NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 6
Church Freedom and a Free Church:
Giessen's Lutherans. Part I

Plockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
April 22, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York, 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

All Giessen's Lutherans are divided into seven parishes. Of these, the Free St. Luke's Parish is the fiercest. Or, to put it another way, the post-war story of the local Evangelical Church contains a touch of Caesar's De Bello Gallico.

The City's 40,000 Lutherans started after World War II with six parishes. They were faced with an enormous task of rebuilding and repairing their ravaged properties. It was peacetime and things seemed peaceful enough within the church community. However, bellicose spirits were abroad. A scant five years after 1945, Giessen's Lutherans were rocked by a rebellion that split the community wide open. The conflict lasted four months, ending with the formation of a splinter group which established its own independent congregation - the seventh parish.

In one respect, the great church Reformation which Martin Luther began over 400 years ago is still going on. Luther sought independence and freedom for the German church. He and his supporters were successful in breaking the tie with Rome. But the newly established Evangelical Church remained under the control of the German princes who had helped to make it. State control of the church, first by the nobility and later by the Bismarck's Reich, was maintained until 1918. Even the liberal Weimar Republic held onto one element of control over the church - the purse. The state collected and dispensed tax monies which supported the church. This was a small but decisive factor of regulation. Lutheran leaders were made bitterly aware of its importance when the National Socialists seized power. The church felt the impress of the totalitarian state more than any other institution.

Despite this experience, the Evangelical leadership decided to re-introduce the church tax after World War II. It is collected through State offices and distributed by the Land church board. The reason for maintaining this financial tie was the massive physical destruction which the church had to cope with after the war. It was clear to the church leaders that they could not go it alone financially. The levy - 10 per cent of the income tax - was re-established with permission of the Military Government. It was begun as a temporary measure, to be altered when the church got back on its feet. However, it looks in 1957 as though nobody is going to do anything about changing the system. And although the church has won considerable freedom in the last decade, especially in the field of education, the Reformation is still not over. It won't be until the church becomes completely independent of the state.

The Giessen rebellion, which led to the creation of the Free St. Luke's Parish, was a peculiar manifestation of this striving for independence. The rebels are now convinced that they are trailblazers on the path of church freedom. However, there is evidence that a free congregation does not

necessarily constitute a milestone on the road towards freedom of the church. Before going into this, it might be worth taking a glance at Giessen's religious history and some regular congregations.

The Chatten, the Germanic folk who settled Hesse, were the only tribe that stayed put during the period of the great migrations. As a result, they were converted to Christianity very early by Irish monks - long before St. Boniface's successful mission to Germany. The inhabitants of Upper Hesse were worshipping Christ when most Germans were still worshipping pine trees.

In the year 1200, Giessen had two small churches - one a chapel in front of the old castle and the other at the village of Selters, which was later incorporated into the City. Neither is standing now. The castle chapel was the "daughter" church of the one at Selters. About 1248 it was consecrated in the names of St. Pancratius and Maria. It had eight altars. In 1484 the little church got a tower. There is nothing to indicate that the City's early church history was tempestuous or remarkable.

The first wave of the Reformation struck Giessen about 1526. The earliest known Protestants were two craftsmen, Junghans the weaver, and Wolff the stonecutter. They refused to attend services at the City chapel and marched off to Selters to hear an Evangelical pastor. A few years later, the landgrave, Philipp The Magnanimous, an early convert to Lutheranism, sent a capable Evangelical minister to take over the City church. Daniel Greser, a native of nearby Weilburg, arrived in 1532. He had a job cut out for him. Giessen was still divided between the old faith and the new. On the one hand, City officials and the well-to-do burghers were hanging onto Catholicism. The lower classes, especially the craft guilds, were supporting Luther. Meanwhile, the plague which had carried off Greser's wife and most of his family, was taking its toll in Giessen. Greser was an unusually able man. In addition to his effective consolidation of the Lutheran faith here, he introduced a fundamental administrative reform which won the praise of Luther himself. Greser established the first layman parish council. The 8-man council was chosen by democratic election. A few years later this was made a universal practice in the Lutheran Church. This pioneer minister was not so successful in another local effort. Greser was distressed that his sponsor, Philipp The Magnanimous, had magnanimously acquired two wives. He tried to talk the Landgrave out of one of them - to no avail.

