



Days of October: The Role of the Church in East Germany’s “Peaceful Revolution”

MARTIN HENKER¹

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In August 1989, my wife and I spent a wonderful vacation with our children—nine, seven, and five years old at that time—in the Moravian forests of the Jeseníky Mountains in what was then Czechoslovakia. In a small village we stayed in a former post office used as vacation lodging. The peace and quiet felt good after my hectic first months as city youth pastor in Dresden, a position in the Dresden Church District in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

In February of that year, we had moved from our idyllic village near Meissen to the big city of Dresden. The manager for the district youth ministry office in Dresden was helping us unpack when the director of youth ministry from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Saxony showed up. He pushed the two of us into my future office, closed the door, and began to speak very seriously. It took me a

¹This article was translated by Paul Rogers.

In the fall of 1989, citizens of Dresden, Leipzig, and other East German cities participated in nonviolent protests and demonstrations against their Communist regime. Their “Peaceful Revolution” contributed directly to the opening of the border between East and West Germany, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany in 1990. Churches in East Germany provided essential support and meeting places for the protesters. In this article, Martin Henker reports on these events as an eyewitness and a participant.

while to understand what this was about. Some people from church action groups² in Dresden had started publishing an underground newspaper, a thin little journal of six or eight pages, exposing conditions in the lives of the populace: the lying propaganda events for workers, the tricks of management to artificially reach production goals, the grueling and exhausting struggle to get the simplest items for daily living, the shocking destruction of the environment—these were the themes. The little newspaper had been given the delightful name “We the Clueless.”³ However, the issue was by no means humorous, because “The Clueless” had been reproduced using the license number of the youth ministry office. These numbers had to appear on all copied material. In this way the state maintained control over all information to be distributed. It would have been a catastrophe for the youth ministry office to lose this license, because distribution of any copied material depended on it. According to the churchwide youth pastor, the governmental Office for Church Affairs was furious and threatened to withdraw the license and initiate a violation charge against Superintendent Ziemer, the head of the Church District of Dresden and my boss beginning the next day. “Think about what you are doing,” the churchwide youth pastor said. “If you lose the license, we cannot help you!” With that he left. When he was gone, the office manager looked at me and said, “Martin, welcome to Dresden.” Two more issues of the little newspaper appeared, each time producing renewed anger and threats in response.

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The situation developed without pause. At the end of April, the Ecumenical Assembly of the churches in the GDR passed a resolution on Peace, Justice, and the Protection of Creation. Two weeks before, Superintendent Ziemer had assigned me the task of considering how to cover all the participants at the closing worship with a net that could be raised like a tent top. At the time, there was a lack of everything. Neither material nor rope could be purchased in the necessary quantities. Driving my Trabbi⁴ to the only factory in the GDR producing colored ribbons, I told them that I was from the church and that we were planning an event for a worship service using colored ribbons. Without anything further, the director person-

²Translator’s note: The government controlled all public gatherings, and the church was the only place where people could meet with any amount of security. Beginning in the early 1980s, groups within some congregations began meeting, more or less clandestinely, to discuss peace and environmental issues. As these *Basisgruppen* or action groups grew, they included persons who were not Christians or members of a congregation but who were committed and had no other option.

³Located in a basin, Dresden was one of the few places in East Germany where TV signals from West Germany were not available. Therefore Dresden was called the “valley of the clueless.”

⁴Tr. note: The Trabant (or Trabbi) was a small automobile produced in the city of Zwickau: two-cycle, two cylinders, synthetic body panels. The noisy, uncomfortable, under-powered car was unreliable but easily repaired, and it was the most common model in the GDR. Many former East Germans think of it with a love-hate nostalgia.

ally loaded the car full of ribbons and firmly refused any payment for them, making this his contribution to the church.

Then came May 7, the day of local elections in the GDR and also the date of the Dresden youth gathering of the church. On the previous Friday, the state Secretary for Church Affairs had called and requested that I encourage the youth to vote in the election. I asked if he wanted to have 1,000 youth break out in ringing laughter. He responded, "Pastor, you are threatening with levity!" and hung up. In the worship service at the gathering, Superintendent Ziemer installed me as City Youth Pastor for Dresden.

The church action groups had agreed to monitor the election results⁵ and to collect the results from the individual polling places. This made it possible to establish that the election had been rigged. Later, there were heated discussions about what to do with that information. Some group members preferred that "the church" make public the actual election results. Superintendent Ziemer rejected that idea. When it was suggested to publish them in the "Clueless," he nodded to me postively. A few days later, he said to me, "Don't worry. We won't abandon the youth ministry office."

