

Luther's spiritual heirs face uncertain future: "We're fighting all the way"

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Faced with declining membership, dwindling income and more demands to provide community services, Germany's Protestants see an overwhelming challenge ahead of them.

In search of inspiration, some 300 church members traveled last month to Wittenberg, the town where Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in 1517, for a workshop to map out their future. Attendees brainstormed on structure, financing and how to make the church that Luther built viable for the 21st century.

They met as part of a "Future Congress," officially titled "A Church for Freedom: Perspectives for the Evangelical Church in the 21st Century." *Freedom* seemed a part of every sentence uttered at this conference, but *finance* might have been a more appropriate catchword.

Church attendance has dropped across Europe, and Germany is no exception. What matters in Germany are the automatic paycheck deductions—taken from all registered church members—that are used to fund church operations, regardless of how often members attend services. Seeing fewer people in the pews may be upsetting to church leaders, but the prospect of fewer registered church members presents a financial hazard.

Demographic trends indicate that the church soon won't have enough money to keep operating. About one-third of Germans belong to the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Germany. The worst-case scenario shows the church's current membership of about 26 million shrinking to 17 million by 2030.

Thies Gundlach, head of the church services division, said financial questions clearly sparked the current debate. The main issue, however, is shaping a 21st-century church now, while the church is solvent, instead of being forced to make rash decisions later, he said. Gundlach noted that not all church members see the coming

threat: “There is no firm conviction that we have to change.”

But Wolfgang Huber, Berlin’s bishop and head of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Germany, is a believer. Last July he released a 100-page paper laying out the problem and suggesting ways to keep the church operational. Proposals include:

- Consolidating or merging congregations.
- Unifying districts (Germany’s 23 church districts in no way line up with the borders of its 16 states).
- Making do with fewer ministers and hiring more professional laypeople for outreach programs.

Predictably, Huber’s suggestions sparked debates. The proposal to merge districts—some of which have charters dating back to 1815—from the current 23 into 12 was not well received. Huber says he expected the controversy, and issued the proposals as little more than a conversation starter.

In some ways this level of soul-searching is not unusual for a church that sends out surveys every decade or so asking its members if they’re happy with the church and its offerings.

“This institutional introspection is nothing new,” said Wilhelm Graeb, head of the theology department at Berlin’s Humboldt University, noting that problems aren’t as dire as they may appear because some parishes could live for years off bank accounts fattened by years of church taxes.

But this conference was different in many ways, said participants. For one thing, it was not limited to church officials. And the participants sensed that the church is no longer focusing on the present but trying to be more forward-looking.

“The surveys were always about ascertaining the status quo,” said Wolf von Marschall, a forestry and agriculture manager sent as a delegate by his church in Lueneberg. “Here we’re trying as a group to set goals for the future.”

The German church’s efforts have elicited interest from churches in places like Switzerland, which could soon face its own demographic problems.

In his closing remarks, Huber said the future won’t come without change. “We’re under way,” he told the group. “Like good Protestants, we’re fighting all the way, but

we've started. We can no longer go back." -Niels C. Sorrells, Religion News Service