**Closure of Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany**

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The closure of empty churches and the resultant question of what to do with the relevant church buildings is currently a subject of public discussion in Germany. We accordingly organized a conference on the topic at the beginning of April which attracted 300 participants, less from specialist monument protection circles and more especially from the churches' lay movements who are concerned with this question. Let me start by making a few comments on the conditions that accompany this development, a development that is by no means at an end but that will be in evidence to an even greater extent in the future.

The demographic trend in Germany must assume that the population will shrink considerably. Admittedly, this does not apply to all areas of the economy because a growing population is still being forecast for metropolitan areas. By contrast, in a number of economically weak rural areas researchers are assuming a decline in population of 30 percent and more for the future. Alongside this general drop in population falling numbers of church members is another main factor causing problems.

In 2003, around 65 percent of the population was Christian, with almost equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants, i.e., around 26 million. The number of churches of both denominations is also approximately the same. There are 23,000 Protestant churches, as opposed to some 24,500 Catholic ones. This means that around 1,000 members need to provide for the upkeep of one church. However, due to the large number of people leaving the church numbers are constantly dwindling.

The number of people leaving the church is far higher than those joining it. The number of people resigning from the church reached a high point in 1992 after German unification, when 361,256 people ceded their membership of the Protestant church and 192,766 quit the Catholic church. On top of this, since the mid-1970s, more church members are buried than baptized.

In Germany, every church member contributes to financing the churches through his/her church tax which is collected by the state together with income tax. Falling numbers of members thus have a direct effect on churches' abilities to maintain their church buildings. Accordingly, the eight percent of the members of the Protestant church currently living in the eastern federal states have to pay for 40 percent of all the Protestant church buildings in Germany.

Another problem is the fact that a clear abandonment of church traditions is observable; baptism, communion and confirmation are no longer a matter of course. This is resulting in a secularization of society. The demand for church services and the liturgical use of church premises has declined considerably. On average, only four percent of Protestant Christians still attend Sunday services. Amongst Catholics, too, the average number of people receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion slid from 45.1 percent in 1965 to 14.8 percent in 2004. This means that houses of worship are much too large for today's congregations and that a much too small number of parishioners is having to pay for their upkeep.

Despite these dramatic figures, although the problem of these empty churches is much discussed at present, in practice it is not yet backed by similarly drastic figures relating to unused churches. Nonetheless, of the above figure of approx. 24,500 Catholic churches, 416 are currently no longer used for religious services. This corresponds to 1.7 percent of the total inventory. A mere 0.4 percent of these churches has been sold or demolished. However, falling income from church tax means that in the near future the problem will become considerably more acute.

The Diocese of Essen very recently hit the headlines in this respect: There were plans to close down 96 of its more than 300 churches, or almost one third of the total. This figure was the firm expression of a problem that has come to light particularly in post-War metropolitan areas. Shortly after the War, parishes grew very quickly through the accommodation of refugees and the accompanying conditions of economic growth. For example, since the Diocese of Essen was established in 1958 119 new churches have been erected there. Today, these churches in particular are no longer required for religious services. Firstly, the urban environment has changed so greatly due to immigration from non-Christian countries that there are hardly any Christians left living in the relevant districts of the city. Secondly, the membership of the relevant parishes has declined so dramatically as people have left the church and the existing population has continued to age that these parishes no longer have any members to speak of.

Another point is that the churches of the 1950s and 1960s in particular have been judged and found wanting because of the widespread negative attitude to the architecture of this period. In Germany, churches are not automatically considered monuments. For churches, the German

monument protection laws call for the same critical assessment of a building's suitability as a monument, i.e., criteria of urban planning, artistic, historical or scientific aspects, that is used for other categories of buildings. In general, the relevant inventory process and assessment of criteria has not yet been undertaken for the architecture of the 1950s and 1960s. Here, there is still a great deal of catching up to be done.

Normally, the continuity of use associated with church premises in the past is considered particularly favorable to their preservation. Through the institution of the church, stretching back as it does 2000 years, the premises erected for the purposes of worship has become a special kind of monument that should generally be more strongly protected from serious attacks than other monuments. In terms of monument protection, continuity of use is often considered desirable, a method quite likely to succeed in preserving buildings from change. However church premises in particular have now turned out to have undergone a transformation because of changes in people's ideas about religious services, leaving nothing the way it was.

The above applies equally to past centuries and to the very recent past. And we are all familiar with the way that after the liturgy reform of the Second Vatican Council historical regalia was removed from altars, pulpits and communion rails, as were many other objects, as part of a modernization presumed more fitting to the new liturgical requirements. Elements of this modernization often soon turned out to be too modish and dictated by the zeitgeist and are now being submitted to yet another reform. In Protestant churches, by contrast, a trend is to be observed for creating multifunctional community rooms. The following is taken from a Protestant church magazine: "No toilets, no foyer and no reasonable way

of heating it sometimes makes the church itself almost unusable for meetings between parishioners and for an environment appropriate for human requirements." The opinion of this parish pastor no doubt represents an extreme example. But when historical church buildings are perceived as an "unsuitable straitjacket" the question occurs as to whether the resulting adaptation of sacred premises to make them more like multifunctional community rooms does not mean divesting them of their meaning. Equipping historical churches with cafeteria chairs, Ikea shelving, pin boards and the like devalues these special places and destroys the significance of major elements of their accoutrements.