The Reformation which Greser cultivated so well here grew sturdily. Lutheranism remained the faith of the overwhelming majority of Giesseners down to the present century. Only in the past 10 years has the Catholic Church grown substantially - largely because of the great influx of refugees from Catholic areas behind the Iron Curtain.

However strong Giessen's commitment to Lutheranism may have been, the City never went out of its way to prove it by building beautiful churches. The Lord's houses in any of a dozen cities and villages around Giessen are far more handsome and luxurious. A local cleric says this is to be explained by history. "Until the last century, Giessen was nothing but a little mudhole," he said. The main trade roads by-passed Giessen and the local nobility never tried to make Giessen as elegant as nearby Marburg or other landgrave holdings. Throughout local church records one finds constant repetition of these complaints: overcrowded church space, delapidated roofs, and rotting timbers. The authorities planned to enlarge the Stadtkirche (the old St. Pancratius Chapel) as early as 1613. But the outbreak of the Thirty Years War and another siege of the

plague in 1635 made it necessary to postpone the plan. Not until 1809 was the old church torn down for replacement. The new church, in lamentable classical style, was finished in 1821. Meanwhile, a church had been built in 1623 at the old cemetery at the northeast corner of town. And a chapel was opened about the middle of the 17th century in the University Ballhaus. It had no bell, so drummers went through the streets to announce worship services on Sunday.

With the rapid expansion of Giessen's population during the 19th century a new church became a pressing need. The Johanneskirche was finished with the help of long term loans in 1894. Its Kaiser Wilhelm style silhouette still dominates the Giessen skyline.

The morning after the December 6, 1944 airraid, numb Giesseners climbed out of their shelters to find the Stadtkirche a smoking ruin. Only the old church tower remained as a remembrance of the City's religious past. The bombs also damaged the other three Lutheran churches and smashed four parish houses, the Evangelical hospital, and the Evangelical Orphan's Home.

The job of setting the church's house in order fell on the husky shoulders of Karl Schmidt. He was elected deacon of Giessen in 1945. In this position he had charge of 20 parishes in this area, including the six in Giessen. The deacon is the middleman between the local ministers and the Upper Hesse Probst (Prior). The Prior in turn represents the area's 13 deaneries on the State Church Board in Darmstadt.

Dekan Schmidt retired early this month from the deanery at the age of 70. A year ago he turned over a second job as head of the local minister's office to a younger man. But Schmidt is still pastor of St. Matthew Parish, pending appointment of a new minister. And he is keeping his position as chairman of the Evangelical Hospital.

This placid, industrious man is the fourth minister in his family. He has a square head, white hair, blue eyes, and small eyebrows. His face scrunches up when he smiles. There won't be any more ministers in the Schmidt family. His three sons died on the Russian front. A native of nearby Biedenkopf, he was pastor of a church in Wiesbaden when the tides of Nazism flowed across Germany. In 1934 Schmidt joined the Bekennede Kirche (Confessional Church), which was called into being by a group of Evangelical Church leaders as a bulwark against the onslaughts of Hitler. This was the time when National Socialists were trying to subvert the Lutheran Church through the so-called German Faith Movement and the "German Christian" church. The former tried to encourage a return to worshipping of Thor, Wotan, and pine trees. The latter was a more successful attempt at turning some Lutherans into racists and the churches into components of the total state. The pressure to join the Deutsch Christen was ever stronger. But Karl Schmidt and 7,000 Lutheran ministers like him refused to submit. In 1937 he was thrown out of his Wiesbaden church for speaking up against the Nazi-appointed bishop of Hesse. Then he came to Giessen. Schmidt had other brushes with the Nazis. The Gestapo periodically searched his house for incriminating papers. Several times they confiscated collections taken in his church. He was threatened with arrest. Schmidt is not a man of great imagination. He has his feet on the ground and he sticks to his convictions. He can look with pride on his part in the reconstruction of Giessen's Lutheran community: a church built in 1949 near the site of the shattered Stadtkirche; the 160-bed hospital, the 65-bed orphan's home, and the parish houses rebuilt and expanded; and a new church, the Pauluskirche, nearing completion in north Giessen where post-war housing developments sprouted up.

