forest without knowing where we were going or why we were doing this. We might be going outside so that nobody would be eavesdropping on us, or because there were not enough chairs in the living room for all of us to sit in. Or, because there was a ruined church in the forest that the village was proud of because they had kept it from becoming a total ruin, and they wanted to show it to us.

I remember one long hike to such a ruined church where we had a short time of prayer and singing. Afterwards, an American college student on our team asked me, “Jane, what was that all about?” He was young, and he really didn’t get it. I said, “Well, we heard stories about how old the church was and that it was where the original congregation started. How it was ruined during the Thirty Years’ War [1618-48] and how they hold their Easter sunrise service there. What were we listening to?” He looked at me and said, “Family history. They were telling us who they are.” We have to let that be what it is, ponder what was given us as guests. And if you have to figure it out, you figure it out. ♦

Berlin Fellowship: East German Perspectives and Missional Encounter 1961-1989

JANE HOLSLAG

An abridged extract from the author's 2013 Protestant Theological University doctoral dissertation with the above title.

The Church's witness is manifest in all that it does and in all dimensions of its life service. Importantly for this discussion, that missional witness is even within, among, and to the Christian community itself. Here I use the word "missional" and not "missionary," for in American English the term "missionary" can have a very distinct, dated, and limited usage. Traditionally, it is implicit that missionaries are sent out by a mission agency or a denomination to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard it. Being missional, on the other hand, is witnessing to and participating in God's redemptive and transforming mission already operative in the world.

At the outset of the 21st century, the newer English word "missional" has come to identify the Church's nature and activity under the larger contextual umbrella of the "mission of God" (*missio Dei*). As South African theologian David Bosch writes in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991): "In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. ...Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world, and the church is viewed as the instrument for that mission." The missional body is realizing its identity when assembled for worship or witnessing through proclamation and service, when ministering to any in need or gathered and united in fellowship.

Most North American Christians sitting in the pew would understand and use the more familiar word "fellowship" in reference to what *they* do. The word usage then ranges from Bible study groups to coffee hour after worship. Though varied in biblical usage, I use "fellowship" [Greek: *koinonia*] in my research to refer to the community in Christ given through the Holy Spirit, Who shares in and actively engages in a common life or in a shared encounter, however short or long. Yet, however the term is understood, fellowship is unlikely to be labeled mission, or a missional activity where "missional" is used as a descriptor of what Christians do while "being church."

The German and U.S. founders of Berlin Fellowship recognized that this program, a Christian-to-Christian "fellowship/*koinonia*" experience, was considerably more than a chat over coffee. As a visitation across borders, it was an activity of the church being the church in an ecumenical sense, the gathered body of believers participating in and sharing in their common faith. My research asks: Was this shared experience of fellowship a place, a happening, an encounter of a missional nature for the East Germans?

How a cross-cultural or intercultural encounter is experienced and interpreted by either partner reflects differences. Each partner brings their own culture and context to the encounter. Both experience boundaries because of these differences. In the case of Berlin Fellowship, the boundaries were clear, for the political and historical reality and divisions of the Cold War world were not invisible. In fact, it was the building of the Berlin Wall and the change in travel restrictions, a physical and political assault on the city of Berlin in particular on 13 August 1961, which contributed to the first group of American Presbyterians

being urged by German hosts to attend a pastors' conference in East Berlin that same autumn.

Yet Berlin Fellowship participants were not only bound to and in a very real way defined by their own contexts, for their encounters propelled them into being inter-contextual (newly related to a situation and to others beyond their borders because of their Christian faith). The very reason for their meetings and ongoing visits had its origins and was centered in that which they shared, the Christian faith. While participants were certainly bound to and defined by their background cultures, in so far as they bumped up against each other and were "together" because of their Christian faith, they experienced a form of interculturality, even in a momentary sense.