In my opinion, this kind of trend cannot be desirable, either for official monument conservators or for the representatives of the church. After all, it is not only parts of their accoutrements and the artistic coherency that get lost. The painful loss of sacredness is more distressing than it makes the church attractive to people. Today, we must regrettably recognize the fact that the kind of well-informed care of the church's inventory of art that was once a matter of course for the holder of the pastor's office can no longer be expected. I could give you a whole string of examples illustrating how essential elements of the accoutrements or even entire spatial coherences fall by the wayside because of the relevant parishes' new ideas of religious services.

Despite these critical comments about the destruction of historical spatial coherences in churches not for liturgical reasons but because of modern notions of space, it should be noted that continuity of use at least results in an authentic preservation of the intangible Christian legacy associated with the church. Authenticity is of course not only a matter of material substance.

This being the case, the special nature of churches also gives rise to requirements regarding possible future uses. With few exceptions, the monument protection laws of the German federal states also stipulate that changes of use require the authorization of the monument protection authorities. In the case of churches however, the points at issue are not only the substance and the appearance of the monument but also, and to an equal extent, the reconcilability of use with the dignity of the location.

The churches of the two large Christian denominations have stated their positions regarding the question of extended or new use by issuing memoranda. However, basically, it is assumed that churches are a sign of general social acceptance of religion, as theologian Thomas Erne put it. His demand, that simultaneously represents a demand by churches in general, is thus as follows: churches, as effective symbols, i.e., as buildings in religious use, should be preserved. And, as the German Bishops' Conference has formulated it, they must not "run contrary to the character of the building." Any new uses must be compatible with the religious function of the churches themselves. Consequently, in the case of any changes of use, special uses by the church will be seen as most eminently appropriate, for example, city churches, youth churches or, something that has now been implemented at three locations, columbaria (St. Joseph in Aachen, St. Konrad in Marl-Hüls and Allerheiligenkirche in Erfurt).

In cases where church buildings have become too large, changes of use for parts of the church are also seen as one possible alternative. Here, priority is given to uses incorporating functions closely connected with

the parish such as use as a parish hall, parish library or something similar. As a rule, side rooms are separated off vertically for such uses. The church function is preserved in the main room and is continued.

Today, both of Germany's major Christian confessions view the possibility of handing over such premises to other Christian religious communities as an alternative. Whereas giving up a church to Jewish communities for use as synagogues is acceptable, specific transference to Islamic religious communities or to other non-Christian ones is not.

Interestingly, in cases where churches surrender their function and possible new, non-ecclesiastical uses are looked for, statements made by the church on the subject coincide with public opinion. That was the result of an opinion poll conducted by research institute Emnid in 2001.

A hierarchy of possible new and additional uses for churches outside ecclesiastical ones can be derived from this opinion poll. Accordingly, cultural use in the broadest sense such as for concert houses, theater auditoriums, museums, exhibition halls or libraries, has been implemented in various cases and positively received. The large, undivided hall area of churches does accommodate this kind of use. Often, no structural changes are necessary, particularly when the church in question has not been used as such for a long time. This is true, for example, of the convent churches stripped of their ecclesiastical functions at the beginning of the 19th century as part of a secularization process.

Other private or commercial uses, such as for department stores, gymnasiums, restaurants, supermarkets, apartments or offices only

occur in isolated cases in Germany. Such uses tend to be viewed critically because only seldom do the buildings in question succeed in marrying the clearly symbolic character of the church with an appropriate usage. The palm tree on the pulpit in the former church "Don Camillo und Peppone" in North Hessen alienates the visitor, who expects a pastor there.

It is often difficult to find an adequate non-ecclesiastical use for a church. We monument conservators are shocked however, when, if church is no longer used for religious purposes, people prefer to demolish it rather than preserving it by simply leaving it standing. I would just like to remind you how many church buildings, having lost their religious status, have been used as stalls, repositories, lunatic asylums or factories and how many are now once again used as churches or have been accorded another appropriate use. The buildings that have been victims of destruction, by contrast, are sorely missed by us. Accordingly, the rule established by the Council of Protestant Churches in Germany in 2004 "Pulling down churches is preferable to giving them over to other uses of that damage our image" was the subject of criticism from the German monument conservators. It was, however, taken back by Protestant Bishop Wolfgang Huber as long ago as the 25th Protestant Church Building Conference in Stuttgart in 2005. The rule Huber laid out there was "Rather ruined churches than a 'slate wiped clean'". Architecture critic Wolfgang Pehnt took up this rule and formulated the following: "Ruins bind memory for a long time. Memory in the face of something that is damaged but still there is without doubt better than losing it altogether and soon forgetting about it." We must agree with this unreservedly.

There are repeated examples of how people can be galvanized by church premises that happen to be unused but have been secured from harm, how they act as historical reminders for lengthy periods of time and of how their symbolic significance can be interpreted thanks to the clarity of their architectural dimensions. Independent of people's adherence to a particular denomination, they see a church building, even one situated on the outskirts of a particular community, as a common symbol of the village as a unit. The solidarity generated in taking the initiative to preserve it strengthens this community and brings people together. Unlike any other kind of monument, churches are able to provoke the preservation instinct.

Accordingly, campaigns such as that by the German Monument Protection Foundation to save old village churches have elicited an unexpected generosity. There is now a special church buildings foundation looking after village churches in the eastern part of Germany in particular.

The fact that there is now an increasing number of associations of people coming together when churches require construction work is a hopeful sign. And the fact that the institution of the church is withdrawing from maintaining all church buildings can represent an opportunity if we succeed in mobilizing within the population the wish to preserve these buildings and thus bring people to see monument preservation as a general public responsibility.