Shortly before the summer, one issue became increasingly important: There were plans for a chemical factory up above the Dresden basin that would produce toxic substances heavier than air. Though the planning had been kept secret, an action group had gained access to this information and made it public. There was a call for protests, and these began in the summer. The police and Stasi (*Staatssicherheit* or State Security) handled the protesters aggressively, arresting some and imposing a fine on many. The response of Superintendent Ziemer was to call for contributions to help pay the fines.

But now it was finally time for my vacation in Czechoslovakia. Since we could not receive West German radio or television signals in the Moravian forests, we missed the daily reports of refugees streaming into West Germany through Hungary and Austria. Thousands wanted to flee from the "Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat" (Land of Workers and Farmers). They could no longer bear to live in the paternalism and rose-colored deception of party ideology. During my vacation, I read Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. Over and over again, as I read of the crumbling world of the cloister in the Middle Ages, I thought of home. What would happen? A society cannot exist with a foundation of lies, injustice, violence, and stupidity. Umberto Eco's cloister world had collapsed in a conflagration. What awaited us?

The most strenuous and unsettling weeks I had ever experienced began after this vacation. Sometimes they were also dangerous. Months later, these times were labeled the "Peaceful Revolution"—a paradoxical term, yet one wonderfully able to capture strikingly the incredible events.

⁵The counting of ballots had always been public. However, up until then no one had ever shown interest.

THE SITUATION BECOMES CRITICAL

In the youth ministry office, I found a letter from Superintendent Ziemer. He wanted a three-person group formed to handle payment of the subsidies for the fines. He asked me to be part of the group, and the youth office to develop plans for distribution. The work was difficult. First, we discussed how to determine whether an applicant had done anything illegal. Then came this decision: "Members of a Christian church can apply for reimbursement of a fine." It dawned on me that we should check with a church attorney to see if there was some other important consideration. The other two members of the group agreed, and I was to make the contact. When I asked the attorney,⁶ he laughed and asked what I was worried about. "The church's call for contributions already violated state law," he told me. He encouraged me to continue, as long as the contributions were adequate to cover all applications for payment. Then he added, "If nothing changes, we'll be seeing each other from time to time—and especially so if things *do* change!"

In mid-September, the "New Forum" was established, the first organized opposition group in the GDR. We in the youth office had intensive discussions about how we should respond. The experience of violence with the demonstrations against the chemical factory threatened to paralyze us. No one uttered the question that was always with us: What happens if the state strikes back with full force? We decided not to run off copies of the call to organize. Instead, we placed the recruitment statement in the Dresden Peace Library⁷ that was lodged in the basement of the youth office, and visitors came daily to copy it by hand.

INTO OCTOBER

On Monday, October 2, the annual ministerium⁸ was held. For the first time there was no lecture following worship, rather the whole morning was available for conversation and discussion. Bishop Hempel began a short statement with the words: "The situation is thoroughly miserable." Then 150 pastors had an intensive and earnest discussion about the prospects for the country. The atmosphere was oppressive; no one could see a way out. Thousands had fled the country through the opening in the Iron Curtain that had developed in Hungary. Many were occupying the West German embassy in Prague, demanding passage to the West. In a laughable attempt to display its decisiveness, the GDR leaders had six trains full of the embassy occupiers travel through the GDR at night, so that the Communist Party could proclaim, "We have kicked the traitors out." That raised outrage and bitterness once again. In the meantime, hundreds *more* had fled to the West German embassy in Prague. What would this come to? Fear was evident on the faces of

⁶The attorney was Steffen Heitmann, who later played a major role in writing the new constitution for the Free State of Saxony and also served several terms as Minister of Justice in Saxony.

⁷The Dresden Peace Library was started in the early 1980s along with the peace movement. It contained the largest collection of peace literature in Dresden, mostly from publishers in the West.

⁸The ministerium, called by the bishop, was held annually in six different cities in Saxony.

the older ones among us who had experienced the suppression of the uprising on June 17, 1953, in East Berlin, when Soviet tanks moved in and crushed the protest, causing injuries and death and long prison sentences for many.