Looking back, my East German interviewees articulate the undeniable factor of the Berlin Wall and



Visiting the Berlin Wall
(Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE,
Fuller Theological Seminary)

amazement at the fact that people from the other side crossed over it to visit them. The interviewees all refer repeatedly to the border's existence and its power to create a ghetto-like life, to wall in, to lock up, to isolate, to insulate, and to cut off news from the outside. Of course, the East Germans knew they were meeting sister and brother Christians, but the dividing line between these two peoples was not simply crossed because of a shared tenet of faith. The border was not only a physical boundary and reality, but a spiritual one as well. However, the border's effect was not only negative, for it is quite often noted by the Easterners that being cut off from the outside somehow made "something" unique happen in a Berlin Fellowship encounter.

The essence of Berlin Fellowship was described in various ways, but the interviewees focus first on the "coming" of the American visitors. One person makes it very clear what happened, at least for him—Berlin Fellowship communicated to him that he and his congregation counted, were worth visiting: "We are interesting for them." The coming was more than tourists crossing borders, for it is labeled a *Zuwendung*, an act of care and attention, or, as one bishop put

it, an example of diaconal power and solidarity. The "place" of solidarity and ecumenical being together was achieved rather rapidly, often happening quickly in the first hours of meeting between East Germans and Americans. That is noted by almost all those interviewed and marveled at, even years after the events; a rapport and a unique kind of intimacy or trust, a kind of closeness seemed to happen.

The experience was new and different: "It was always fascinating to hear from the opposite side... I think they were out of the ordinary in two ways... for the Americans who had the opportunity to see how we live, what the reality of the Iron Curtain was... and [we could meet] the reality of the evil capitalists, as Americans were labeled. Yes, this picture of the enemy was softened by human encounter, by a person-to-person meeting." In one interview, the speaker refers to the fact that the "walls had fallen" because of or through Berlin Fellowship, and he concludes with reference to a time and a place. "The wall in Berlin stood as before. The border was as always. But through this [meeting], I believe that the walls in peoples' heads were considerably reduced in size. And that one can even have contact over deep trenches and high borders [in a place and point in time] where people find one another."

Is this a new place the visitors bring with them, or is it rather a new place created and experienced by both

conversation partners, a place in between? This unique place of meeting and engaged communication is pondered by a few interviewees, who name its center Jesus and call it a mystery. "There was a line [of communication or connection] that made this ministry then and now unexplainable. Simply, I'd say an encounter that was somehow mysterious." This place of trust is not necessarily comfortable and is indeed a liminal setting, a place "in between" that is fascinating and alarming at the same time. However, what makes it fascinating and alarming yet also safe is what one person identifies as the work of God in the midst of the fellowship experience, there on the spot. "It has an effect not just because it was nice for him or for me, but because it was God's doing, because the

Holy Spirit found a place in the midst of our lives and in this fellowship."

One stranger met another stranger and in that encounter they found themselves on neither's territory, for they met in a kind of *Sperrgebiet* [German: prohibited area], a border-land, a land in-between. However, it was *that* border-land which became the place of genuine engagement and meeting. It was there "in the gap," in a place *between* strangers who had never met before and would probably



Evening of conversation, 1980s
(Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE,
Fuller Theological Seminary)

never meet again, that Berlin Fellowship was at home. This place of between-ness or in-betweenness became a place of missional encounter and coming together, of listening and being listened to, of nurture and encouragement, of solidarity and dialogue of fellowship. In the midst of differences and in spite of everything that worked against it at the time, this "place" became *oikos* (Greek: home) in the *oikumene* (Greek: the inhabited world), not as an abstract universality, but as a lived experience and encounter.

Koinonia is a missional reality not to be underestimated, for fellowship can and does act in a parabolic sense to point beyond itself. As an incarnational encounter for all participants, this place of meeting becomes a place of liberation and freedom while at the same time a place of belonging and of home, a "dwelling place for God." Fellowship is, I believe, a yet-to-be-understood treasure of wisdom and witness, hope and learning for those seeking to "do" something in mission. Just being with and for the other as host or as guest is integral to "doing" mission or missional endeavors. ♦

Jane Holslag is a retired Presbyterian minister and mission co-worker. An alumna of Princeton Theological Seminary, she has taught at LCC International University (formerly Lithuania Christian College), Klaipėda. She completed her doctorate at the Protestant Theological University in The Netherlands.

