

# Future for Religious Heritage, FRH

## The European network for historic places of worship

### Overview of the situation in Germany

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Ladies and Gentlemen, honoured guests,

please allow me to greet you in the name of the German organizations involved in the preparation of this conference: the Catholic Academy of the Diocese Magdeburg here at St. Moritz, the Landesheimatbund Sachsen-Anhalt, the foundation „Entschlossene Kirchen“ in the Church District Zerbst in Anhalt, the federation of associations for churches in Sachsen-Anhalt, and the Förderkreise Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg and Marbnrg, together with support for which we are very thankful from the State of Sachsen-Anhalt, the City of Halle, the Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz/ German Foundation for Preservation of Historic Monuments and our host tomorrow and Friday, the Francke'sche Stiftungen, and our local helpers, in particular Franziska Schories, Dorothea Tesching, Antje Loehr-Dittrich, the former Landeskonservator Herr Gotthard Voß, Frau Antje Böhme as voluntary interpreter, Cantor/Organist Irenée Peyrot and Gewandhausorganist Michael Schönheit, Frau Kirschner as guide in the Marktkirche and also four young volunteers from the Jugendbauhütte Quedlinburg and one from the Voluntary Social Year for help at the conference.

As a prelude and background information to our conference in the next two days I would like to give you some impressions on the situation of places of worship here in Germany, particularly in the countryside.

#### **The post-war situation**

Forty to fifty years ago in the old Federal Republic of Germany (before unity in 1990) the official Protestant and Roman-Catholic churches were - compared with the organized churches in most countries of Europe apart from Scandinavia – wealthy, with revenue mostly from church taxes. War damage had been repaired and along with modern theological thinking new churches and church centres for modern needs were built, also in the countryside. Sometimes even between two villages such new buildings were erected making old churches redundant. In some areas such as in the State of Hessen, north of the river Main, many old timber-framed churches were demolished. Often there were no effective preservation laws and little regard for historic buildings at a time when a decent consciousness for history and heritage was lacking. Modernization and economic development, which forged the so-called „German Economic Wonder“, stood in the foreground. Surviving, former synagogues which had already been profaned in the Nazi-pogrom November 1938, were often used inappropriately and being demolished.

#### **Eastern Germany**

In eastern Germany in the so-called German Democratic Republic (GDR) many war-damaged churches were not rebuilt, were demolished or left as ruins. However, compared with Western Europe or with the very depressing situation in the Russian part of the former German province East Prussia, only few churches in the countryside were actually demolished in the GDR. They were rather left to decay and neglected under an unfriendly communist atheistic regime. However, they still stood, to be saved in better times. The good work which was done already before 1989 in the GDR to save village churches under very difficult circumstances should be not ignored. However twenty five years ago an international conference on this particular theme would have been unthinkable with East Germany still very much behind the Iron Curtain.

#### **Western Germany**

The wave of demolition of churches in western Germany was halted by the 1980s. A great *Denkmalschutz-Kongreß* of citizen's initiatives and associations, including the 1973 founded *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen* and supported by the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation, was held exactly 40 years ago 1974 in Marburg. It condemned the destruction of historic town and village centres and particularly the abandonment of old churches and their replacement by new concrete ones promoted by the official churches. It put pressure on the government and parliament of the State of Hessen to pass an effective conservation law which took place soon after. First local associations were founded, cultural use of redundant churches was practiced and more state and other public money became available for much needed restoration work. In the mid 1980s inspired by the work of the *National Trusts* in England and Scotland the then

Landeskonservator of Hessen, Dr. Gottfried Kiesow, began to develop first ideas for a German national foundation, the *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz*, DSD. However in contrast to the British organizations it was established as a grant-giving - not building-owning - body. The DSD prepared the way for its truly great work in helping to finance often very basic urgent restoration work, especially in eastern Germany after 1989 of very many church buildings.

### **Support for restoration and extended use by the Churches, state and foundations**

Since 1989 very much has been done to restore church buildings, former synagogues and other places of worship for the purpose of appropriate cultural and memorial use. This applies particularly in eastern Germany where the need after years of neglect and decay was very great. The organized churches themselves with much state and local support have done much to maintain and restore their buildings. Special financial support has come from the Federal Government, for instance with a programme for much-needed repair to church roofs (*Dach- und Fach-Programm*). Financial support has come also from the Federal States, from various ressorts of the European Union, particularly for regional and local development, from the *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz* and other foundations such as the *Deutsche Bundesumweltstiftung*, the *Messerschmitt Foundation*, etc. Important work has and is being done by the foundation of the organized Protestant Church in Germany, the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*, the *Stiftung zur Bewahrung kirchlicher Baudenkmäler in Deutschland, KiBA*. Here in the former Prussian part of Sachsen-Anhalt and in Brandenburg the inventorization and protection of church furnishings is furthered by foundations for the cultural religious heritage of the respective Protestant Churches.

