



# SECULARIZATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

USING THE EXAMPLE OF A POST-„VOLKSKIRCHE“, EAST GERMAN REGION

## INTRODUCTION

Two dialogues are not entirely atypical for the sociological context discussed in this presentation. ☞

The first one: This happened during a school conference in the city of Greifswald. There was a parent representative on the school council who was completely unchurched, and he was interested in the cathedral of Greifswald. He knew the church from various visits and now asked me the very telling question: „Do worship services still take place here, occasionally?“ The question was telling, because on the one hand it expressed the assumption that religious life in this city had perished long ago. On the other hand the question signals that, although the religious life of this church has not perished, it happens in the corner of those who are faithful to the church anyway, and it does not really become public. Is this still „publice docere“, if the public does not know about the teaching anymore?

The second one: In a diaconical institution, a young unchurched man is doing an internship. In a staff meeting, the difficult situation in the institution is discussed. At one point during the discussion, the intern comes forward and recommends to the leader: „Couldn't you now tell again the fairy tale of the enlarged barns?“ What he meant was: the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12. Again, the impression is ambivalent: On the one hand, for this young man the parable is on the same level as the fairy tale of the Snow Queen or the Emperor's New Clothes, on the other hand, he has taken it in with fresh curiosity, as an exciting story, and now he can apparently offer it as a powerful intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Mission in East Germany often takes place at zero point situations like this, where church and unchurched people encounter one another. The repository of tradition has been used up. Knowledge of tradition is not even rudimental. But if contact is successfully made, then trust grows, and the freshness of the encounter makes the gospel resonate anew.

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<sup>1</sup> Told by Rev. Christine Rösch who ministers in the Protestant church of Central Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland).

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I would like to place this ambivalence at the beginning of my talk, in order to provide a first insight into our missional context, and also in order to prevent me and us from seeing mission in East Germany as all-too easy or as all-too hard. A zero point situation means: Beware of old and easy recipes, they might not be up to this situation. But a zero point situation also means: Beware of self-imposed depression and hopelessness. They could overlook what surprises God already has in store in this situation, what God is up to in his mission. ☞

Thus my thesis is almost formulated:

*In the East German context, the challenge of the missional church presents itself anew. I am convinced that we can only be faithful to our calling as Lutheran church in this context if we live and work in a way that is at once sober and hopeful, inspired by mission and competent in dealing with plurality.*

I want to develop this thesis in three ways. ☞ I will begin with a fresh encounter of the term mission and its relevance for the church. Afterwards I will describe the sociological context of Decristianization in East Germany and its impact on churchlife to present a closer view on the chances and challenges. At last the Protestant Church in Pomerania serves as an example to illustrate characteristics of a plural mission in a mainly unchurched context. ☞

## 1. MISSIONAL CHURCH: REHABILITATING AN „UN-WORD“

### 1.1 A „DISEASED WORD“

I do not have to comment at length on the fact that mission evokes complicated reactions: For some, it is enthusiasm, for others, it is scepticism and rejection. For some it is the key commission of any Christian and of the whole church, for others it smells of the overpowering of people, of a know-it-all attitude and of intolerance. This is the case already within the church, and more so outside the walls of the church. There, the word mission is a „burnt up“ word.

For instance, young East German writer Juli Zeh, in her novel with the title „Schilf“ („Reed“), describes a nun entering the compartment of a train. There she meets the novel's protagonist, Maike. „The nun is pestering every passenger walking past with the attempt to start a conversation, as if to prove to the poor Lord Jesus that people still do not want to be left alone after all. Love your neighbour, or whoever happens to sit on your neighbouring seat. Maike shivers.“<sup>2</sup> Is this mission: making people shiver, talking without connecting to them, pestering whoever is sitting next to you, ignoring when people are not interested?

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<sup>2</sup> Juli Zeh: Schilf. Frankfurt/M. 2007, 194.

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Apparently, at least we do not earn the right to talk to people about our innermost faith automatically. ☹

## 1.2 REHABILITATION OF MISSION WITHIN THE CHURCH

In the perspective of the church, however, a lot has happened. We have rediscovered that mission belongs to the very nature of the church. In the Evangelical Church in Germany, this is connected, for example, to the statement of the General Synod in Leipzig in 1999: „Coming from this synod, the signal is: For the protestant church, the issue of faith and the missionary commission is its first priority.“<sup>3</sup> In the understanding of the synod, mission is the mission of God, into which the church is taken up, but which does not happen for the sake of the church. The synod maintains: „Our commission is to open people’s eyes to the truth and beauty of the Christian message. We want to win them for freely binding themselves to Christ and to keep to the church as the community of believers.“<sup>4</sup>

Since then, mission has been on the agenda of the church in Germany. Our Research Institute for Evangelism and Church Development in Greifswald is situated within that context. For the first time, there is an academic institution that is able to concentrate, in research and teaching, on questions of mission in our context. It is financed by charitable foundations and by churches, and supported especially by the Pomeranian church and its Bishop.<sup>5</sup>

