

## **Creation of an International Network for the preservation and use of endangered religious buildings**

**In the 1960s and 1970s in several countries redundant churches in particular posed a major problem: in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, to a certain extent in West Germany, more so in East Germany, in North America ...Redundancy was a result of different causes in different countries, mainly as a result of shrinking congregations in cities and in the countryside, but also in countries where church authorities were then rich (West Germany) or congregations large and strong (Republic of Ireland, after 1975 also in Poland) building new churches left some old ones empty and even open for demolition (see “Redundant Religious Buildings”, Report of the Committee on Culture and Education, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Doc. 6032, Strasbourg 1989, English and French versions available on website of Future for Religious Heritage: [www.futurereligiousheritage.eu](http://www.futurereligiousheritage.eu) under “Resources/Articles”).**

**In England the Historic Churches Preservation Trust had already been founded in 1952 for the better preservation of Anglican churches in use, in 1957 the association “Friends of Friendless Churches” for preserving important redundant Anglican churches. A prime mover was the former M.P. and junior Minister in the Labour Government 1945-1950, Ivor Bulmer-Thomas. Bulmer-Thomas was instrumental in leading a campaign which eventually resulted in legislation of the Church of England and Parliament, creating the Redundant Churches Fund and the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches in 1969/70. At around the same time trusts began to be founded in the Netherlands to save important redundant or underused churches, the most important being the Stichting Oude Kerken Groningen, founded in 1969. In France the organization “Sauvegarde de l’art Francais” gave grants to save endangered churches and chapels. In West Germany in Hessen, where there were many redundant churches, especially timber-framed buildings, the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen e.V. with its seat in Marburg was founded in 1973 to stop demolition of churches in danger, find possible cultural uses for them and if necessary take them in to its possession.**

**The year 1975 which saw the campaign for the European Architectural Heritage (commonly referred to as European Architectural Heritage Year), organized by the Council of Europe (Strasbourg) and the Civic Trust(England) together with Europa Nostra under Lord Duncan Sandys, saw first movements to bring experts and interested organizations and persons together to discuss common problems of the preservation of endangered, in particularly redundant churches in Europe and in North America. A first start was made by the First International Conference on**

**the Challenge of Underused Church property and the Search for Alternatives, held 13-14 May 1975 in Trinity Church, New York City (proceedings published 1975 by the Chiswick Center, Cambridge/Mass.).**

**The Förderkreis Alte Kirchen took an active part in events within the Architectural Heritage Year, in Germany and also at the Amsterdam Conference of Europa Nostra, becoming a member in 1978 and for a long time the only member organization concerned solely with the preservation of churches. The Förderkreis used the events in 1975 in particular to discover other organizations and institutions working to save churches in danger (for instance also in French-speaking areas in Canada). At that time the Förderkreis had close connections with the Institut für Kirchenbau und kirchliche Kunst der Gegenwart (Institute for Church Building and Contemporary Church Art), led by Professor Rainer Volp, who was Honorary President of the Förderkreis, at the University of Marburg. Already in 1974 the Förderkreis took an active part in an excursion, organized by the Marburg Institut für Kirchenbau, to see churches in Thuringia across the border in East Germany. The Marburg Institute traditionally had close links to similar Institutes at the University of Birmingham and in particular at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, led by Regnerus Steensma, so that contacts soon developed with the Stichting Oude Kerken Groningen and other similar trusts in The Netherlands. Members of the Förderkreis visited London and established contacts with the Friends of Friendless Churches, the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches, the Redundant Churches Fund and also the Council for the Care of Churches of the Church of England, whose Secretary was then Peter Burman. Through the French founder of the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen, Jean Chanel, contact was established with the “Sauvegarde de l’Art Francais”. Most of these organizations were NGOs. The Marburger Förderkreis had few and difficult contacts with official church authorities in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, after all it was the church authorities who at this time were building new churches, abandoning old ones and wanted them demolished or transferred. Together with other NGOs and the liberal Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation the Förderkreis organized a major congress in Marburg in 1974 on the preservation of historic buildings, finally persuading the parliament (Landtag) of the Federal State of Hessen to pass the first effective conservation law of the present state of Hessen (created in 1945), helping greatly to protect endangered churches, but taking a long time to become really effective. The Förderkreis itself was already truly international, having as active members: a Frenchman as founder, two active American and Spanish ladies, and a British historian. In 1976 the Förderkreis published the first edition of its book “Fachwerkkirchen in Hessen” (Timber-framed Churches**

in Hessen) in the well-known architecture and art series “Die Blauen Bücher” (K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger H.K. Köster, Königstein/Ts.).

A further impetus for international contact was given in 1977 by the major exhibition “Change and Decay – A future for our Churches” in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, organized by Peter Burman and Marcus Binney. Through the contacts already established, the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen was able to make a contribution to the exhibition showing the problems of churches in Hessen and West Germany. The Förderkreis itself organized a first international meeting in Marburg at the Institute for Church Building at which Dutch representatives took part. In August 1977 the Förderkreis showed some of the problem churches in northern Hessen to Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, who was an active member of the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches, and had not been able to take part in the international meeting. Pevsner had already made possible a grant from the British Council to the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen for an excursion, organized by A. Fowler, to study timber-framed churches in England (resulting in a thesis by Ulrich Herborn for the University of Kassel).