Giessen's ministers are hard to get in touch with. It isn't that they are inaccessible - they are simply very busy. Each is obliged to give four hours of religious instruction in the City schools every week. Each holds additional "confirmation" classes which prepare youngsters for official entrance into the church. Then there are the usual baptisms, weddings and funerals to attend to -plus active visitation work, writing of sermons, supervising parish club activities, and participating in church conferences.

One of the busy ministers is Rev. Hermann Lipp. He was born 46 years ago on a farm at Oberweitbach. An inveterate pipe-smoker, he is a handsome man with thick dark hair. He has the quiet composure of Hesse's countryside in his face. Pastor Lipp is assistant minister in the Luther Parish, an area on Giessen's northside which includes a housing development for low income families and a slum area of former military barracks. Lipp came here four years ago after serving in a village parish. His ministerial studies were interrupted by World War II. Called up in 1939, he served in Norway until 1945 and then spent three years as a prisoner of war. He is married to Elli Lipp, the Hilfsschule teacher (see DB - 4). They have an attractive home in North Giessen.

It was Friday afternoon, and Pastor Lipp had a boy's Konfirmanten class at the Parish House on Luther Hill. The youths, all about 13, were in shorts. The minister asked them to recite Christ's words on the cross and then discussed their import. After class he hiked about a mile to the housing development where the Luther Congregation has another building - with a bell on a wooden stand outside. Lipp held a second confirmation class here for four boys and four girls. He dismissed the class at 5 p.m., picked up a portable baptismal salver and walked over to a house on Wichernweg to baptize a boy. It didn't come off because the father was still at work and the boy wasn't home either. The mother explained these absences from her doorway. Just then a man entered the hall and shouted rudely at Lipp: "What the heck do you want here?" Said Lipp, "I'm the parish minister." The man was only slightly flustered. "Oh," he said, "fine that I met you. I'm the superintendent here and I just got permission to take some of the settlement kids to the spring fair for nothing. Is it all right with you if the youngsters who are going to be confirmed on Sunday come along too?" Lipp chuckled and replied in his country voice, "Sure, there are worse sins in the world." Then he set off for the "airport settlement" where there was another baptism to perform. The way led over the rocky hillocks behind the American Army depot. There were poorly clad children playing on the muddy path. They all greeted Pastor Lipp and some tagged along after him. From the doorways of the shabby barracks buildings came more greetings: "Good Day, Pastor," "How is it going, Pastor?" The baptismal ceremony was for a boy. It took place in the over-heated living room of the Walpert family. Frau Walpert lay sick in bed in the next room. The boy and his two sisters stood around sheepishly while Lipp unpacked his black robe, the salver, and a Bible. Karl, 14, fetched a pail of water and filled the salver to brimming. Perspiration glistened on Lipp's brow as he fixed the white collar around his neck. Karl scraped his foot on the floor and wrung his hands - he was a little ashamed to be getting baptized so late in life. After the 5-minute ceremony, one of the sisters said she had another baptism for Lipp - her two-week-old baby. The minister sighed and said he would come on Sunday. He already had four baptisms scheduled for Sunday, plus a 2-hour worship service at the Old Cemetery Church, and an afternoon examination of 20 confirmands. Pastor Lipp packed up his equipment and shook hands all around with the Walperts. Then he walked the two miles to his home to work on his Sunday sermon.

Pastor Lipp lent me a diary he had kept during his first days in the Luther Parish. Following are some excerpts:

"September, 1953...only a few people at Sunday worship, at most nine or 10. Seldom does the service go without a disturbance. A cat runs up on the altar and meows. The sacristan performed his duties one morning in shorts. What will become of it? One must not lose courage. ...We as preachers may never become tired or want to rest. God Himself does not get tired. We will begin. The Lord's mercy also shines in this border area of Giessen.