Midday, October 3, radio reports from the West informed us that the government of the GDR has suspended open travel to Czechoslovakia. The news came as a shock. The last possibility for free travel had been choked off. In Dresden hundreds of people were surprised by the closure of the border, for they had come from all corners of the GDR on their way to Prague.⁹ Starting in the afternoon, trains toward Prague were stopped shortly before the border, and police roused the passengers from the trains, sometimes with nightsticks. They were returned to Dresden, some even in freight cars. More and more people gathered at the railway station with only one goal: to flee this "land of workers and farmers." They had a single hope: to wait for one of the trains coming from Dresden with the embassy refugees, jump on the train, and somehow gain a seat on the trip to freedom. In the middle of the night, an empty train pulled into the station, providing a spark that released all the bottled-up tension. When 800 people stormed the train, police "cleared" the station—that is, the people were violently and harshly driven out.

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The next few nights were filled with violence. A full battle erupted at the central station, complete with barricades. The people did not want to be driven away and lose their last chance to reach freedom. In the meantime, the Kreuzkirche (Lutheran Church of the Cross) and the Roman Catholic cathedral were occupied. The protesters would leave the churches, they said, only when given permission to travel out of the country. Following negotiations with representatives of the churches, the state agreed. Then the cathedral was closed, with entrance allowed only for mass. Police and the Stasi began random arrests of individuals, even apart from the demonstrations.

LIFE WITH NO ASSURANCES

On October 6, a Friday, Superintendent Ziemer invited pastors to a consultation in the Kreuzkirche. Shattering new information about the situation was provided. The state issued brusque warnings, sharper than ever before. The state, we learned, would not allow protest, especially on its fortieth anniversary, which was to be "celebrated" the next day. All means available would be used to maintain peace and order. The church would be held responsible if it could not restrain people from "illegal behavior." From other reports it appeared that there had been

⁹The Dresden-Prague line was a short and important rail link, a distance of ca. 110 miles.

many arrests, occasionally with severe excessive force. The action group of one congregation had made an invitation to attend a founding assembly of the New Forum on Saturday. The state warned that, were the event not canceled, it would be prevented with all means necessary.

It was rumored that Superintendent Ziemer was going to establish an opposition group for Dresden that night in the Kreuzkirche. A number of groups had called for Sunday demonstrations for reform in the GDR. We all agreed that the Kreuzkirche would remain open. Evening prayers were planned for that evening and preparations made for the availability of emergency services in the Kreuzkirche for the whole weekend.

Over the noon hour, I drove home. I asked my wife to withdraw 1000 marks¹⁰ from the bank, in case our account would be blocked. We discussed the possibility that she should leave the city with the children but then postponed the decision.

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Ziemer told us*

In the afternoon, we met in the youth office to prepare the evening prayers. While we were trying to gather our thoughts, Superintendent Ziemer was called to the telephone. He returned looking very earnest. “I was just informed that, for the weekend, use of armed weapons has been authorized for Dresden and Leipzig,” he told us. A heavy silence fell upon us. Finally, Ziemer said, “Come on, we need a plan for this evening. And whatever happens, we are in God’s hands.”

I was assigned the task of passing on to people our urgent admonition to remain nonviolent, the request to give careful consideration in choosing events for participation over the weekend, and the announcement of the cancellation of the assembly to organize the New Forum in Dresden. In the evening there was a steady coming and going in the church. At the 6:30 evening prayers we sang some Taizé songs, prayed for peace in the city and the nation, and Superintendent Ziemer gave a short sermon. Someone interrupted him with a shout about police brutality, after which the church quickly emptied.

I went toward the train station with some colleagues from the youth office. Police were everywhere, with military personnel also at a few locations. We spoke with some soldiers forming a human chain. One of them whispered to us, “Get out of here. We’re just doing our military duty.”¹¹ Do you think we volunteered for

¹⁰That was about a pastor’s monthly salary. Tr. note: The actual value at that time would have been approximately US \$62, according to <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/currency.htm#tables> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹¹Tr. note: Eighteen months of military service (*Grundwehrdienst*) was required of all males at age eighteen, with some exceptions. In later years, it was possible to serve as a *Bausoldat* (“construction soldier”), a soldier available for weapon-free service. Christian churches in the GDR were instrumental in the government’s decision to establish that status.

this?" Several times, we saw the whole line beating nightsticks against their shields in rhythm; then, after a whistle, they all stormed forward and started pounding anyone passing by who did not flee quickly enough. We had to run, with the terrible cries of the slower ones ringing in our ears. Arriving home after 11:00 p.m., I sat in the car and wondered if I should tell my wife about the authorization to use weapons. In the end I did tell her, and she said, "I'll not leave the city. I'll stay here with the children."

