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Church Freedom and a Free Church:  
Giessen's Lutherans. Part II

Plockstrasse 8  
Giessen, Germany  
April 23, 1957

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The physical and spiritual rebuilding job faced by Giessen's Lutherans kept them thoroughly occupied in the early post-war years. Nobody took time out to question the order of things or the path which the Evangelical Church had set towards establishing itself in the new age. Thus it came as a complete surprise to most people when the hard-featured head of rebellion arose in their midst. The population had risen to 60,000, but there was still much of the small-town air in Giessen. And revolution in a small town means scrapping with the man next door or down the hall.

There were three main elements in church rebellion - partisan claims to the contrary. The first was a forceful young minister. The second was the controversial president of the Hesse Evangelical Church, Martin Niemoeller. The third was the church tax.

The young minister was Kurt Götze. A native of Erfurt, Thuringia, he was the son of a master tailor. He studied for the ministry at Jena and Marburg, refused to join the Confessional Church because he "didn't want any political ties," and served in the Wehrmacht for seven years as an artillery officer. He was made chaplain in an American prisoner of war camp after the war. Because Erfurt was in the Soviet Zone, Götze decided to work in West Germany. He came to the Giessen Probst in 1946 and asked for a job. The priory sent him first to a church in Wiëseck, a Giessen suburb. A few months later he was sent to a suburb of Nidda, a small city in the Giessen district. At this time he divorced his wife. In October 1947 he was called back to Giessen to serve as assistant pastor of the St. Luke's Parish. During the next three years he won a strong following in this congregation. By cultivating relations with American Occupation officers he obtained truckloads of food, shoe leather, and other necessities for distribution to the needy families in the parish. He also managed to get a group together to clean up the rubble around the Johanneskirche and plant a garden there. His vigorous sermons drew new visitors to Sunday services.

Götze's appointment to the Lukasgemeinde was by no means a permanent one. His senior, in fact, was due to leave the congregation sooner or later to take a position with the Church Board in Darmstadt. When the senior pastor left, in the fall of 1950, Götze was sent to Nidda to take over the Parish there. And that's when the trouble began.

Impassioned followers of Götze in the St. Luke's Congregation demanded that he be allowed to remain in Giessen - if possible to take over the whole parish. However, the Parish Council voted against retaining Götze. Under the church organization rules the council votes twice and the Church Board once in the election of a new pastor. The final decision must be unanimous. In this case, Götze's fierce supporters did not have the backing of their own council although they did represent a third of the congregation. But they still wanted Götze.

During the autumn of 1950 the lines were drawn. Götze's supporters started going en masse to Nidda to hear him preach. Meanwhile, back in Giessen, tempers were getting hotter. The pro-Götze faction tacked up placards on trees calling for a reversal of the State Church decision. In mass meetings they hurled epithets at the church leadership. By the time President Niemöller arrived on the scene to try to calm things down, it was too late. In an assembly of the whole congregation, Götze's bellicose backers called Niemöller a "vagabond" and accused him of being (simultaneously) an agent of the Soviets and the Americans.

Newspapers, delighted with a latter-day church rebellion, playing the story big. In Giessen it got to the point where the newly installed Lukasgemeinde pastor was attacked by kids on the street and threatened in letters and telephone calls.

As winter drew on, a group of Götze partisans went down to Nidda and made the following proposal to him: Come back to Giessen and start an independent congregation. The partisans guaranteed financial support. Götze accepted.

Thus it was on January 26, 1951 that the Free St. Luke's Congregation was founded. In the succeeding years it has tripled its size, which is presently 7,000. It has built its own \$125,000 church, established its own kindergarten, and organized a social service agency.

On the face of it, this congregationalist rebellion seems a mild and perhaps a desirable thing to the American eye. However, there were crass factors at work in the establishment of Pastor Götze's independent parish. For one thing, after the sniping started it became apparent that a number of his supporters were using Götze as an excuse to attack Martin Niemöller, a man who is widely detested for his outspoken record as an anti-Nazi and a liberal. For another, the healthy incomes of many Götze partisans made it fairly clear that a lot of them liked the idea of an independent church because it would mean they could escape the high church tax. The 10 per cent of income tax assessment hit them harder than it did poor people.

The State Church itself rightly regarded the Götze development as a serious blow at its authority. A few months after the splinter parish formed, it circulated a call to all Evangelical churches in Hesse to break away from the Darmstadt authority. This appeal met with no success.