The process of reform that the Evangelical Church in Germany has started to implement with the thesis paper „Kirche der Freiheit“ (Church of Freedom) in 2006 is also unthinkable without the affirmation of mission. Mission – and there is an ecumenical consensus on this – is not what we do by sending out missionaries to others. Mission is what we need ourselves. Thus it is said in the thesis paper: „Part of what is encouraging today is that in all streams and groupings of the church, a missionary reorientation of the church is welcomed. When talking of ‚mission‘, people do not only think of partnerships with churches on other continents; and a missionary orientation is not only equated with evangelistic forms of proclamation. Rather, mission is recognized as the task of the whole church to address people in our own society in a way that awakens their faith, a task that must show and be emphasized in all areas of church work.“<sup>6</sup> In the implementation of the process of reform, the missional venture is one of three main focuses.<sup>7</sup> This is also reflected in the foundation of a „Centre for Mission in the Region“, which has been situated in Dortmund, Stuttgart, and Greifswald since 2009.

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<sup>3</sup> Kirchenamt der EKD (Ed.): Reden von Gott in der Welt. Der missionarische Auftrag der Kirche an der Schwelle zum 3. Jahrtausend. Frankfurt/M. 2001, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. , 38.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Michael Herbst, Johannes Zimmermann und Jörg Ohlemacher (Ed.): Missionarische Perspektiven für eine Kirche der Zukunft. Neukirchen-Vluyn 2005 (BEG 1).

<sup>6</sup> Kirchenamt der EKD (Ed.): Kirche der Freiheit. Perspektiven für die evangelische Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Impulspapier des Rates der EKD. Hannover 2006, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Next to „Worship and Sermon“ und „Spiritual Leadership in Church“.

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In the Lutheran context, reference must also be made to the Lund declaration of the Lutheran World Federation: Here, the office of the bishop is interpreted in the context of the apostolicity of the church.<sup>8</sup> In paragraph 28, the connection of the bishop's office and apostolicity is interpreted in terms of the theology of mission. Reminding of the sending (or mission) of the Easter witnesses at the empty tomb (Mt 28:10) and of the disciples on the mountain (Mt 28:16-20), it is said: „The mission to which the apostles were called remains the mission of the whole church throughout history. As this mission shapes the church, so the church is rightly called apostolic.“<sup>9</sup> ☩

By the way, the English term “missional church” is becoming more common in our context, in order to break away from an outdated understanding of mission. Thus, mission is the holistic ministry of the church, which is understood as the „hermeneutics“ (the interpreter) of the gospel, and which witnesses to God's love in word and deed, embodies this love and makes it tangible, and invites people to faith.<sup>10</sup>

Now, I cannot develop a full-blooded theology of mission here, but I want to make one more statement on the nature of mission. ☩

### 1.3 A STATEMENT ON THE NATURE OF MISSION: CROSSING BOUNDARIES

How can mission correspond to rather than contradict the original missional, Jesus himself? What does the mission of Jesus of Nazareth look like, who declares: „As the Father has sent me, I am sending you“ (John 20:21)? My thesis is: The mission of Jesus of Nazareth was the constant crossing of boundaries for the sake of the love of God.

Allow me to explain this in more detail: In New Testament times, there was a clear code as to who was to associate with whom, and also: who was not to associate with whom. Pious people were sure that they did God a favour when they kept themselves at a distance, when they separated from others and drew fine distinctions: separating themselves from the tenants of Roman tax booths, from women from the allegedly oldest profession in the world, from leprous people and Samaritans, from women, children and certainly all kinds of Gentiles. In their eyes, holiness was about separation: profane from sacred, holy from unholy, pious from worldly, outside from inside. On this view, according to the German sociologist and prominent thinker in the sociological Systems theory Niklas Luhmann, religion has an excluding effect.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lutheran World Federation: Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church. The Lund Statement by the Lutheran World Federation - A Communion of Churches. Lund 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. , 6 = Nr. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Darrell L. Guder: *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. The People of God Sent on a Mission. Gospel & Our Culture.* Grand Rapids 1998; Lesslie Newbigin: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society.* Grand Rapids/Genf 1989, 222ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Niklas Luhmann: *Inklusion und Exklusion.* In: Ders.: *Soziologische Aufklärung.* Bd.6, Opladen 1995, 237-264, 262.

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But what does Jesus of Nazareth do? Apparently, he is a boundary crosser by conviction. He is about inclusion rather than exclusion<sup>12</sup>, and he draws inside the very people who are outside. Therefore, he crosses boundary after boundary. Worse still, he claims that there is rejoicing in heaven when the walls come down and when people with whom God had nothing to do and who had nothing to do with God – when people like this come home to the Father (Luke 15:7). And he claims that God is by no means honoured when we build walls and keep people from entering the Father's house. From now on, to be holy means to cross boundaries, to connect with others and to welcome the very people who had previously been „outside the door“. In the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest sin is not to be connected to those who the Father loves, on whose misery he has compassion, and to whom he wants to grant access to his presence. With his whole being and work, Jesus radiates the message: There is a lot of space next to me, come here, „in my Father's house are many rooms“ (John 14:2).

