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A MOVEMENT IS BORN: CHURCH GROWTH BEGINNINGS IN AN OLD CHURCH IN GERMANY

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A new approach must be discovered to break old, encrusted traditions which have kept the church in a "Babylonian captivity." Lack of spiritual vitality and creativity have stifled attempts to inject new life into the church. Unfortunately, the influx of missionary personnel into the European scene has not produced the breakthrough it hoped to accomplish. Mission societies have failed to be the change agents they wanted to be. This is principally due to the failure to understand the historical and cultural context, as well as the theological complexities of the German situation.

Yet, there are the stirrings of hope that things are beginning to move forward in this old, established church. In recent years, totally independent of Donald McGavran's and Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission, a German approach to Church Growth appeared on the scene. Notably, the emergence of Superintendent Fritz Schwarz provided the necessary impetus for a German approach to Church Growth. His writings, coupled with the practical application of these concepts through Fuller-trained personnel, contributed in a substantial way to awaken church leadership to new approaches.

At the same time, the charismatic renewal movement under the dynamic leadership of Pastor Wolfram Kopfermann in Hamburg, gained increasing importance. Repeated conferences conducted by John Wimber in Germany produced front-page headlines and strong theological debate.

This marks the beginnings of a new movement which has the potential of ushering in the renewal so desperately needed and a new track of evangelism within a nominal setting. Everything is still in its infant stages and very much in flux. But one can observe that the status quo has been jolted and things are beginning to move.

These evident signs on the spiritual horizon, at the present time, give hope that this indeed might be God's time of visitation for Germany.

The Need For A New Approach

Donald McGavran, who is commonly considered the father of the Church Growth Movement, seems to think that renewal of the church in Germany is not enough. He calls for the creation of "multitudes" of new congregations. In his definitive tome *Understanding Church Growth*, viewed by his spiritual heir and successor Peter Wagner as the "Magna Carta of the Church Growth Movement", McGavran observes:

In Europe, however, with its entrenched State Churches, what church growth means is not yet clear. The State Churches appear to believe that nothing more than renewal is called for. The population is already "Christian", i.e., baptized. I myself am inclined to believe that renewal is not enough. Only the creation of multitudes of new vital congregations (either within or without the State denominations) will reconvert the myriads of European Christo-pagans. Much thought should be given to this.¹

While church growth strategies and concepts have emerged in fairly clear patterns for Third World Countries, and in the past decade for North America as well, this is not true in Europe. We are indeed dealing with a heavily traditional and entrenched "state church".² In popular view, to be a Christian in Germany is as much a cultural issue as it is a religious matter. Obviously, new ways must be discovered to cope with this challenge.

In a recently published nation-wide survey of the EKD (Protestant Church of Germany), statistics revealed that in the past ten years (1974-1984) more

¹Donald McGavran. *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, p.262

²The established church in Germany is not, in the strict sense of the word, a state church. Actually it is a "Volkskirche", which is officially sanctioned, but not government controlled.

than 1.5 million members had officially severed themselves from church membership. This growing trend was all the more alarming in view of the official statement, that "there are at this stage roughly another 4.6 million church members over 14 years of age who already have one foot outside of the church."³

At the same time, Sunday morning church attendance in the Protestant church has declined by approximately fifty percent since 1969. This should place Germany, with less than twenty percent of regular worshippers, within the ranks of "unreached peoples", according to the definition of the Lausanne Committee. In other words, Germany, the land of the Reformation, has indeed become a mission field.

Fritz Schwarz queried: "Since when has Germany *not* been a mission field?" This provocative question by a leading churchman, a few years before his untimely death, received public attention in an article published by *Gemeindegewachstum*, the German church growth publication.⁴ Schwarz, an EKD church superintendent for some 20 years in the heavily populated Ruhr Valley, heartland of German industrialism, emerged in the early 1980's as the chief spokesman for the German church growth movement. Here, and in general, he made no apologies to his German peers. As any student of church history well knew, argued Schwarz, from Constantinian times to the present, the organized church has *never* recognized "building the body of Christ" as its foremost task. Christianization and churchianity sufficed in that these allowed the church her full exercise of temporal powers. Naturally, in those days, expansionism was the policy of the church, whereas now, the church is primarily content with mere maintenance if not survival.

Consequently, for many in the EKD, nearly everything revolves around questions dealing with church stability and the regaining of past position and power. One hears: How can the church be made attractive again? How can we get more people to attend services? How do we ensure the next generation's financial support for the church? How stable is the church?

Schwarz came through loud and clear:

It is not primarily my intention to save the church. I am not interested in the church regaining power and public influence. I am interested in other questions: How can Jesus come to his rightful place in our day and age? When I look into the New Testament, I see that the real

³Johannes Hanselmann et al. *Was wird aus der Kirche*. Gutersloh: Gutersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1984.