"October, 1953...I visit the settlements and say my little verse: 'I am the new minister and I'm going from door to door to get to know the people.'...Almost all of them are refugees. It's easy to talk to these people and they are pleased and thankful for the visit. I meet a lot of bachelors - a lot with visitors from the East Zone. Many are divorced, many are waiting for divorces, and many are living with their fiancees while waiting for the divorce of one or the other. ...A woman lies in bed smoking while she talks to me. Too bad for us if these people feel the pastor is just out looking for sinners in order to lead them to the right path. You can't just grab them by the hand. ...A man says, 'You won't have any success with me. I don't want to hear you.' I tell him I'm pleased to meet someone so frank. He took me into his room and said: 'I have despaired in God. I was in the Confessional Church and I prayed every evening. I lost three sons in the war. I prayed for my mother too, but I had to witness how my mother was incinerated in the flames after a bomb attack. God is terribly cruel. I have lost my love for Him. Why does God punish the pious so much?' I told him about Jesus, Who suffered more than any of us, but I did it only briefly. He admitted that his hard fate had not been the worst, that the worst was that he had lost his faith. I must not expect that after this friendly visit he will come to church right away."

Pastor Lipp continued his visits to the barracks settlement as the hard winter of 1953 began. His little congregation nearly froze in the barracks chapel, and it still averaged only nine to 10 despite his energetic efforts to increase the size of the fold. In January he checked up on his statistics and found attendance at Sunday worship was almost double that of September. Lipp noted that among the new regulars was the man who had lost his belief.

The genial head of the Luther Parish is Rev. Gerhard Bernbeck, a balding, heavy-browed man with a large round face that is usually wreathed in smiles. He is the 13th minister in Bernbeck family history. His daughter represents the seventh generation of Bernbecks who studied at the Landgraf Ludwig Gymnasium. Among the illustrious branches in the family tree was one Captain Wilhelm Bernbeck who fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto. Another tie with America was a female Bernbeck who fell ill while crossing the Brooklyn Bridge the summer of 1900 and expired in Flatbush.

Pastor Bernbeck takes mild pride in his links with the New World. He himself visited parts of the United States in 1951 with a group of ministers. On his return, he saw to it that his new parish house incorporated American features - plenty of light and modern architecture.

Gerhard Bernbeck is a well-educated man. He studied at the universities of Tübingen, Giessen, and Königsberg. He picked up a couple of duelling scars and a lot of knowledge along the way. One of the things that astonished him in America was the incredibly short period of

education which our ministers get. He cited the example of one who became a minister in 12 months after spending a decade as a seaman. "They have the advantage of being closer to life," said Bernbeck, "but they have little or no theological training. For the German, a minister is a studied man - 'unfortunately' and 'thank God' at the same time." The German, he continued, runs the risk of becoming alienated from the world in his scholarliness. As for his own "Worldliness", Bernbeck pointed to the sport shoes and jacket he was wearing. "That wasn't done 20 years ago," he said. Another impression he brought back from America concerned church art. He showed me a beautiful handmade crucifix carved by one of his parishoners and said, "In our church we have art - in yours you order your art from a factory catalogue."

The 48-year-old Bernbeck began his ministry in 1933, the last legal year in which one could start preaching without permission of the Nazi Party. He joined the Confessional Church as soon as it was formed. "I saw in 1934 when the Aryan paragraph was introduced, that all Christendom was threatened," he said. This was the law that required every State employee - including ministers - to have "pure Nordic" grandparents. Bernbeck was drafted in 1939 and served throughout the war as an artillery officer. He came to this parish in 1947 "with real devotion." It was largely due to Bernbeck's vigorous leadership that the Luther Congregation participated in the construction of the housing development where Pastor Lipp now has his headquarters. Along side of his ministerial activities, Bernbeck is an enthusiastic observer of his times. From time to time he leads public discussions on local problems. Here are some of his remarks on contemporary Germany:

"The man who lived in the city during the Hitler period went through a harder shcool than his brother in the country. The city man lost his house and land, and he and his family went through de-nazification. This was a lot more than the peasant or village man experienced.. The city man is sturdier in his religious core than the country man.

"The German has yet to learn that wealth is not a ground for egotism. He is still indulging in self pity for his own 'needs'. The pleasure in giving has not grown comparably with our post-war wealth. We claim to be against the doctrine of materialism, but we here in the West are the crudest sort of materialists. In the East (Zone) they have reached the point where they are denying themselves material things for a better future - although they are theoretically materialists."