I'll never forget saying goodbye to my wife and children on Saturday morning. The children had a feeling that something special was happening. For my wife and me it was clear that this could be a farewell for a long time, if not forever in this life. I arrived at the Kreuzkirche just as a doctor from Deaconess Hospital was setting up in a corner of the sacristy, with boxes of bandages and instruments for infusions. In the church, people had all kinds of questions about times for the demonstrations on Sunday, the cancellation of the evening event, and the possibility of getting information about friends or family who had been missing for several days.

At noon, it was decided to hang out a poster calling for the foundation of the New Forum. In a short time, a woman from the Department for Church Affairs in the City of Dresden showed up and demanded its removal. When I told her that the poster would not be removed, she replied, "You will be sorry for that," and left the church. That evening the first spontaneous demonstrations happened. Prague Street¹² had been closed off with a police line, so the demonstrators turned into the multi-laned Main Street. The police were completely surprised and could not stop them.

On Sunday, October 8, members of Kreuzkirche came to the sacristy after worship and asked if we could help them. Their friends, spouses, or children had disappeared, some for several days. Police refused to give any information. During this time, another woman came and reported that as she was returning to the pew from communion, her son had appeared at the rear door and motioned for her to come to him. He said that his older brother had just been arrested. The Stasi had rung at the door and taken him away. Some began to weep as she told the story. We were all deeply shaken. When we were alone, Superintendent Ziemer asked me if I was prepared to look into it. "Yes," I answered, "it must be done right away." At evening prayers it was announced that, starting Monday, the youth ministry office would be open from 8:00 a.m. to midnight to provide information and contact for relatives of arrested or missing persons.

On Sunday evening, the situation became almost unbearably tense. Several thousand had been demonstrating in the city from afternoon on. There were reports of many arrests. Church leaders had a consultation in the sacristy after evening prayers, discussing what the church could do officially for those arrested.

¹²Prague Street is a pedestrian zone with restaurants and shops. At one end of the 500-meter street is the Kreuzkirche; at the other, the Old Market.

There was a knock on the door, and a woman started pleading with us: “Open the church doors, please. Please! A huge demonstration just turned into Prague Street. The police have blocked off everything. Army units with machine guns are behind the police. The people must have shelter available if it turns violent.” As we were assigning tasks in a panic, she pulled a note out of her pocket, gave it to Ziemer, and said, “Call this number. You will reach the desk of the mayor. Tell him no shooting should be allowed!”

I was sent to the main entrance of the church as watchman. We agreed upon a signal for opening the door. The tension that followed was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I heard the first bullhorn announcements from the police: “Citizens, this is an order from the People’s Police of Germany. Leave Prague Street in the direction of the Old Market. Otherwise the area will be cleared by the People’s Police.” Then it was ghostly quiet. No whistles. No chants. The announcement was repeated. Once again, quiet. We had learned during recent days that there would be five announcements, and then the “clearing” would take place. Announcement three followed, then four, then five.

But all remained quiet. After nearly two hours, the first demonstrators came running out of Prague Street—peacefully!—something that had not happened in the last few days. When I entered the sacristy, I found boundless, unbelievable joy. A member of the churchwide council was dancing around like a child. What had happened?

I learned that Bishop Hempel and Superintendent Ziemer had been at the Rathaus (city hall). After Ziemer’s initial phone call, the mayor had asked them to come immediately. There they learned that representatives of the protesters in Prague Street—probably young Catholic priests—had spoken with the police and agreed that all would go home peacefully if they could speak with the mayor about their demands. He had agreed, and the demonstrators were to be there at 9:00 a.m. the next morning, but there could be no more violence. Superintendent Ziemer was to go to Prague Street and report this to the demonstrators, and he had done that. On Monday evening, there were to be informative gatherings in the five largest churches in the city to report on these conversations in the city hall. These events brought us great relief and joy. We went into the church for prayers of thanksgiving. Someone said, “This must be what it is like in heaven.”

The next day, I saw our children again. What great joy I felt! What journey would their lives now take? Could it be possible that they would grow up in something other than a Communist dictatorship? I told them that the mayor would have to visit with the demonstrators that day. They wanted to know if I would be there. I said no, I had to look after the ones who had been arrested. They wanted to know how I would do that, and it struck me that I had absolutely no idea how that should happen.

About 7:00 a.m., I arrived at the office. I called Frank Richter, the Catholic youth pastor. Reaching him on the first try, I asked if he knew exactly what had

happened the night before. He told me the whole story, how a "Group of 20" had been formed upon his initiative, and how everything else had followed. He called the whole thing a complete miracle. I made some notes, and from these we formulated an initial report about the formation of the Group of 20. I told him of our assignment to check into the matter of those who were missing. He was enthusiastic and said one of the demands for the mayor today would be the immediate release of all political prisoners. I asked if he thought the mayor could accomplish that. Frank laughed and said, "Of course not, but the powers of the state must speak with the people today for the first time. That has never happened in the GDR."