The companions whom Jesus had called to him saw this in their master. They experienced it in their circle. They were amazed: The person who in their eyes was the holiest person on earth was also the one who was the least exclusive and the most decidedly inclusive. Thus, the mission of Jesus of Nazareth also became their mission, and crossing boundaries became their passion. Jesus sent them to all, to the entire world, to all nations and peoples. He did not draw any distinctions anymore; becoming a disciple should be the privilege of all people.

This can be seen, for example, in the Apostle Paul. He is infected by the vision of Jesus, and so he is ready to radically deny himself. He is ready to put his own good completely on hold as the task is to reach people with the message of the gospel. He does not want to ask any longer: What is dear and holy to me, what is my tradition of living in the community of faith, what is my style of worshipping God? He wants to do everything that connects people to the gospel, and he wants to leave everything what could keep them away from the gospel, as long as it is really the message of Christ. He wants to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might save some (1Cor 9:19-23).

So I can only participate in the gospel when I join in with its dynamic movement towards people who have never heard of Jesus and still live their dire lives without connection to him. If I refuse to join in with this inclusive effort of the gospel, then I exclude myself from it. A church should be a community on the move, crossing boundaries and making inclusion possible.

So God has a mission, which he has never cancelled. He is determined to look for and find people. And when he meets with people, then he does what is necessary. And apparently he does have those who are privileged and favoured: those who seem to us to be furthest away. And apparently various things can happen when God comes close to somebody: The sick get healthy, the hungry get fed, the crushed down are lifted up, the children are blessed.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Miroslav Volf: Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation. Nashville 1996.

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Word and deed, diaconical service and evangelism belong together; they are like the two legs of the dance that mission is.

In theological language, I could say it like this: There is no mission without incarnation. At least, when this is about God's mission. There is no mission without incarnation, that means: As the word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), so the mission of the church of Jesus must become „flesh“ and go where people are, overcome social and cultural boundaries and immigrate into every social environment. Therefore: ☩

## 2. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE? THE SITUATION IN EAST GERMANY

Mission happens never without its context: God's mission will take its own shape in every context and will substantiate the more abstract statements of chapter 1. Thus we have to look at the East German context in particular. And it is in West- and East-Europe – may be together with the Czech Republic a special case of high-grade Dechristianization.<sup>13</sup> ☩

### 1.1 WE COULD SPEAK ABOUT STATISTICS FOR A LONG TIME

For the mission of the church, one of the main challenges is certainly the stable situation of unchurched people in Germany: “By this we mean people who have not belonged to any church for three or four decades and ‘who have forgotten that they have forgotten God.’ In the East of Germany, they make up 70-75% of the population, which is about 10-12 million people, in the West, they make up 25-30%, which is about 15 million people.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, numbers are always likely to be impressive. In 1959, the Pomeranian Church still had 700.000 members, whereas now only around 100.000 people belong to the Protestant Church, which is about 20% of the population. The Catholic Church is traditionally very small in the North East, free churches and other groups do not play a major role. They even have more difficulties with mission, because any given Pomeranian will prefer to get involved with the traditional Church, if ever he wants to have a go at religion, rather than getting involved with any of these groups which to him look obscure. ☩

We can also talk about the average age in the Pomeranian Church and find out that the average age is even higher than in the aging society in general. It is close to 60 years or older, whereas the percentage of children and young people is low. The numbers show a small church with the status of a minority. ☩

By the way, it is a church which still is shrinking, however it does not shrink so much because its membership is declining but because of migration to the West und because its membership is getting older. It has been like this for at least one generation: Many leave, mainly those who are gifted and nimbly with their tongue. We speak about “brain drain”, the

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Gabriel e.a.: Religion und Kirchen in Ost(Mittel)Europa: Deutschland-Ost. Ostfildern 2003 (Gott nach dem Kommunismus).

<sup>14</sup> Hartmut Bärend: Kirche mit Zukunft. Impulse für eine missionarische Volkskirche. Gießen 2006, 43.

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loss of the elites. It is a small church in a minority situation. If the “Volkskirchen” are characterized by the fact that it is normal for most people to belong to the church – to whatever degree –, then our church is surely no longer a “Volkskirche”. We could speak about statistics for a long time, however we would only scratch the surface of the problems.

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## 1.2 WE COULD SPEAK ABOUT HISTORY FOR A LONG TIME

No doubt, this is crucial, too. However, in thinking about history, we should not start with the German Democratic Republic.<sup>15</sup> We need to go further back to follow the roots of the meagre situation in the North East in the past 200 years.