“Our Christian faith tells us that we must raise our voices”:

An Interview with Pastor Ulrich Barniske

Symbolic of Germany’s peaceful reunification in 1989-90, the renowned Brandenburg Gate marks the start of an ancient roadway from Berlin to the town of Brandenburg an der Havel, some 50 miles to the west. For more than three decades—including the final decade of the G.D.R.—the town’s Reformed minister was Ulrich Barniske. Now retired, he remains active as chair of Evangelische Partnerhilfe (www.evangelische-partnerhilfe.de), a charitable initiative by German pastors and other church personnel to provide financial support to Lutheran and Reformed counterparts across the former Communist bloc.

The largest Protestant body in today’s reunified Germany is the E.K.D. (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, or Protestant Church in Germany). A predominantly Lutheran federation, this also contains a Reformed minority, now including Pastor Barniske’s Brandenburg church. While one of only around 15 Reformed congregations in Communist East Germany, these were widely distributed from the city of Magdeburg, 100 miles west of Berlin, to the towns of Butzow in the far northeast and Görlitz in the far southeast, both near the Polish border.

In late 2019 the editor of the East-West Church Report met with Pastor Barniske near the Tränenpalast [German: Palace of Tears], a former Berlin Wall crossing point not far from the Brandenburg Gate. Accompanied by his American friend, the Rev. Jane Holslag, Pastor Barniske shared something of his experience during the G.D.R. period. The original conversation took place in German.



Pastor Ulrich Barniske (G. FAGAN)

What is the background of your Reformed congregation in Brandenburg an der Havel?

Pastor Barniske: After 1685 many thousands of French Huguenot refugees came to Germany [along a northeasterly route] via Frankfurt am Main, Halberstadt, Magdeburg, and Berlin. Some went as far as Königsburg, now called Kaliningrad [former East Prussia, now Russian territory]. In the early 1800s every third person in Berlin was a Huguenot.

In Brandenburg an der Havel there were originally two Reformed communities, one French and one German. In 1687 they received St. John’s Church, right on the River Havel, which they used until 1806. During the Napoleonic Wars the church was used to store animal fodder, but after 1815 it was cleaned up and used for worship once again. In 1835 the French- and German-speaking congregations joined together because there were so few French speakers left. After a few generations the French had mostly assimilated—there were many mixed marriages—or moved away from the area.

On 31 March 1945—Holy Saturday—St. John’s Church was very seriously damaged during an American air raid. So on Easter the congregation no longer had a church. The main nave remained in ruins, but in the early 1950s the side nave was built up into a church. In the late 1940s Swiss churches had offered to help fund full restoration, but the city authorities refused permission, saying: “We need construction materials for more important things than building churches.” In August 1986 the roof of the

side church fell in—the noise was so loud, people thought that an airplane had crashed. It was a very old part of the roof that could no longer hold the weight of water that was seeping in. The mayor then said that the church would have to be demolished. I quickly informed Berlin, and the officials responsible for protecting monuments objected. So the church remained standing, but our community could not do anything with it—we were too small to support the building.

Rev. Holslag: I always found it astonishing that the *Denkmalschutz* [German: historic monument preservation authority] intervened. That was often the place of salvation for many church buildings in the G.D.R. Congregations inherited them but could not afford to look after them and had to let them go to ruin. Yet the *Denkmalschutz* always somehow had a say. That was an ironic twist of history in the G.D.R.

Pastor Barniske: Yes, you could say that!

Is your own background in the Reformed Church, Pastor Barniske?

Pastor Barniske: I was actually born in Martin Luther’s town, Wittenberg! But my father came from Wiesloch, a town near Heidelberg [southwest Germany, 50 miles from the French border]. That whole region has a very strong Reformed influence. So I was raised on the Heidelberg Catechism, in a Reformed congregation in Stendal [80 miles west of Berlin], where my father was pastor. I studied theology in Halle together with my future wife, who was raised Lutheran—we were ordained



Berlin Wall and Brandenburg Gate
 (Source: BERLIN FELLOWSHIP ARCHIVE,
 Fuller Theological Seminary)

together in Magdeburg in 1976. I did not serve a Reformed congregation initially—no posts were free—but in 1982 we moved to Brandenburg an der Havel. I served as pastor there for 31 years, until 2013.