Meanwhile, local churchmen were pretty sore at Götze. Here are some of their comments on their rebellious colleague. Alfred Trommershausen-- "He didn't behave badly until he allowed himself to be called back. There is something overwhelming but not winning about him. He gnashes his eyes." Pastor Bernbeck-- "He had to have a claque. They are easy to find. Some old Nazis were among them. The second motive was the church tax. Götze is the caricature of the Thuringian revolutionary. He is the jumping jack of his own church board." Pastor Paul Zipp (who took over the Lukasgemeinde)-- "Old Nazis used him as a tool to attack Niemöller. He is less free than we are because he is dependent on the whim of his parish."

Pastor Götze became sort of a hero in some Giessen circles after the rebellion. Women swarmed to the bachelor minister's worship services. He surprised them when he turned around and married a young Catholic girl. One gets the feeling that Götze is licking his wounds even today. Now 44, he is not as handsome as he used to be. He has the blazing eyes of a basilisk, a heavy chin, deep creases in his duel-scarred face, and thick hair receding from his strong brow. He is ready enough to tell you about his part in the rebellion:

"The congregation wanted to keep me. The State Church fought them because I wasn't a Hessian. The battle began. They juggled my divorce into the whole business. I had married a minister's daughter. When I came back in 1947 I learned she had been having relations with a colored soldier. I went to the priory and they advised me to divorce her. I did.

"The church was stupid and clumsy in my case. I have always been a true member of the church. I come from Erfurt and was nourished there with the mother's milk of Lutheranism.

"Our congregation depends on the willingness of the congregation to support it voluntarily. We are completely self-sufficient. The parish assembly and its council elected me. It is entirely democratic, not dictatorial. We have our own revenue office.

"Perhaps our congregation will go back to the State Church some day. We want to keep contact with them."

Listening to Pastor Götze's trenchant voice, watching his sharp chopping gestures and rolling eyes, one gets the impression of a tension such as Faust expressed: "Two souls dwell, Oh, within my breast. The one wants to split from the other." A few minutes after finishing his personal history, Pastor Götze said something that hinted at such a tension. He said: "Hitler was dumb and clumsy. He could have won - could have done whatever he wanted if he had played it right. He should have had a Jewish foreign minister."

Pastor Paul Zipp had a tough assignment in taking over the regular Lukasgemeinde after Götze's splinter group had drawn away some 2,000 members. But he put his shoulder into it, and his congregation now numbers 6,000 again. The 48-year-old Zipp is a native of Wiesbaden, where his father was a bank director. He has short-clipped gray hair, a wide mouth, several chins, and a sunny disposition.

After his studies at Tübingen, Marburg, and Berlin, Zipp was called to a parish at Bodenheim in the Catholic Rhineland area. "I've liked working in the diaspora ever since," he said. In 1934 he joined the Confessional Church and in the same year was dismissed from his pastorate by the Nazis. "I refused to be dismissed," he says. "The Nazis cut off my pay then so I went to eat with people in the village and stayed in their homes." Next year the Gestapo chucked him out of the Rhineland and into prison to cool him off. Meanwhile his Bodenheim congregation had been taken over by a Deutsch Christen pastor. Zipp went to Herbstein, another diaspora village in the Vogelsberg district southeast of here. He was drafted into the Luftwaffe and served until 1945. After the war he was pastor in a P. O. W. camp. Zipp returned to Herbstein at the end of 1945 to resume his ministry and stayed until he was called to Giessen in 1950. These are some of his observations on church and state in the present:

"Church attendance in rural areas is declining markedly - probably because the countryside has felt the impact of the materialization of society more than the cities. Religiosity has received a shock. But attendance in the city is growing, especially among the youth.

"The church in the East Zone is under constant pressure. But spiritually they are stronger. We have money, work, and freedom here and we don't treasure our privileges so much. Our spirit is getting more and more materialistic. The power of the East German faithful has already shown itself in our church conferences with them. The church remains the only unifying factor between East and West (Germany) right now. It is good there is still communication between us. We send them money, and they send us their spirit.

"What to do about materialism? It begins with the car and the radio. You just can't go against the tide. But I tell my congregation that materialism is a pagan religion."

Pastor Zipp has a heavy schedule of activities. He does a lot of visitation work - ministering to members of his congregation who have troubles. Usually this means advice on family and school problems. But other difficulties come to the pastor too. Not long ago one parishoner asked Zipp to find a husband for his daughter. Zipp did. The daughter married. Then the parishoner complained the husband was too old.

In addition to his ministerial work, Zipp is chairman of the Gustav Adolph Association, an organization that collects money to support Evangelical churches in areas where Lutherans are in the minority. "This is my hobby," he says. "If I had the choice I would go into the diaspora again myself. It's more of a challenge." Zipp also does a lot of youth work. His confirmation classes are popular because, as one student put it, "He knows the world and he has his feet on the ground."