In a small research study in 1893, Pastor Wittenberg from the small village Swantow on the island Rugia in Northeastern Germany came to the conclusion<sup>16</sup> that the average Pomeranian is not only cumbersome and sceptical of everything new<sup>17</sup>, but is also “largely indifferent” towards the Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> Church attendance is around 3% rather than around 6%,<sup>19</sup> and it is more about adhering to church rituals, which are deemed unavoidable, like attending infant baptisms, weddings, and funerals.<sup>20</sup> The catechumenate of the children is almost completely missing.<sup>21</sup> Pomerania is – according to Wittenberg in A.D. 1893 – a „spiritual grave yard.”<sup>22</sup>

Our part of Pomerania has never been a flourishing spiritual landscape. Revivals only happened locally. After World War II, there was not very much left of the country and the church in Pomerania. What was spiritually inspiring was mainly the immigration from East Pomerania. These immigrants played a major role within the local churches.

The success of the propaganda of the GDR fell on a ground, which was well prepared by religious indifference and abstinence from church life. However, what was new was that atheism was now anchored above the level of the individual: Not only individual people are unchurched, but most parts of public culture, the educational system, civic places are unchurched as well.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> To the deep historical roots points Helmut Geller, Karl Gabriel e.a. in their paper: „Die Kirchen in der DDR vor und nach der Wende“ auf. In: Karl Gabriel e.a.: Religion und Kirchen in Ost(Mittel)Europa: Deutschland-Ost. Ostfildern 2003, 325-336 (P. M. Zulehner e.a. [Ed.]: Gott nach dem Kommunismus).

<sup>16</sup> H. Wittenberg: Die Lage der ländlichen Arbeiter in Neuvorpommern und auf Rügen. Leipzig <sup>2</sup>1894.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit., 47.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., 67.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., 59.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit., 70.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., 67.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., 70f.: „Where ever one goes in the religious field, everywhere indifference, and it is the most evil of all. Is it not possible to find means to abolish it, New Pommerania and Rugia remains for ever what they are, a spiritual grave yard.“

<sup>23</sup> Cf. e.g. Ehrhart Neubert: Konfessionslose in Ostdeutschland. Folgen verinnerlichter Unterdrückung. In: PTh 87 (1998), 368-379.

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The marginalization of Christians by the regime of the Socialist Party belongs to history, too. The politics of the reigning party was hostile towards the church and attacked it mainly where it hurt most: in education and lifetime support. In education, this happened with the fight against religious education and youth work. Education also meant to gradually establish an atheist picture of the world, which then functioned as scientific world view, and to plant this into the minds and hearts of children and young people. This crop flourished and for many people, it is still part of their deepest beliefs today. And as for lifetime support, the socialist state created its own rites: The church lost its interpretive authority with regard to the major turning points in life, and the authority to support and counsel people from the cradle to the grave, because now the state was able to dedicate names, to turn young people into grown up socialists and to comfort people, more or less, in their last hour. Education and lifetime support were taken away from the church, and people were weaned from Christianity generation by generation. In addition, there was pressure, discrimination, and social disadvantages. It became expensive to remain a Christian. Socialist cities emerged, and church steeples should not disturb their appearance. Some steeples in old cities had to give way, had been blown up like the church of the University of Leipzig. Rural life was industrialized, the agricultural culture shaped by the church was finally replaced by socialist production cooperatives.

History – it ought to be told as family history: of the grandfather who had still been confirmed but then withdrew, the father who was never baptized, and the child for whom it is now normal not to belong to any church. The loss of the language of faith should not be underestimated. The grandfather still knew the Christian ABC, but did not pass it on to the father. However, some subversive grandmothers did it anyway. But most of the fathers did not have anything left to pass on. Children did not learn the language with which they could have learned to believe.

The „Wende“ in 1989 did not bring any change. The revival and revitalization that had been hoped for failed to appear. People did not return in crowds, on the contrary, the church continued to shrink. Do people not become more and more spiritual, do we not talk of the return of religion and the re-spiritualization of humankind? Well, but not here. ☹️

### 1.3 FACT IS: THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE IS FAR FROM FAITH

It is not for nothing that bishop Noack from the East German city Magdeburg says again and again: “Don’t fool yourselves. We “Ossis” (people from East Germany) are immune against religion.” Despite all hopes, the East German variety of being unchurched is deeply anchored in the biography of many East Germans. “ East Germany is as a-religious as Bavaria is catholic”, Eberhard Tiefensee, philosopher at Erfurt University in East Germany,

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formulates.<sup>24</sup> What he describes is religious immunity: „East Germans don't go to the Dalai Lama either.“<sup>25</sup>

Within 50 years, a new normality has cropped up.<sup>26</sup> Before that, it was more or less normal to belong to a church. Now the opposite is normal, unquestioned, the model of the majority, with which the people in the East are brought up and live. These unchurched people come along with an atheism, which is deep but not necessarily aggressive. This atheism comes with a far-reaching indifference for the whole religious interpretation of life including the offers of the church. They are known, but are of no interest whatsoever to the average East German.<sup>27</sup> „You know, I am not religious“, a train conductor said when she was asked about church related issues. That is common. Focussing on these unchurched fellow human beings, e.g. in the prefabricated slab-construction buildings of our cities or in the underdeveloped rural areas, Roman Catholic bishop Wanke of the diocese Erfurt in the Southeastern state Thuringia says: „To lead an unchurched Thuringian to Christ seems to me to be more significant, at least more difficult, than to baptize an animist African.“<sup>28</sup> ☺