The pastor of St. Mark's Parish is Paul Geissler, a 53-year-old teacher's son. A tall man with thick glasses and a commanding voice, he sports a beret on his bald head. Geissler came to Giessen in 1949 after 20 years as pastor in a Vogelsberg village. Like most German ministers, he was drafted at the beginning of World War II. The draft was mandatory according to an 1892 concordat which Hitler reintroduced in 1933. According to the concordat, ministers were made subject to draft for military duty - including combat. Geissler served in munitions guard units until 1942, when he was sent to the Russian front. As a member of the Confessional Church, he was held somewhat suspect. Nevertheless, he became an officer in 1943 and was sent to the Italian front, where he served until the collapse. Pastor Geissler recalls this among his wartime experiences: "I was stationed next to a concentration camp in Poland in 1943. One night I was standing guard and I smelled the burning flesh of the extermination chambers. I heard the awful cries of the Jews inside the ovens. I asked the commander if that happened often. He said yes. Then I said: 'Send me to the worst sector on the front.' Later I came back on leave and told some Party members what I had seen. I said: 'The blood of the Jews will inundate you one day. I have seen it and it's true.' They didn't

believe me. We are all guilty for these crimes. The Jews were the best Germans."

Pastor Geissler's parish includes the heart of old Giessen and the area across the Lahn called "Rubber Island". The former was hardest hit by the 1944 airraid. The latter is the poorest of Giessen's slum areas. Altogether, the parish counts some 7,000 registered Lutherans. Roughly 10 per cent of these are active church members. "Our congregation," said Geissler, "is not one of the intelligentsia. About half our workers and most of the rest are from middle class business families." This congregation formerly used the old Stadtkirche. Now it shares in the new Pancratiuskapelle, which was finished in 1949 with aid from America. It is a low structure with a striking wood interior. Geissler runs his parish with the help of a young assistant pastor, Joachim Kraemer, who takes care of most of the work in "Rubber Island", He also has a young woman assistant. They keep busy with a number of church organizations - the women's club, the men's Bible circle, the mother's club, and seven youngsters' groups. The total participation in these organizations is about 700. Geissler himself has extra duties as chaplain at the local prison. The pastor is a gifted and expressive speaker. Perhaps this stems from his hobby - studying the German language. His office is filled with dictionaries. "The most important thing to me in theology," he said, "is to get at the heart of the meaning of the words in the Bible. We are in an age of the great levelling of language. All you hear today is 'prima' or 'knorka' (terrific or swell). I want to see the language renewed from within."

With an accompaniment of lively gestures, these are some of Geissler's other comments on Germany and theology:

"During the Nazi period activity in my village parish was especially strong. We had 42 per cent of the congregation coming to worship. It was harder in the cities because the Party was stronger there. Now a certain indifference has developed because life is securer. But the core of those who go to church is stronger in its faith.

"The German's national weakness is that he stands on the needlepoint of his convictions and damns anyone who disagrees with him. Who can stand on a needlepoint? This comes partly from the fact that we live in this narrow, closed-in space. A person has to be right or wrong - never in between. Then we get something unfortunate from the Reformation too, from Luther if I may say so - the question of truth. Something is either 'true' or 'untrue.' And Kant, who made truth into a universal law. Our weakness comes from our history and our philosophers. We must reach tolerance for other viewpoints.

"We were a national military autarchy. In 1945 came the total collapse. People still had the old idea that we were 'betrayed'. They couldn't distinguish between the good of the past that was bound together with the lies of the present. Now the German is plagued by this old opposition again. One group is going back to the earlier ways and they won't think about the Hitler period. They don't want to - it's unpleasant. We simply can't acquire a century of democratic education in a decade. This is our great task and our true need. You can't change traditions with a mere logical explanation of the facts or a stroke of the pen.

"My father was a strong nationalist. I learned to be critical of nationalism. I see idealism as something potentially dangerous. But I believe in the regeneration of man through his faith.

"We loved our fatherland. We loved our soil almost too passionately. This is the strangest aspect of German Christianity which runs counter to the Gospel that tells us our earthly resting place is only temporary.

"I don't think the (East) Zone German is evil the way some of our politicians seem to. I have the greatest respect for the people of the Zone. In their tough life they are expressing the truest and best side of Germany. The Zone German will be the bearer of the German spirit in its best sense. The West German is a materialist."

David Binder

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Received New York 4/30/57.