In the 1970s and 1980s the organizations in Europe concerned with saving endangered churches were all very much concerned with their own problems and - as Ivor Bulmer-Thomas said, excusing attendance at the 1977 meeting in Marburg - had no time, money or personnel for such events. The Förderkreis Alte Kirchen, at this time also much concerned with its own pressing problems, nevertheless persisted in maintaining international contacts, particularly through Europa Nostra, urging Europa Nostra to organize an international event on the problem of endangered churches. The Stichting Oude Kerken Groningen developed links with the Norfolk Churches Trust in England and its Chairperson, Lady Harrod. In the 1980s the fate of former synagogues also attracted attention (the work of Thea Altaras/Giessen on the fate of synagogues in Hessen after 1945, eventually published in the series “Blaue Bücher”). Through Europa Nostra the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen developed contact with the Council of Europe, its Parliamentary Assembly and in particular with Christopher Grayson, Secretary of the Committee on Culture and Education and its Sub-Committee for the Architectural Heritage. At the Seville Conference of Europa Nostra in 1985 first thoughts developed for a report on redundant religious buildings in Europe. From 1985 to 1989 the research for this report was undertaken by A. Fowler with the help of Christopher Grayson and many informants in many countries in western and eastern Europe. Contacts with the Protestant Churches in East Germany were intensified at a conference held in 1985 at the Church Academy in Mühlheim/Ruhr. Study trips to Yugoslavia/Croatia and Hungary were undertaken. The report was presented in 1989 and together with the report by the Chairman

**of the Committee on Culture and Education, the Italian politician, Pino Rauti, in particular on problems in Italy and discussion of the issues there, was debated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in the course of its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 9 May 1989, resulting in the Resolution 916 (1989) on Redundant Religious Buildings.**

**The events in 1989/1990 opened the way for closer contacts with central and eastern Europe. With the help and model of the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen a working group for wooden churches in Poland with the name “Kochajmy koscioly drewniane” (“Let’s Love Wooden Churches”) was founded under the leadership of the Polish expert, Prof. Marian Kornecki, by members of the Polish Association of Art and Architectural Historians in Krakow. In eastern Germany, united with West Germany since 3 October 1990, Förderkreise Alte Kirchen were founded in Berlin-Brandenburg (May 1990) and Thuringia (June 1990), later also in Mecklenburg and Saxony. However today only the FAK Berlin-Brandenburg survives as a particularly active organization. In Berlin a first conference on “Neue Nutzungen für alte Kirchen” (New Uses for Old Churches), organized by the Evangelische Kirche (Protestant Church) in Berlin-Brandenburg (West) and the Senate of West Berlin, had already taken place in 1987. Under the chairmanship of A. Fowler from 1996 better contacts with church and state authorities in Berlin-Brandenburg were developed. The programme of the Church of Sweden, “Vägkyrkan” (Wayside Churches), for developing cultural tourism to churches in isolated regions, served as a major model for the creation of the programme “Offene Kirchen” (Open Churches), begun by the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg in 2000 and initially financed by the Robert-Bosch-Foundation and the State of Brandenburg. The annual catalogue now includes some 900 open churches in Brandenburg and the programme has inspired the development of similar projects elsewhere in Germany. The FAK Berlin-Brandenburg has in particular helped save and restore many churches still in the possession of local church councils but which after long neglect are often in very poor condition. Over 250 local NGOs, Fördervereine, have been founded to work locally to help finance the restoration of churches and often use them for extended cultural uses. This has been helped especially by the competition “Start Capital” for new associations and for several years by the programme of the FAK Berlin-Brandenburg “Art and Culture in Churches”, funded by the German Cultural Foundation. A particular project exists to save one type of art in Protestant (Lutheran) churches in Brandenburg, the wooden sculptures of angels hung over baptismal fonts (“Taufengel”).**

**By 2000 a very loose network of contacts, promoted by the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen, existed between various organizations and institutions in Europe**

**concerned with the preservation of religious buildings, some involving regular exchange of information and publications.**

**Throughout the 1990s the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen, which had co-founded the European organization for rural issues ECOVAST in 1984 (from its foundation already particularly active in central and eastern Europe) intensified further links in central and eastern Europe, finally making contact in 2008 with its Russian counterpart, the organization “Village Church of Russia”, founded right at the beginning of Perestroika under Gorbatschow in 1985. This contact was symbolically expressed when A. Fowler presented a prize to the organization “Village Church of Russia” within the framework of a Russian conservation competition at a major Russian event.**

**As a member of the Council of Europa Nostra 1984-2011, A. Fowler gave regular progress reports on work and contacts concerning churches in danger at meetings of the Council and General Assemblies of Europa Nostra, encouraged the award of several Europa Nostra prizes throughout central and eastern Europe for positive and model projects for saving religious architecture, also for placing important religious architecture on the World Heritage List and continually urged the initiation and creation of an international network under the wing of Europa Nostra, finally persuading Lester Borley, formerly Secretary-General of Europa Nostra, to organize a Forum on the Use of Religious Buildings at the meeting of Europa Nostra in Munich 2000. The debate there was controversial: representatives from Belgium and Greece arguing for the demolition of churches if they became redundant, rather than allowing them to be used for inappropriate use or to be vandalized (but see already the far more progressive debate involving the State, the Italian Bishops and the Vatican and the recommendations of the Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy in 1987, mentioned in detail in the Council of Europe report in 1989). At Munich it was agreed that the debate should be continued and that Europa Nostra, represented by J. Sell with the help of A. Fowler, should aim at bringing international representatives together to found a more organized international network than the loose network of contacts which had previously existed since the 1970s under the care of the Marburg Förderkreis Alte Kirchen.**

**After the development of further contacts from 2004 onwards by John Sell, Crispin Truman, Oddbjorn Sormoen, and the creation of a working group, meeting at the Churches Conservation Trust, all the existing contacts were brought together, a first data base was created by Lucy Hockley, and the Canterbury Conference took place in November 2010.**

**Angus Fowler, Berlin/Marburg, March 2012**