Compared to this, the situation of the congregations is diffuse. Some are involved in missional attempts at crossing boundaries, and they realize how difficult it is. This is because even the linguistic constructions of reality are different. Others are sceptical against opening up to the outside world. „We understand ourselves as a confessing community“, a pastor who rejected mission told me. A confessing community: These are those who paid the price for keeping the faith already in the past, who suffered in many ways. Do we really wish to have the former secretary of the socialist party sitting next to us in the pew, and the teacher of the grammar school, and the spying neighbour? Whoever thinks they have an easy answer to this underestimate the hurts of the time of dictatorship. Nevertheless my question is: „Are church members open for new people, ... to be won? Are you ready to welcome strangers and to make space for them? Are the congregations ready to question liturgical traditions which may have been tested over long times and are deeply familiar – in order to reach those who simply cannot do anything with highly sophisticated offers like this?“<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Eberhard Tiefensee: Chancen und Grenzen von „Mission“ - im Hinblick auf die konfessionelle Situation in den neuen Bundesländern. In: M. Bartels und M. Reppenhagen (Ed.): Gemeindepflanzung - ein Modell für die Kirche der Zukunft? Neukirchen-Vluyn 2006 (BEG 4), 68-85, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., 70.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Pittkowski: Konfessionslose in Deutschland. In: W. Huber e.a. (Ed.): Kirche in der Vielfalt der Lebensbezüge. Die vierte EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft. Gütersloh 2006, 89-110, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Eberhard Tiefensee: Chancen und Grenzen von „Mission“ - im Hinblick auf die konfessionelle Situation in den neuen Bundesländern. In: M. Bartels und M. Reppenhagen (Ed.): Gemeindepflanzung - ein Modell für die Kirche der Zukunft? Neukirchen-Vluyn 2006 (BEG 4), 79.

<sup>28</sup> Joachim Wanke: Missionarische Herausforderungen im gesellschaftlichen Kontext Deutschlands - Perspektive Ostdeutschland. In: EMW e.a. (Ed.): Aufbruch zu einer missionarischen Ökumene. Hamburg 1999, 138.

<sup>29</sup> Hartmut Barend: Kirche mit Zukunft. Impulse für eine missionarische Volkskirche. Gießen 2006, 50.

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We have to add here the enfeeblement of the congregations who are out of puff. Reforms of the structures are exhausting, because they usually mean it will become more difficult as the numbers decline and neither money nor power will suffice. The grappling with church fusions and the threatening end of the own church in the village bind energies and mellow people. The focus is more on maintaining what is there than on reaching out to those who are outsider.

The North German Broadcast Station (NDR) broadcasted a report about a young pastor close to the border to Poland: “The Lord of 13 steeples”.<sup>30</sup> For many, this is normal: small and tiny church services, mainly elderly people, here and there a few children, rarely men, rarely men and women between 30 and 60. But all the more church buildings where services have to be celebrated: “The Lord of 13 steeples”. Moreover, he is also a solo entertainer who has to do everything alone. In one person he is liturgist and preacher, choir leader, organ player, youth worker, master builder, counsellor, administration manager and teacher. He has a few funerals, but rarely baptisms and weddings. It is a poor region, there in the geographical region named Uckermark. Whoever can leave will leave. Whoever stays do so because they have to.

So a little courage is needed to travel to the border to Poland, to look into the face of the parochial church council and of the young pastor and to say: It is about mission, outreach, and growth! Courage is needed, or the humour of faith, like the bishop of Magdeburg Noack has: “We must gladly decline and yet wish to grow.” For what that means is: We still have to accept the decline of congregations and cope with it, to mourn together and to assent to the dying of what is familiar. But at the same time we shall set out, venture for new things and not give up wishing to grow.

But how can we imagine that this missional challenge is easy, fast, or could be accomplished with only few resources?

- How do we reach the aging people, those who withdrew from the church in the past?
- How do we reach the people of the middle generation brought up in the GDR?
- And how do we reach the young people who grew up in a kind of ideological and religious nowhere land?
- How do we get public attention again so that we are seen and recognized as respectable? ☹️

It should not be denied or denigrated what good approaches can be seen. To do otherwise would be like a self ordered depression. Without doubt there are smaller and bigger stories of success. We can at least guess what chances there are for the future. The regular ministry in our local churches can have missional effects – as long as it is fostered by Christians with the heart of a missionary. It is a chance to found protestant schools, to show a new presence in the educational sector and to earn trust. Furthermore: If people in a village get involved

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<sup>30</sup> NDR-Nordreportage: Herr der 13 Türme - Der Landpfarrer vom Randowtal. 25th Februar 2008, 18.15h North German Broadcast Station (NDR).

