

“Open to all!”

by Carolin Wilms

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This simple invitation on the door of the Protestant church of St. Nicholas in Leipzig was its essential message during the 40-year-long second German dictatorship.

The role of the church in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) changed significantly during the latter’s 40 years of existence. Karl Marx had deemed religion “the opiate of the masses” and the government of the GDR sought not only to reduce the influence of the Church, but also to abolish it as an independent social organization. Under the political system of “actually existing socialism,” which aimed to bring uniformity to all social institutions, the Church was viewed as an alien element.

With the aid of the secret police (Stasi), the government attempted to marginalize the Church by infiltrating spies into the parishes, demoralizing believers and promulgating National Socialist traditions. This resulted in the GDR being the most secularized country in Central Europe by the end of the Eighties.

Under this repressive system, the churches had to reposition themselves. Saxony, being the cradle of the Reformation, had a predominantly Protestant population. The Catholic Church, with its strict hierarchical structure, adopted a strategy of “hibernating,” thus maintaining its position as an outsider. The Catholic faithful followed the church calendar, engaging in parish work and helping out in individual cases of oppressed fellow Catholics.

The Protestant Church was not only able to count on its “home field advantage” (before the division of Germany, 80 percent of the population of subsequent GDR territory were Protestants), but also proved much more open to engaging in the secular concerns of its followers. Throughout the arms race of the Eighties embodied in the NATO Dual-Track Decision, the GDR-era Protestant Church tackled the same themes as the West German peace movement and organized peace prayers. The first peace prayers at Leipzig’s St. Nicholas Church took place in 1982.

A church community developed, following the motto of the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “the Church can only be the Church if it is there for others.” Church work committees addressed topics such as the integrity of the Creation myth, moral justice and peace. They participated in organizing peace prayers, which became more thematic, and target group-oriented, attracting many people from outside church circles. These groups afforded a unique space in which to meet and participate, in keeping with democratic principles and a culture of parliamentary-style discussion. For any other form of gathering, that did not accord with the One Party policy, special permission was required. Either such permission was not granted, or it amounted to spies being dispatched to infiltrate meetings.

Even today, the peace prayers take place at the same location, on the same day, and at the same time.

In his book, *Saint Nicholas Church: Mondays at Five*, Hermann Geyer describes the transformation of the peace prayers into a kind of independent “counter public space.” Here, topics that most concerned the people could be brought to the fore and discussed. As Hartmut Zwahr writes in his book, *End of A Self-Destruction*, this led to the erosion of a basic phenomenon of dictatorship – the strict suppression and taboo status of social problems.

As the years passed, tensions between those wanting to leave the GDR, religious concerns of believers and the opening up of the Church to social problems intensified. These tensions, combined with the attempts by the State to limit the influence of the Church, led to the fundamental question: Is this still the Church?

Heated debates took place on all sides; the participants did not want to be taken over by the Church. Their aim was not only to reform church circles, but also to reform society as a whole. The Church wanted to avoid being exploited by the growing opposition and feared the loss of its internal authority over far-reaching actions. The State infiltrated the parish councils with secret agents and threatened to close parishes. At the same time, it tried to maintain the few concessions it had made to the people, which had led to increased international recognition of State respect for the liberties of its citizens.

“Monday Parishoners” was the name given to the participants of the peace prayers by Christian Führer, then pastor of St. Nicholas Church. Ninety percent of those who attended were non-believers. The church services were, therefore, ecumenical and celebrated without the Eucharist, but included chants, sermons, prayers, blessings and participation of the church committees – some of them from the Catholic parishes.

Political changes in the Soviet Union, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, led to other factors that influenced the situation in the GDR, for instance, the modernization of member states of the Warsaw Pact. The mass departure of GDR citizens in the summer and fall of 1989 through Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the marked deterioration of the economic situation in the GDR, the disastrous environmental situation, and the obvious problems of conscientious regard for the wellbeing of the people – all led to a call for change.

However, the first hesitant attempts of the citizens not to resign themselves to their fate were quickly shattered by the GDR’s leaders, who advocated harsh measures – like those taken by the Chinese government in response to student demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in June of 1989. The “China Solution,” as the killing of protesters was labeled, was seen as the inevitable means of preventing a counter-revolution. The state-run GDR newspapers backed this position and it was clear that the GDR government was prepared to act accordingly, if need be.

Despite all attempts at intimidation, the Monday prayers continued and expanded to seven churches in Leipzig. They urged non-violent behavior for the Monday demonstrations that followed and took place in the center of Leipzig. These demonstrations were secular expressions of their parochial predecessors. Under the motto “Dona nobis pacem” and guided by the the sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. during the US Civil Rights

movement, people left the churches in October 1989 chanting, "We shall overcome." They peacefully confronted the armed forces made up of police units and brigade groups. The State had not expected peaceableness. Horst Sindermann, member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), later expressed the astonishment of the GDR leadership, "We had everything planned. We were prepared for everything – except for candles and prayers."

As the second largest city in the GDR, Leipzig hosted its most important industrial trade fair twice a year. This attracted not only domestic and international visitors, but also allowed West German television crews to report from within the fairgrounds and the City. Even though it was officially forbidden for citizens of the GDR to watch television channels from the "class enemy" West Germany, the majority of the population used TV as an independent source of information, especially for topics either not covered or ideologically manipulated by official GDR channels. The people of the GDR were informed about the Monday prayers and demonstrations via West German television! This peaceful movement was taken up by citizens of other towns in the GDR, eagerly expressing their suppressed opinions following Leipzig's example.

The space initially occupied by small groups of demonstrators for only a few hours, expanded to a large stretch of liberty for the entire population.

In commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the crucial role of the Church in Germany's Peaceful Revolution arises again and again, its lessons discussed in relation to current political developments elsewhere, such as Ukraine. Undoubtedly, the role of the Church during those years was one of providing a place where people could address their worries and troubles – an outlet for the frustration that had built up over years of hopelessness. Furthermore, it influenced people to refrain from allowing their anger to escalate into violence. Then again, it is doubtful that the "Wonder of Leipzig," the demonstration of October 9, 1989 following Monday prayers – when 70,000 protesters facing 8,000 armed soldiers marched peacefully on the inner-city ring road – can only be credited to the Church. A diversity of factors playing around the edges of events were broader and quite complex.

In his book, *Dialectic of Form and Mind*, Fulbert Steffensky suggests that post-Christian society needs a temporary faith. In reunified Germany, the Church's role as an attractive place to meet and discuss secular topics has decreased. Different organizations, associations, parties and interest groups seem to be covering this spectrum of themes. In 1991, 34 percent of the population of the former GDR belonged to a church (whereas in West Germany it was 82 percent). Twenty years later, these proportions have shrunk to 25 and 70 percent, respectively. In eastern Germany, only 4 percent of the populace are members of the Catholic Church.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that in 2015 two new churches will be sanctified in the center of Leipzig – one Protestant and one Catholic – in hopes of countering the growing number of people leaving the Church.