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⁴*Gemeindegewachstum*, Issue 15. No. 4, 1983. p. 2

issue is whether men and women come to faith and are saved through establishing a personal relationship with Jesus. And that because of this personal relationship with Christ they enter into a fellowship with sisters and brothers and express their faith by lovingly reaching out to a lost world.⁵

Here it is evident that for Fritz Schwarz and a growing number of pastors he has influenced, a clear-cut distinction was being made between the church as institution (kirche) and the Body of Christ (ekklesia). Where this distinction has disappeared, nominality has resulted and a clarion call needs to be sounded once again to define the message of the "simple gospel" (Das Einfache Evangelium). Obviously, renewal must take place. The question is, renewal of what? Howard Snyder feels that

a general principle for highly institutionalized churches is that institutional renewal must accompany personal renewal. Where this is not possible, or where the official guardians of the institution will not permit it, the old institution may have to be abandoned and new structures formed. There are times when old wineskins must be replaced by new ones. This has occurred repeatedly in church history.⁶

I am sure that along with Fritz Schwarz and his German colleagues, missionaries serving in Germany today do not sense a calling to renew the structure of the established church. It is not our business to save the church and by saving it to re-establish its power and influence. No, the basic concern must ever be to see that men and women are reconciled to God through the clear proclamation of the Good News and thus brought into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Why Missions Have Failed To Be Change Agents

In a pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the American Missionary Presence in Western Europe*, Arthur Glasser depicts various models which

⁵Fritz Schwarz. *idea Dokumentation*. Nr24, 1983. p.3

have been attempted by American missionaries to act as change agents in Europe. He describes them as follows:

The first is parochial. This type is carried out in much the same fashion as in America. The denomination desirous of extending its structures into Europe consults no one. Its brand of church-cum-theology is introduced whether or not it is suited or meaningful to the local cultures. After planting a few struggling congregations, a branch of its American seminary is established...⁷

Glasser maintains that Europeans with a measure of understanding of the American penchant for denominationalism are somewhat resigned to this invasion. If they had their "druthers" however, they would wish that Americans would leave it to the Europeans to found their own denominations.

One of Germany's key Baptist leaders admitted several years ago that while Americans had expended hundreds of thousands of dollars and the labors of scores of missionaries since World War II, no significant success had been achieved. A missionary put it more bluntly: "I firmly believe the whole missionary enterprise in Europe is 'spinning its wheels'!" While I don't agree with this statement, it does alert us to the need of evaluating and re-examining missionary strategy.

Perhaps, one of the key reasons for this "present ill-conceived strategy" can be found exactly in the deliberate attempt to bypass the existing state church and establish their "own brand" of churches bearing a strong MADE IN USA imprint. In doing so, a cardinal principle of church growth has been violated and at the same time vindicated: People do not like to cross cultural barriers in order to become Christians. To leave their own traditional and cultural "church homes" and attach themselves to an American "import model" has been too high a barrier for all but a few. It is questionable, how many Americans, if the roles were reversed, would give up apple pie, ice-cream and Monday night football in order to join a new church!

Another model mentioned by Glasser is that of the "independents", the members of non-denominational "faith" organizations. Accordingly,

some call themselves "church planters". Others speak of their "youth ministries", their "man-to-man" discipleship training programs, their network of Bible schools. Their approach to the European scene is

more subtle. They contact evangelical churches with the generous offer: "We want to help you, we want to serve you." Initially, many friendly evangelical doors opened to them. But by now European evangelicals have become somewhat wary. They have discovered that eventually these Americans introduce and promote well-worked-out programs that allegedly transformed American churches. And the friendly national churches then find that they have been cultivated so that they might adopt these "package-deal" programs and swing into line behind the aggressive Americans!⁸

Glasser's analysis might seem blunt and overstated. But it certainly echoes a personal experience I encountered when I first went to Germany in 1981 and met with one of the most influential evangelicals in the country to discuss the possibility of opening a new field of service for Overseas Crusades. Politely, yet firmly, I was told: "Herr Wilhelm, we have an abundance of American religious organizations in Germany. What do you have to offer, that they don't? What are you trying to sell? Do you have a specialized program you want to offer?" It was only after repeated assurances that OC had no pre-packaged program, in fact, that it would be presumptuous for a foreign mission to tell Germans how to evangelize their own nation, etc. that this German brother relented.

When he did indeed hear that the purpose was to send a missionary team to work with the evangelical movement in the established church and together discover means and ways to bring men and women to Christ, the whole tenor of the conversation took a radical turn. Warming up he said: "This is exactly what I was hoping you would say. You are a German and understand us. You will be amazed how many mission groups come in from the outside with program upon program and lots of advice on how to do the job. In fact, many Americans have answers even before they have heard the questions! We don't need more programs, but we do need people willing to serve. When can you come? I hope real soon..."

I have described this experience in order to underline the importance of the third model Arthur Glasser pin-points. It is a type of ministry confined to less than 10 percent of the many American missionaries currently working in Western Europe.