One is pastor for life after ordination, so I have taken on various duties in retirement, such as my work for *Evangelische Partnerhilfe*. In the 1950s a West German fund was set up to support church personnel in the G.D.R. because their income was so low. I myself was a beneficiary—it meant that I was able to buy winter tires for my car. After 1992 the G.D.R. pastors did not need this anymore, but in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere in the former Eastern bloc it was still needed, so *Evangelische Partnerhilfe* was set up as a successor body.

Did you want to study theology at a young age?

Pastor Barniske: I was initially promised a university place to study medicine following my term of military service. That ran from 1967 to 1969, so I was a soldier during the terrible events of 1968—the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. We [East] German soldiers were not sent to Czechoslovakia, but we understood that if we were ordered to move our tanks that would mean we were at war. Forces in the region where we were stationed were slated to fight against the Dutch tank army. This made me think, and I realized that I could not possibly support that.

Alongside the political events of August 1968 there was a second level of shock that completely shook me up—my father died very suddenly that autumn. From 1943-45 he had been a prisoner of war in America, and he saw the flash of the first atomic bomb test with his own eyes. The wind blew radioactive clouds over his prisoner of war camp. He became sick with leukemia in the 1960s and died in 1968, aged 55. The doctors said that this radiation was probably the cause. All this meant that I could not remain neutral when it came to nuclear weapons, war, and so on; I am vehemently opposed. So in November 1968 I applied to leave the army in order to study theology in Halle. My release was granted in April 1969.

How was life generally for pastors in the G.D.R.?

Pastor Barniske: There were very difficult phases between church and state, such as in the first half of the 1950s. Until 1952 people still considered the reunification of Germany a possibility, but that hope receded as the G.D.R.’s resolve for a socialist system grew ever stronger. The ruling party fought churches in particular, especially Protestants. I have an early memory from soon after the popular uprising of 16 June 1953. I was five years old, standing with my father and twin brother outside a prison in our town. We were waiting for the release of our church’s elder provost and youth worker, who had both been arrested.

Later things were also difficult, but there was some change after [East German leader] Walter Ulbricht was replaced by Erich Honecker in 1971. The churches seemed to be more in the background, even though they were constantly surveilled by the Stasi secret police. I have read my own Stasi file—there was an operational case in which I was surveilled from 1977 to 1980.

You were constantly surveilled during those years?

Pastor Barniske: Our telephone was, yes. I was telephoned by a friend who was in West Germany at the time of the call, and I think that led the Stasi to suspect a link between me and a doctor who attempted to flee to the West. But whatever was written up [in the Stasi files] in the final years of the G.D.R. was probably destroyed. Brandenburg an der Havel belonged to the administrative district of Potsdam, where—like Berlin—files were shredded very quickly.

Did things change for you towards the end of the G.D.R. period? By the 1980s the churches were much more socially active, including in the popular pacifist movement.

Pastor Barniske: Being a Christian was always associated with a specific position: “*Krieg darf um Gottes Willen nicht sein.*” [German: “According to God’s will, there should be no war.”] This was articulated ever more clearly during the 1980s through the *Friedensdekaden* [annual “ten days for peace” prayer meetings] and the Conciliary Process for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation [series of ecumenical gatherings on peace and ecological issues during 1988-89.] We also had various *Kirchentage* [German: Church conventions]—not just one, but in multiple cities such as Rostock, Erfurt, Magdeburg, and Dresden. Discussions there were absolutely political.

Rev. Holslag: What happened from the 1970s going into the 1980s, in your opinion, to permit this volume of discussion and political argument within the church?

Pastor Barniske: The Helsinki Accords of the C.S.C.E. [Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe] in the 1970s were significant. Among other things, they dealt with human rights. People who were discontented and wanted to leave the G.D.R. were therefore able to make

(continued on page 16)

Barniske Interview (continued from page 15)

human rights' issues a topic of conversation. Another group of people reasoned: "We want to live in the G.D.R., but we want it to be a life worth living; in freedom and justice. We see much of that is being called into question by the one-party state, and we cannot accept this. Our Christian faith tells us that we must raise our voices." The situation was extremely tense and became increasingly dramatic during the 1980s.