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with maintaining a church building, this can lead them to identify at least with the building where faith is expressed. It can also make people think when they get in touch with a Protestant care facility like a hospice and experience it as different. These are important approaches.

There might be even more chances, if diaconical and educational institutions, those caring for evangelism and those interested in church ceremonies understand themselves as a confessing community, focusing on winning unchurched people for Christ. E.g., the East German theologian Ehrhart Neubert puts the critical question: „It should be researched whether most of the church staff in the East have a background that makes it difficult for them to see the mission to the unchurched as a major challenge.“<sup>31</sup> Here we have a major problem: In some places we are not only not able, but we even do not want it.

To add to the complexity, we also need much more missional imagination to develop plural missional models for unchurched contexts, for the aging former church members, for adults brought up in the GDR, for young people brought up in an ideologic and religious nowhere, for poor educated rural youngsters, for the faithful atheist elites and so on. There is a lot of homework to do. ☹️

## INTERLUDE: HEBR 10:35F

When this presentation was written, I did it parallel to the regular Bible reading in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The given text from Hebrew 10:35-39 helped me to call off the dark thoughts about the situation of the church, which jumped around like wild dogs.

*„ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.  
You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God,  
you will receive what he has promised.“*

In this passage, faith appears in the two forms of confidence and perseverance. Both are needed when we think about the mission of the church in the East:

- Confidence that God’s mission to us has never been cancelled. He himself is at work in people. Confidence that we have to go new ways. New missional paths, even new forms of congregations, starting by near zero.
- And perseverance: perseverance for going the extra mile. Perseverance means: remaining in it and not running away.

Confidence and perseverance have God’s promise: He won’t forsake us. We shall receive the promised. To this also belongs the experience that people become followers of Christ, being baptized and taught in the Gospel. ☹️

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<sup>31</sup> Ehrhart Neubert: Konfessionslose in Ostdeutschland. Folgen verinnerlichter Unterdrückung. In: PTh 87 (1998), 377.

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### 3. MISSION IN POMERANIA: MAIN FEATURES OF PLURAL MISSION

The Pomeranian Bischof Abromeit <sup>☞</sup> in Northeastern Germany surely hit the point: “We live in a situation that challenges us in a missionary way.”<sup>32</sup> Mission in Pomerania has already begun long ago. It happens in various congregations that seek to get in touch with people next door. They strive to gain public attention. They open their church doors and seek to get in touch with their dechurched and unchurched neighbours. Plurality is not a problem as long as it remains oriented towards the common mission. In such a case it is not a problem but becomes a strength, and even necessity, to reach as many as possible. In other words: Because there is not just one single kind of the typical unchurched person, a plural approach is indispensable. <sup>☞</sup>

For example, let us look at children’s and youth work. The number of children and young people who attend religious education in school is far higher than the number of church members of the same age. A seeker service project in Greifswald reaches about 200 teenagers each month. Many of them grew up without church. A youth church in „Grünhufe“, a typical former socialist housing district in the nearby city Stralsund, is active in a mixture of social and evangelistic projects among young people. Many young people in other church districts of Pomerania become involved with church by Christian camps that pool the hours of confirmation class.

Special missional activities make an impact as well. It is just not true that activities that were in practice in Western Germany for a long time cannot be effective in the East at all. The project “Neu anfangen” (“starting anew”) succeeded exceptionally well in reaching unchurched people in a Pomeranian city (Loitz). Every household in this region with a published phone number was called and offered a small booklet with testimonies from the region. A volunteer would personally bring the booklet to their front door if they accepted the offer on the telephone. They would then be invited to a series of evening discussions. A different approach: Twice a year, about 200 women meet in the cafeteria of Greifswald university for “Frühstückstreffen für Frauen” (“breakfast meeting for women”). Many of them are unchurched. They have breakfast together and listen to a talk on a contemporary issue from a Christian perspective. In several places, there are “Seeker services” which entice people to come to church – new forms of services with a short piece of drama, modern music, and a sermon with a thematic focus. Not least, several congregations make very positive experiences with missional nurture courses. In a short-run project lasting 6-7 weeks, interested people get to learn the tenets of the Christian faith and to discuss them with Christians. As you have probably seen by now, most of these activities seek to offer easy access with a low threshold and most of them are short-term offers. They tie in with themes that query modern vital issues from a Christian perspective. Attendees neither need to be

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<sup>32</sup> Hans-Jürgen Abromeit: Wahrnehmungen aus dem Bischofsamt in Ostdeutschland. In: LVK-Forum 3/2002, 26-30, here: 27.