Zipp is in charge of the Y.M.C.A. groups for his parish and two others. He has an exuberant assistant who runs these groups, young Siegfried Kurschgen, a heart-voiced, curly-haired man who wears knickers and knee-socks. Here as in most parts of Germany, the Y.M.C.A. is run through the church parishes. At a "Y" meeting last week, Kurschgen had the 14 to 17-year-old group sing songs, play a word game, and discuss a Bible passage. Three guitarists accompanied the singing of this number: "We are climbing the dizzy heights, climbing to the peak. In our hearts a yearning burns that never lets us rest. Beautiful mountains, sunny heights, mountain vagabonds are we. Yes! With rope and pick we dare everything on the steep headwall, hearts are glowing, edelweiss is blooming; as the Alps glow red in the sunset we head homeward. But we will come again, for we are brothers, brothers in life and death." Other songs had a slightly militant twist to them.

As the administrative center for Upper Hesse, Giessen contains a number of church institutions.

The Prior, Rev. Wilhelm Weinberger, has charge of 220 ministers in this area. He is one of six priors elected by the State Synod for a 6-year term. Weinberger's main duty is to handle the problems of individual deacons. His is the clearinghouse for appointment of new ministers, retirement of the old, and replacement of the ill. Nearly every weekend he travels about the area to participate in ordaining of new ministers or consecrating new churches. Once a week he meets with the other priors in Darmstadt. Weinberger is a soft-voiced man with a thin face and a high forehead. He is 58. A minister in Darmstadt for 17 years, he was called to the prior here in 1950. During the Nazi period he was active in the Confessional Church as a member of the Darmstadt area church council. For this he was slapped in jail by the Gestapo in 1937 and subjected to many house searches after his release.

The director of the Minister's Office for Giessen is Dr. Alfred Trommershausen, a portly, moon-faced man with a broad smile. His office collects a head tax from the area's Lutherans which pays for utilities and personnel in the local churches. The tax amounts to about \$2 per family annually.

The 47-year-old Trommershausen is also the Giessen clinic pastor. As such he has charge of ministering to some 3,000 patients in the various local hospitals. He holds worship services every Sunday in the Mental Hospital chapel. Assisting him in the clinic work are an assistant pastor and a Vikarin (female vicar).

The only Giessen minister with a doctor's degree, Pastor Trommershausen is something of a theologian. He studied under Paul Tillich at Frankfurt before the war and wrote a dissertation on "The Problem of Theological Anthropology." He agrees with Pastor Zipp that there are, roughly speaking, three kinds of Lutheran preachers today - the Pietist who sticks strictly to the Bible, the Confessional Church minister who draws on the Bible to interpret modern problems, and the "free" preacher who makes liberal use of sources other than the Bible for his sermons. Trommershausen says most of the local ministers are of the Confessional variety. Trommershausen himself was not a member of the Confessional Church, but the Nazis bounced him out of his job teaching at Giessen University anyway, as a "political opponent". Ironically, he was taken into the Wehrmacht soon after as a chaplain. As for modern trends in the Evangelical Church, Dr. Trommershausen says theologians are going back to the Reformers for new inspiration.

The Catachetical Office in Giessen is one of seven in Hesse. Through it the religious education of the area is administered. The director, Rev. Heinz Becker, supervises the workshops and conferences which train Upper Hesse's 1,200 religion teachers. Becker also inspects area schools to see that religion teaching is up to par, works on the State's religious textbook committee, and takes part in drawing up Hesse's education plans. Becker is an energetic 43-year-old with gray hair and snapping brown eyes. He was tossed in a Gestapo jail at Mainz in 1943 for preaching against Nazi Party leaders. He was banned from Hesse then, but allowed to preach in Württemberg. The Catachetical Office is something new in Germany. It was begun two years after the war in Hesse. The suppression of religious instruction by the Nazis was the main cause for increasing emphasis on it after 1945. Becker is enthusiastic in his support of the idea that the future of German Lutheranism lies in German youth.

If you want a taste of that "old time religion," you can get that in Giessen too, within the bounds of the Evangelical Church. The Stadtmission (City Mission), while independent of the State Church Board, is nevertheless an arm of the Lutheran Church. It belongs to a division called Innere Mission (Interior Mission).

In the words of its director, the Stadtmission has the function of "bringing estranged Christians back to the fold - like your Billy Graham." The director, 74-year-old Karl Peters, also runs a religious book publishing firm and a book store here. He is responsible to a parent organization, The St. Chrischona Mission, which has its headquarters in Southern Germany. This organization, founded in 1840, is firmly based on the Pietist tradition in the Evangelical Church. Its emphasis is on such Biblical fundamentals as the virgin birth, the concept of rebirth in baptism, and all the miracles. "We believe," said Peters, "that Communism and everything else came out of the liberal straying away from these fundamentals in the last century."