The focus of these missionaries is on the churches that already exist in Western Europe. They are convinced that unless these churches

become increasingly viable models of what the church should be and do, all seminary and Bible school teaching, all evangelistic outreach and all American-style para-church work is largely irrelevant. And the statistics are on their side!⁹

To the extent that mission agencies have ignored this third model, their effectiveness to act as change agents within the established church and the nation has been severely crippled. But missionaries, who have opted to go the route of ministering within and alongside the established church, have pursued a course which certainly has not enhanced their image among the majority of their fellow-missionaries. What are the reasons for this course they have taken?

1. *An historical perspective of God's activity.* God has been at work for centuries in building his church in Germany. The Reformation under Martin Luther was not the beginning, nor have post-World War II days attempts to evangelize been the final answer. To categorically state "it is impossible to reform a state church from within" correctly defines the degree of difficulty associated with such a task, but ignores God's sovereign workings in the past.

2. *A pragmatic consideration.* Since nine of ten Protestants hold membership in the EKD, it goes without saying that any ministry outside of this body is only peripheral in reaching the nation as a whole. A "whole-nation vision" demands that ministry be carried out where it impacts the largest concentration of people within a nation. Says Pastor Bernd Schlottoff: "If anyone is truly interested in evangelism, he should minister in the Protestant Church. That's where the people are."

3. *A rejection of unbiblical separatism.* There is a brand of American separatism, sad to say, which holds that if Christians don't agree with you, then you should withdraw from them - or better yet, start your own church! Missionaries working in Germany with the established church have had to make the deliberate choice not to cause fragmentation in the church by magnifying out of all proportion peripheral doctrinal differences.

4. *A recognition of an evangelical presence within the church.* One of Europe's best known American missionaries of the post-war period is Dr. Robert Evans, founder of the Greater Europe Mission. He observes in his book *Let Europe Hear*: "The fact that there are outstanding men of God and

dedicated laymen in... these Protestant circles demonstrates that God keeps a faithful remnant."¹⁰

It is true that many of these are suffering from an Elijah complex - "I'm the only one who is left" - because they are so isolated and feel so much in a minority. Yet, they have maintained their faith even while swimming up-stream against the system. And God has used them over the years to bring men and women to Himself.

What then is the strategy to be followed by those who are firmly committed to the fundamental principle that in the final analysis the evangelization of Germany - the evangelization of any nation - depends on the vitality of its own church? Few will deny that Germany needs evangelizing. The question is how? Where do we begin?

A German Approach To Church Growth: by Fritz and Christian Schwarz

Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus (1984, translated "Theology of Church Growth") represents a fully original and indigenous theology of church growth from a German perspective. This is all the more significant, since it does not reflect any acquaintance with or dependence on the worldwide church growth movement. Fritz Schwarz (1930 - 1985), earlier referred to as one of the leading spokesmen in Germany for church growth, along with his son Christian, interact in this study with recent German literature on ecclesiology in a hard hitting, provocative, even polemic manner. Referring to church growth theory and practice, they write:

Es ist bemerkenswert, dass an dieser Stelle in der deutschen theologischen Tradition ein absolutes Vakuum herrscht. Diese Thematik überlässt man weitestgehend der "evangelikalen" Literatur und da noch schwerpunkt-mässig den amerikanischen Importen. Der Beitrag der deutschen akademischen Theologie erschöpft sich oftmals darin, im Blick auf diese Literatur arrogant die Nase zu

rumpfen, weil sie im allgemeinen den Regeln der eigenen Zunft nicht entspricht.¹¹

The authors are not satisfied to accept this status quo and seek to demonstrate through this book, also subtitled *Ein Versuch (An Attempt)*, why and how church growth is the only hope for a dying "Volkskirche".

According to Kent Yinger, Schwarz's central thesis-the "kirche" (institutional church) cannot be identified with the "ekklesia" (Body of Christ) - is a call to this institution to return to its fundamental task: calling men and women to saving faith in Christ, fellowship with one another, and service to the world.¹² This might seem old hat to American evangelicals. However, for a German church long satisfied with baptized nominality, these words spell a revolution in thought and practice.

As an appropriate present for Martin Luther's 500th birthday, the authors introduced their convictions in 95 theses! In arguments much akin to Howard Snyder's, the institutional church is presented as merely a vehicle for (or sometimes against) the building of ekklesia. They contend, according to Yinger, that

German Christianity since, and including, Luther has failed uniformly to pursue biblical church growth, and largely due to this confusion of "Kirche" with "ekklesia". This is, however, no call to start establishing "Free" or independent churches in Germany (yet). Quite the contrary, the authors want to silence those who would say, "It is too hard, or impossible, to disciple Germany within the context of the established Church." They show instead that the possibilities for evangelism and church growth within this crumbling institution have never been greater.¹³

¹¹Fritz und Christian Schwarz. *Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus*, p. 263,264. "It is important to take note, that at this point, there is a complete vacuum in the German theological tradition. Such subjects are principally left to 'evangelical' literature, or more precisely to American imports. The only contribution of German academic theology is to arrogantly turn up its nose, because this does not fit the system."

¹²Kent Yinger. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No.1, January 1985, p. 109
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¹³*Ibid.*, p. 109