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especially educated nor pious. They normally take place in a hospitable setting, allow first and fresh experiences of church, and invite to seek for more. A few people are reached by public relations work. But most are reached by personal relationships. The local pastor can invite people when he is known as trustworthy. Even more so, church members can invite other people when there are connections with a bit more depth and unchurched people do not have to suspect that the invitation is more about missionary success than about themselves. If all works well, then activities like this build bridges to the rest of the life of a church. Very often though, this turns out to be a problem as well, since many congregations are not very much accustomed to hosting formerly unchurched newcomers. More steps need to be taken. It is a long journey to faith! ☺

In some places, the start has to be from scratch. We see entire areas that are hard to reach. It is part of socialism's aftermath that its intention to create "cities without God" proved to be very effective in some places. This is especially true for the city-districts containing the typical East German architecture with large grey concrete housing blocks. In average, the number of church members is here below 10% of all inhabitants in the district. Even worse, in Bergen-Rotensee<sup>33</sup> we experience that those who are still officially church members have turned their back on church and conversely the congregation does not know them either. Congregational fellowship vanished from Rotensee. Not to mention missional endeavours. There has to be completely fresh start here. The Church of England taught us a lot about „Church Planting“ and how to root missional congregations in formerly unreached regions. That was and still is our intention here in Bergen-Rotensee. A new congregation shall grow with the help of a young minister who sets up contacts to local institutions of welfare services, to schools, clubs, and most of all to individual people living in Rotensee. He himself lives next door to those he seeks to reach with the gospel. Diaconical work and evangelistic outreach have to go hand in hand. It is also important for us that worship services are taking place in Rotensee. We expect a lot from word and sacrament, from prayer and worship, even if people do not at first recognize it.

That sheds a little more light on the idea of a plural Mission. Let us move on a little further though. ☺

The „Pommersche Perspektivplan“ (2005) (“Pomeranian Prospect Plan“) also needs to be mentioned in this context. It was established by a task group led by Bischof Abromeit<sup>34</sup> and focuses on the missional calling. It is striking how mission and social context are connected with one another in this document. People shall be addressed at weddings and during difficult times in their lives, and they are to sense: the church and its message help me to get along with my life. And then they can also discover: the gospel is much more. It unlocks a whole new world shaped by the love of God. I believe we need to follow up on such questions much more intensely. Let me name just three examples: (1) Facing high

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. no. 1 above.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Pommersche Evangelische Kirche: Leben in Gottes Gegenwart. Perspektiven für die Pommersche Evangelische Kirche. Ergebnisse des Leitbildprozesses von 2002 bis 2005. Greifswald 2005.

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unemployment rates in our region, the „Pommersche Perspektivplan“ prompts us to think about the meaning of human work and to offer meaningful assignments to people. (2) The “Pommersche Perspektivplan“ identifies the assets of our region for tourism and wellness. How do we, as a missional church, reach those who visit our region for wellness and relaxation? (3) The “Pommersche Perspektivplan“ apprehends the various turns in the history of Pomerania as the old or new home. It encourages to look at the often painful history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to tell this story and to seek for reconciliation in various ways. Work, health and glances at history are such possible point of contact in our region, for a mission, which crosses boundaries.

By now, plural mission in a post socialist context might appear like an assortment of different stand alone activities, which is a little too colorful and confusing. What is necessary for plural mission in a post socialist context to succeed? I see five main necessities. ☺

First: We need people who enjoy the Christian faith and who love to share it. Methods and activities lead nowhere if a joyful faith is not continually renewed and refreshed from within the church. The innermost and hidden basis of a renewed mission are fellowship, celebrating in worship, laughing and weeping together, prayer and finding words to share the faith. The preaching of the gospel needs therefore to be heard by us as well. Mission is not just directed from the inside to the outside, as if it was just of us sharing something with others. We ourselves remain addressees of God’s mission. He cares for us and longs to win us over to his love. This should encourage us to realize that our faith is not a run down model or should be kept secret. Spiritual renewal begins with ourselves. ☺

Second: We are not so much concerned with certain models, projects or activities. Individual activities will fail if they are not rooted within a renewed culture of church life.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, we desperately need a culture of church life that is hospitable, welcoming, and that opens up to others. It is about our sense of “who we are”. Who are we? How do we interact with one another and with strangers? How do we celebrate? What is important and dear to us? The culture of a church is a reflection of its character. So it is possible to say that “we are open to others”, but the life of the church tells a different story. We insist on being welcoming and hospitable, but no visitor would understand our liturgies or could even find a liturgical order for directions. At coffee break after the service, the unexpected visitor stands alone in a corner. It is very cold in church. Children are sent to being stored away somewhere with outdated toys. I am exaggerating to make this clear. It must become our innermost conviction that as a church, we want to become a guesthouse. Only then does it make sense to have missional activities. Otherwise all newcomers will sense that this is unreal and will be disappointed. A guest can “feel” a culture, often upon entering our rooms! But changing culture is much more difficult than changing structure or organization. What some learned during the years of the socialist regime as suitable survival skills has sometimes to be unlearned now. I am speaking about the withdrawal into a niche, and

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Peter Böhlemann: *Wie die Kirche wachsen kann und was sie davon abhält*. Neukirchen-Vluyn 2006.