Since 1878, the Stadtmission has been working here in Giessen to revitalize fundamentalism. Its means are an evangelist newspaper, "Upwards," and its preacher, a young man who was trained for four years by St. Chrischona. He runs a Sunday School, "Youth for Christ" groups,

Bible hours, and summer tent missions. The Mission has about 150 regular members. Peters, a quiet man with a tooth-brush mustache, beard, and big eyebrows, observes that, "Some pastors look upon us as competition. But we are not. We only supplement their work." The Nazis were especially hard on evangelist organizations like this one. They forbade them to take up collections, closed the publishing house, banned the newspaper, and threw some St. Chrischona ministers in concentration camps.

The one Lutheran leader who appears in every conversation with Giessen's ministers is Martin Niemöller, the intrepid 65-year-old churchman who led the Evangelical opposition to State Control by the Nazi Party. All Giessen's ministers know him. Most respect him. Many like him. In a sense he is the conscience of Germany. Niemöller is an outspoken liberal - so much so that his best friends sometimes regret his declarations on current events. One recent instance was his assertion that Germany will probably have to give up the idea of recovering its lost areas beyond the Oder-Neisse Line. This caused a storm of violent protests from refugee and exile groups which culminated in the claim by one exile leader that Niemöller was a Communist agent. The Church President is suing for slander. Here is what some Giessen ministers have to say about Niemöller and his latest controversy:

Weinberger--"When he says something he means it. The trouble was his enemies took the statement out of its context."

Trommershausen--"His statement strikes the matter in the core."

Zipp--"He is absolutely right, but perhaps a little inept. He said it to make the Western powers take a position on the border question."

Götze--"It angered and disappointed me."

Geissler--"Niemöller's attackers are primitives who are still dreaming of the old borders. This is a smokedream. They are yelling 'traitor' at him, but they are wrong. He is down to earth and sees realities. He doesn't bow to public opinion."

Schmidt--"He's a fabulous man. There's always something going on around him."

Another public issue which has caused controversy in church circles is the declaration of 18 German atom scientists that they refused to participate in the arming of the Federal Republic with nuclear weapons. Shortly after the scientists' declaration, a number of Evangelical churchmen, including Niemöller, announced they were also against nuclear weapons for Germany. Chancellor Adenauer hit back at the scientists immediately and hinted that they had political motives for their statement. These are the reactions of local ministers to the ensuing controversy:

Bernbeck--"It is a terrible thing that anyone who differs with Bonn is immediately labeled a messenger from Moscow. I agree with the scientists. I don't think the Government behaved well in assailing them. As for the weapons - Daniel trusted in the Lord, but he didn't tramp on the lion's tail. Nuclear weapons here would be tramping on the Russian's tail."

Weinberger--"The division of Germany will only be deepened by atomic armament."

Becker--"I sensed the scientists' great resignation about the arms race. I feel it too."

Schmidt--"I can't think that others should have atomic weapons and we not have them."

Giessen's ministers are divided on the subject of the new Bonn Army. Probst Weinberger and Pastor Geissler are dead set against the remilitarization of west Germany. They call it "nonsense," a "crime," and "completely crazy." Pastor Bernbeck recalled a Biblical tale and said: "If one is in danger of a bandit attack on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, then guards must be posted. If that's enough to keep them away, well and good. If the robbers come despite the watchmen, then the guards must know how to shoot. They can't be in the situation of asking the bandits "please will you show me how to use this weapon." Another pastor, Paul Zipp, told an anecdote about Niemöller. According to the story, Niemöller was called in one day by U. S. High Commissioner John McCloy. The Commissioner was puzzled by Niemöller's controversial actions, especially his trips to Washington and Moscow. He asked the churchmen in effect: "What the heck are you up to?" Niemöller replied with the story of his aunt in Munich who found a couple of Communist rioters setting up a machinegun in her garden during the turbulent street-fighting days in the Twenties. She tapped one on the shoulder with her cane and said: "Go ahead and shoot if you want to, but please not on my premises." That, said Niemöller, is what he felt about the United States and the Soviet Union - go ahead and shoot if you want to, but not on my premises.

The final question on the lips of Lutheran churchmen here and in the rest of Germany is that of church freedom.

Says Pastor Bernbeck: "We are still strongly dependent on the State, for our finances at least. It is still a question whether we will be freer in the future." And Pastor Geissler agrees, "Our churches are not as free as yours. The break between church and state was begun in 1938 but there are still a lot of ties."

However, these ministers are in accordance that the way to greater church freedom does not lie on the track of Pastor Götze. To them, Götze is a puppet, completely dependent on his congregation; thus possessing less freedom of action than those in the State Church. As Pastor Lipp puts it, "I can say what I please in my church. He can't."

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