

For the Life of the World

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Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich

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“Where is the Lutheran Cathed

In Berlin, the “world’s capital of modern atheism,” as Peter L. Berger has called it, only 30 percent of the population still belong to a Christian Church at all, and about 4 percent worship regularly.



We hear this question sometimes asked by groups from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod coming to Berlin. Is Germany not the land of the Reformation, and are not all Germans Lutherans just by birth? No, they are not. The monstrous Berlin Cathedral is not a Lutheran cathedral but the embodiment of the theology of the Prussian Union: The bishop of this church was the German Emperor, and in the dome of the Cathedral you will find the statues of Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and Zwingli unanimously looking at each other. The Lutheran church buildings in Berlin and in Germany altogether are much smaller: The Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK) (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church), the sister church of the LCMS, has just 36,000 members in about two hundred congregations spread all over Germany. In the nineteenth century, the Prussian king, being himself a Calvinist, forced all Lutherans to join his “united” church. Those Lutherans who refused to accept this Prussian Union were persecuted, until King Friedrich Wilhelm IV allowed them to establish an independent church and to erect their own church buildings. After the Second World War, the remaining Lutheran Territorial Churches in Germany (e.g., in Bavaria) joined the United Protestant Churches in Germany, now forming a unified United Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), although some of them still call themselves Lutheran.

In Berlin, the “world’s capital of modern atheism,” as Peter L. Berger has called it, only 30 percent of the population still belong to a Christian Church at all, and about 4 percent worship regularly. There are eight SELK churches in Berlin with about 2,500 members altogether.

St. Mary’s Lutheran Church in Berlin-Zehlendorf is one of the youngest SELK churches in Berlin. The congregation was founded in 1961. Rev. Dr. Jobst Schöne, who later served as the bishop of the SELK, was the first pastor in St. Mary’s for twenty-five years. In 1973, the new

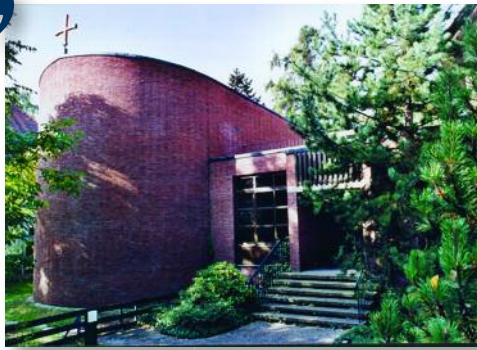
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church building was consecrated. When I became a pastor at St. Mary's in 1991, the congregation had about two hundred members. During the following years, we started mission work among Russian speaking migrants in Berlin, whose ancestors had lived in the German Wolga Republic in the Soviet Union and were deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia during the Second World War.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, about one million Russian Germans have moved to Germany. Most of them have almost no idea of Christianity anymore. A couple of weeks ago, we started a new mission project among Muslim refugees from Iran here at St. Mary's. Meanwhile, we have more than eight hundred members in our congregation. As the membership of most other churches here in Berlin is decreasing, this growth is rather unusual. We do not believe in any church growth concepts. Church growth takes place in our congregation just by Word and Sacrament. We celebrate at least two or three services with Holy Communion and with a rich liturgy every week. The members of our congregation could not imagine a Sunday service without the distribution of the body and blood of our Lord. They regularly invite relatives and friends to come to our church as well. Thus it is one of my main tasks to baptize and to teach those who come according to St. Matthew 28.

There are also many former members of the Protestant Territorial Church who have joined our congregation during the last decades. They had been looking for a church in which the Gospel is clearly preached, in which the Bible as God's Word is not questioned but trusted, and in which the worship services are not degenerated to happenings or political events. Nevertheless it has been hard for many new members of our congregation to leave the Protestant Church. The German mentality says: When you leave the Protestant Church, you leave "the Church" and join a sect. Yet millions of Germans have left the Protestant Church during the last decades in order to save church tax, which is collected by the State for the Territorial Churches. Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church is larger in Germany than the Protestant Church.



Here at St. Mary's we are grateful for our SELK bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt, who has a clear theological stance. And we are grateful for the manifold connections to confessional Lutheran sister churches all over the world: We have close connections to the Lutheran Church in Latvia; a Mongolian woman who was baptized in our church is now active in a Lutheran mission congregation in Ulaanbaatar. There are also connections to the Lutheran Church of Madagascar. The sermons that are preached in our church are sent by e-mail to Lutherans in many different countries all over the world. Most important to us is, of course, the connection to the LCMS. I am very grateful that I was allowed to study at Concordia Theological Seminary in 1983–84. I learned systematics from the late Professors Robert Preus and Kurt Marquart, exegesis from Dr. Dean Wenthe and Dr. David Scaer, and learned how to preach from Dr. Gerhard Aho.

That year in Fort Wayne has been extremely important to me. Thus I have been glad to have two students from Fort Wayne as vicars in our congregation during the last years: Jacob Corzine and Jacob Gaugert. We are looking forward to welcoming Jacob Corzine back here at St. Mary's in September, when he will start to write his doctoral dissertation here in Berlin. And we are always grateful when visitors from the LCMS do not just look for allegedly "Lutheran cathedrals" (and even worship there!), but for their sister church, for a church where the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are distributed according to Christ's institution. That is what counts in a church and here in Germany as well.

For further information: Look at www.selk.de and www.lutherisch.de 

Rev. Gottfried Martens is pastor of St. Mary's Lutheran Church in Berlin-Zehlendorf, Germany.