### **The rise of regional and local associations**

Organizations and interested persons from the western part of Germany helped with the foundation, organization and development of regional and local associations to restore and use culturally and socially church buildings. Local village and small town populations, of which only a small minority are now members of the organized churches, passionately wish to preserve and use their churches. They see them not only as important landmarks in the countryside but also as essential symbols of their social and cultural identity. The *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg* was founded in May 1990 before German unity took place and now has over 500 members (persons, firms, church councils and many local associations for churches) as well as its own grant-giving trust for village churches in Brandenburg (*Stiftung Brandenburgische Dorfkirchen*). Similar organizations were founded in the early 1990s also in Thuringia, Mecklenburg and Saxony which for various reasons have not survived. Today exist in the Federal State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the association *Dorfkirchen in Not (Village Churches in Need)*, in eastern Sachsen-Anhalt the foundation *Entschlossene Kirchen* (resolute opened churches) for the church district Zerbst with a museum on village churches in that part of Anhalt and finally the federation of associations for the restoration of churches in the State of Sachsen-Anhalt, the *Verband der Kirchbauvereine in Sachsen-Anhalt*. In southern Brandenburg, in the Luckauer Niederlausitz there is a particularly active regional organization. All these organizations are active to save especially endangered buildings. Eastern Germany is perhaps – apart from England – the area with the greatest concentration of such local associations in Europe (over a thousand, in the Federal State of Brandenburg there are over 350).

### **The formation of civil organizations**

The work of these many local and regional associations should be considered a major example and source of experience, especially for those countries where there has not been a need for such non-governmental organizations until now. In the Federal State of Brandenburg for instance, organized by the *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen*, there are now about 1000 open churches, projects for art and culture, music schools, endangered furnishings such as baptismal angels. From 2000 until this year the *Robert Bosch Foundation* has given substantial support in turn to the *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg*, *Dorfkirchen in Not in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern* and most recently to the *Verband der Kirchbauvereine in Sachsen-Anhalt* to develop programmes to open churches with catalogues and to promote and help local associations. The *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz* has taken many local trusts for village churches under its umbrella for „treuhänderische Stiftungen“ (stewardship of trusts). The *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz* also has under its umbrella the *Jugendbauhütten* (building lodges for young people) for young people doing a voluntary year in preservation. In 2012 the *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz* with the Federation of German State Conservators, the organized churches, the Institute for Church Building in Marburg and the two *Förderkreise Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg* and Marburg held a national conference in Marburg on village churches. There now exist a number of local associations also looking after former synagogues. Quite a number of former synagogues still exist in the countryside, for instance near Halle in the small town Gröbzig and especially in the state of Hessen, where there were many Jewish rural communities and some 250 synagogues survived the pogrom of 1938. The accompanying and subsequent destruction and also survival has been documented in the grand survey by Thea Altaras, published in the famous German art series, the *Blaue Bücher* (Blue Books), as also in that series the survey of timber-framed churches in Hessen, published by the *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Marburg*, both publications are available for purchase here at this conference.

### **Continuing danger of abandonment, neglect and demolition**

On the other hand after this rather rosy positive picture one cannot deny or ignore negative developments in Germany. However, these are not as serious as the abandonment of religious buildings taking place in the Netherlands, increasingly in Belgium and certainly not as bad as the scenario painted by the journalist Matthias Schulz in his article