Rev. Holslag: It was noticeable then that people were more daring. When I lived in Potsdam [in 1987-88] I was invited to a *Kirchentag* where there was a theater performance by a youth group who were critical of the government. I knew little German then, but I understood who Honecker was—and people were laughing!

Pastor Barniske: In the 1980s sermons were also political, attempting to interpret biblical texts in relation to the given situation, and to lead members of the congregation in such a way that they could think in step with this.

With which biblical texts, for example?

Pastor Barniske: The Beatitudes, Matthew 5: The Sermon on the Mount. Or prophetic texts in the Old Testament: Isaiah and Jeremiah.

About power?

Pastor Barniske: About power and powerlessness. What it means that God becomes powerless in Jesus Christ and at the same time fully demonstrates His power.

Did it become palpable in the 1980s that something was about to change in the G.D.R.?

Pastor Barniske: There was massive tension among the population and rising uncertainty among those who had political responsibility. For example, businesses run by the ruling Party could no longer explain why things were not

improving. It felt like driving into a brick wall. But it was not at all clear that what happened in November 1989 [the fall of the Berlin Wall] was going to happen.

By the late 1980s church meetings in the G.D.R. had developed enormous power. In 1987 there were 20,000 people at our *Kirchentag* to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the foundation of Berlin. In July 1989 there were 60,000 people singing and praying at our *Kirchentag* in Leipzig on the theme, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" [Psalm 8:4].

Rev. Holslag: That was unthinkable earlier.

Pastor Barniske: Yes, it only became possible in the 1980s. The opening of the Wall on 9 November 1989 happened due to an error by Herr Schabowski. [Editor's note: Günter Schabowski was a G.D.R. spokesman who on 9 November 1989 publicly interpreted new changes to travel regulations to mean immediate permission for G.D.R. citizens to leave the country. This led to border guards opening the Berlin Wall that night in response to huge crowds forming at its crossing points.] From the Church's point of view, the deciding factors were the Conciliar Process, the *Kirchentage*, and so on, accompanied and supported by the people. That was more important, politically—9 November was just a dam bursting. ♦



St. John's Church, Brandenburg an der Havel
(Source: Queryzo)

The quarterly *East-West Church Report* explores Christian life in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. We focus on:

- church-state, interfaith, and interchurch relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
- innovative Christian charitable projects and mission
- latest academic research into Christian history and culture in the region

Annual subscription rates are \$23 (individuals) and \$54 (institutions). Payment is either by check (in U.S. Dollars only and payable to *East-West Church Report*) or by PayPal via the "Subscribe" page at www.eastwestreport.org.

Whichever way you pay, please provide (with your check or by email) the e-mail address to which the *Report* should be sent, the subscriber's name and address, and the type of subscription required (individual or institutional).

East-West Church Report holds 501(c)(3) non-profit status and is largely reliant upon subscriptions and voluntary labor. Please consider adding a donation to your subscription.

Institutional subscribers may distribute issues to those within the institution (e.g. students using a university library). Other distribution/

reproduction of whole issues or individual articles requires the permission of *East-West Church Report*. Once permission is granted, the following statement is to be carried with the reproduced material: "Reproduced with permission of the *East-West Church Report*."

The *Report* values feedback from readers, including suggestions for potential topics and authors. Please write to the editor at: eastwestchurchreport@gmail.com.

EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

P.O. Box 76741
Washington, DC 20013
U.S.A.

Geraldine Fagan, Editor
eastwestchurchreport@gmail.com
Mark R. Elliott, Editor Emeritus
emark936@gmail.com
Matthew Lee Miller, Book Review Editor

©2021 ISSN 2576-344X (formerly 1069-5664)
Indexed by American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies (ABSEES), OCLC Public Affairs Information Service (formerly PAIS), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Christian Periodicals Index.