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about the inner separation of those outside from us inside. We need to be sensitive for the secret languages that we speak to one another. We need to learn to look at our church buildings with the eyes of potential visitors. And there is much more that could be listed here. We need a hospitable culture in our congregations. Only if we achieve this we can hope that the widespread feeling of a loss of good companionship and cohesion, a feeling that many East Germans mourn about, can become an open door to the church and to faith.<sup>36</sup> ☞

Third: We need missional hermeneutics for preaching and witnessing. We have not yet thought through the post socialist context enough theologically. Our theological education is indeed more interested in parts of culture that are still soaked with Christian or religious ideas. But it has not brought up enough interest for a culture that has forgotten all Christian elements and considers religion to be dispensable. It is not adept enough to address the life questions of our post socialist contemporaries, or relate them to our message in a fresh way. What do people believe who believe nothing? Which prejudices need to be critically worked upon? Which aspects of faith might interest our post socialist contemporaries? We should not only train our future ministers to foster existing congregations, but need to help them to become missionaries, at least to become leaders who care for a missional culture in church. ☞

Fourth: We need a missional hermeneutics in church and congregation. An example for such hermeneutics comes from the Lutheran context of the United States. Pat Keifert, Professor of Systematic Theology in St. Paul (Minnesota), developed the „Partnership for Missional Church“.<sup>37</sup> In a „Partnership for Missional Church“ about 12-15 congregations in a region work together for three years. They are accompanied by the „ChurchInnovation Institute“. Together, they learn much better than on their own to find out where God is already at work in their specific context. Thus it is evident: This is not about patent remedies. Mission has to be plural because God already has his own particular story with every city or village and every congregation. The goal is to find out what kind of story this is. How? Well, above all else the churches are trained to do two things. They should share time reading bible passages that speak about the church’s missional calling. And they should also become active to learn more about their social context, especially the context of those who join the same congregation and those on the outside who live nearby. They study the Bible, pray, read the life stories of those living nearby, and talk with many. Combining these two ways of reading should help to learn more. Where do we dare to do something new? What needs to be done in our town to join into God’s mission? You are probably not surprised to hear that once again diaconical or social welfare work and evangelistic witness are closely linked to one another. A missional hermeneutic will initiate spiritual processes, will renew the

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<sup>36</sup> Maren Rinn: Die religiöse und kirchliche Ansprechbarkeit von Konfessionslosen in Ostdeutschland. Eine Analyse auf Grundlage empirischer Untersuchungen in der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Landeskirche Mecklenburgs und Evangelischen Landeskirche Anhalts. Hannover 2006, 50-52. Found at [http://www.ekd.de/si-download/SI-Konfessionsloe\\_Ostdeutschland-korr2.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/si-download/SI-Konfessionsloe_Ostdeutschland-korr2.pdf) on Feb 20th, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Patrick Keifert: We are here now. Eagle (Idaho) 2006.

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eagerness to read the Bible, will help to focus upwards while being grounded in a real congregational setting with a well known social context so that finally suitable plural missional strategies will develop. ☺

Fifth: We need a renewal of the baptismal catechumenate. What I mean is: Opportunities to get to know the Christian faith which also take up the pastoral component from the catechumenate of the early church by connecting life and faith and encourage to take first steps of faith on the way to baptism and church membership. As the normal biographies become consciously chosen biographies, it is just not enough anymore to offer standardized assistance from infant baptism to the funeral. We need a new adult catechumenate. Nurture courses should be part of a congregation's normal curriculum just like confirmation classes. This is just the necessary way to go. The „EMMAUS-Walk of faith“ is a wonderful example for a nurture course that finally guides to baptism.<sup>38</sup> It leads through vital Christian issues and shows how to begin in the Christian faith. It assists seekers with Christians who accompany them. It does not offer long lectures but short inputs and much space to explore the Christian faith through discussions and personal Bible reading. We desperately need such a catechumenate, because in a post socialist context absolutely nothing can be taken for granted for a Christian mission to build upon. A professor from western Germany suggested “Oh well, no need to worry that is just a temporary state. It will soon be very normal again to belong to church. Just sing with the people the well known hymn ‘Großer Gott wir loben dich (God we praise thee)’ Everybody knows that.” No, they do not know it. Nor do they know the Lord's Prayer. They have never heard of Jesus and how much he longs to be close to them. That is why we need a renewal of the baptismal catechumenate. ☺

Let me close by reminding of Hebrews 10. We are not the first and last missionaries. It is not our duty to preserve church and Christianity. Otherwise we would have to think of the church in a post socialist context „etsi deus non daretur“, as if there were no God to be seen. We should not throw away our confidence and perseverance. What the German and English Bible translations render as „confidence“ in Greek is called „parrhesia“, “frankness” or “freedom of speech”. So what comes first is: We have access to the Father and the freedom of speech in his presence in order to ask him to put forth his mission in the post socialist context. Following that we have the freedom of speech to joyfully share our faith wherever we find open doors.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Michael Herbst (Ed.): Emmaus - Auf dem Weg des Glaubens. Handbuch. Neukirchen-Vluyn 2006; Matthias Clausen, Ulf Harder and Michael Herbst: Emmaus - Auf dem Weg des Glaubens. Basiskurs 2.0. Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008.