„The Last Supper – Germany's Great Church Sell-Off“, originally in the magazine *Der Spiegel*, 9<sup>th</sup> February 2013 and later, also in English, in Spiegel-Online, and referred to in the Newsletter of „Future for Religious Heritage“ in August 2013. No mass abandonment, redundancy or demolition of churches has yet taken place in Germany and certainly not of rural churches. Today we forget that depopulation and abandonment of churches took place on a considerable scale during the late medieval crisis in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries throughout Europe as a result of climate change and plague epidemics and that many village churches were destroyed during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) particularly in Germany. We can even assert that today the majority of churches in Germany are in their best physical state ever as a result of the many restorations and repairs in recent years. In Germany there is now no massive aversion to 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, for instance neo-Gothic ones, as seems to exist still particularly in France, leading to the demolition of such, sometimes important ones in villages (for instance in Gesté in Anjou). The Roman-Catholic Church for various reasons has problems with its modern buildings, for instance in the Ruhr-Diocese of Essen, where it intended to close some 200 churches. However these buildings will not be demolished en masse and serious work is being done to find appropriate uses for those which will actually be closed. The Roman-Catholic diocese of Hildesheim has closed a number of modern buildings, perhaps 80 dating from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in diaspora villages where Roman-Catholic refugees from the East settled after 1945. The German national, federal state and church organizations (as in Marburg in 2012) held a national conference on the particular problems of modern religious buildings in Mühlhausen in Thuringia in 2010.

### **The trap of secularization and depopulation**

The Protestant Churches in eastern Germany certainly have problems in helping parishes to maintain their buildings and have often developed priorities for preservation and use. As a result of secularization, social and demographic change, the low number of Church members in the East etc. income from church taxes has fallen. In peripheral areas for instance in the Uckermark region in Brandenburg on the border with Poland the population has much decreased, young people have left. This is also taking place in the West along the former border with East Germany. The sale of clergy houses is now beginning to take place. The organized churches, however, still wish to retain as many churches as possible in use, for extended use and preserved. As mentioned the population often fiercely resists closure and has with the support of the large regional organizations organized itself with many local associations. These are often the main and only cultural organizations now in their village and can even become important bulwarks for democracy against right-wing extremism.

### **The cement of cultural and social identity – continuing destruction of churches by brown-coal mining**

Perhaps the greatest continuing scandal in Germany is the destruction of villages with their churches and the expulsion of their populations for the mining of brown-coal/lignite for producing electricity. Since 1945 several hundred villages in eastern Germany have been destroyed and also a considerable number in the Rhineland between Aachen and Cologne and the destruction continues. Several villages with well-preserved and used interesting church buildings are currently threatened in Brandenburg, west of Guben near the Polish border, and the future of the birth- and burial-place of the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in Röcken near the battlefield of Lützen, here in Sachsen-Anhalt, with its church of which Nietzsche's father was pastor, remains uncertain. So-called translocation is often only an alibi, with little left of the original church building. A notable exception is the church of Heuersdorf in Saxony, which under great pressure from the Protestant Church in Saxony, was transplanted as a block at great expense! Many churches have been lost with their villages for brown-coal mining in northern Bohemia in areas formerly settled by Germans and also in villages with mosques in southern Bulgaria in areas formally settled by Turks.

### **Perspective view for stewardship of places of worship**

As yet there are in Germany no foundations or trusts which have taken into their guardianship/stewardship/possession redundant churches in large numbers like the *Churches Conservation Trust* and the *Historic Chapels Trust* in England or the provincial *Stichting Oude Kerken* in the Netherlands, particularly in the province Groningen. A few churches belong to local government districts like the Kreis Marburg-Biedenkopf which owns a redundant church and a synagogue, communes, associations like the *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen* and some local associations. A small start is being made with the establishment of a communal foundation in the commune of Cölbe for historic buildings and culture including the church belonging to the *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen* in Bürgeln, which could be expanded at a later date. Much more work is needed for the sustainable preventive maintenance of church buildings as done particularly by the Monument Watches in the Netherlands and Flanders in Belgium. As yet the organized Churches, although now notoriously understaffed, believe they can do this work themselves, so that the Monumentendienst in the western Weser-Ems part of Lower Saxony, already looking after over 1000 buildings, actually looks after only very few churches as yet. The newly founded organization for Buildings' Inspection in Thuringia aims to provide help for such preventive maintenance.

This conference is, after the national German conference in Marburg in 2012 on village churches, the first great and truly international conference on rural places of worship in Europe and even further afield and their future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, held in Germany. It is appropriate that it should take place here in Halle in the centre of eastern Germany, a city already with a strong and old international tradition through its annual Handel Festivals, and surrounded by rural areas with many village churches. The Förderkreis Alte Kirchen in Marburg, the oldest major non-governmental

organization for the preservation particularly of rural churches in Germany, which I represent here today, can justifiably consider this conference as a climax to its international work begun 40 years ago with first connections with the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France, reflected already in my report on “Redundant Religious Buildings” to the Council of Europe in 1989.

I thank you all for your attention and look forward to an inspiring conference with much productive exchange of information and development of ideas and projects.