It was important not to go to any church tonight or even close to one. The Stasi had a list of 700 names who were supposedly the ringleaders of the rabble-rousers, and that evening would be a good opportunity, they thought, to get them all in one operation.

At 8:00, all the staff members were there, and also some volunteers whom I had asked for help the day before. I began the staff meeting with this announcement: "Beginning immediately, we are the office for information and contact for imprisoned and missing persons. For now, we are open 8:00 a.m. to midnight. We must receive notices of missing persons, organize counseling services for families, and ask for reports about what has happened." We set up basic work schedules, and the first visitors started showing up. We rearranged our offices so that several conversations could take place simultaneously at small tables in the corners. A huge number of organizational questions had to be clarified. As the first conversations with families of prisoners began, we gathered ideas about what had to be done. We needed a form to be filled out about missing persons, a list of trustworthy attorneys, phone numbers of the counseling offices of the church diaconal services, more volunteers to cover the long office hours, and much more. In order to avoid using tapped phones, I went personally to the office of Superintendent Ziemer (only a quarter-mile away) to speak with him, but he was not there. His staff knew nothing about the events of the previous evening. I described what had happened and returned to the youth office.

A young man was waiting there for me. Shaking and upset, he laid a small package in my hand. He had recorded the police radio over the weekend, and now he was afraid to keep the cassettes in his home. I got his name and told him to ask only me about the tapes. I put them at the very back of the bottom drawer. Then a colleague came and tearfully told me that Esther, her daughter, had been arrested the night before, according to a friend of her daughter who had been able to run away. But my colleague had more to tell. The friend had visited her again in the morning, and he told her not to worry, that Esther would certainly be released

soon if she remained peaceable. However, he had been warned by someone he knew who worked in Bautzener Street¹³ that it was important not to go to any church tonight or even close to one. The Stasi had a list of 700 names who were supposedly the ringleaders of the rabble-rousers, and that evening would be a good opportunity, they thought, to get them all in one operation. Once these 700 were put away, so the Stasi supposed, there would be peace again. This information was perhaps more important even than Esther's arrest, and I was requested to tell Superintendent Ziemer about it. Then another young man showed up before I could leave the office. He handed me a whole stack of photos, complete with negatives. Over the weekend, he had secretly photographed the demonstrations and police actions. He wanted the photos to be kept safely, and he said we could use them if it became necessary.

As I stood holding the pictures, the office administrator came to say that it was absolutely necessary that we speak somewhere alone. We went out into the yard, and he said he had just noticed that the Peace Library had been broken into over the weekend. The door was open, but everything appeared to be in order, and he didn't see that any books or papers were missing. We agreed he should find an absolutely reliable electrician to check for bugs in all of our outlets, lamps, and other electric appliances, and that I would inform only Superintendent Ziemer about this. Then I went over to the district office.

On the way, I began wondering just how many years imprisonment might there be for the things we were doing. When I told Ziemer of the break-in, he replied, "Check very carefully for bugs. It would be terrible if the conversations taking place in the youth office now were monitored. The people must be able to rely on us." My report to him of the warning about visiting churches the next night was followed by a long silence. Finally, he looked at me and asked whether I was afraid. I said I had been until last night. But now it would be crazy if everything was destroyed in violence. Then very slowly and peacefully Superintendent Ziemer said, "There are times when we must purely live out the gospel. Times when there are no assurances. It is true today and always: we are in the hands of God."

After a pause, he continued, "I actually wanted to ask about plans for tonight. The huge crowds won't fit in the church." "Then we will have to broadcast the gathering outside with loudspeakers," I answered. "What strange times these are, but that is just how we will do it," he said. "Will you take care of it? But no one can learn of this in advance. I will clear it with the city." Then his secretary knocked on the door for the third or fourth time.

EPILOGUE: AUTUMN

That evening, everything remained peaceful in Dresden. In Leipzig there was a demonstration with 70,000 people, and the police and military pulled back. This

¹³Regional headquarters for the State Security Police, the Stasi, were in Bautzener Street. Thus, "Bautzener Street" and "Stasi" were interchangeable.

news reached us in the Kreuzkirche during our event. Great jubilation broke out. To be sure, the broadcast of our event could not take place, because the mayor had forbidden it, but 6,000 people were inside the church and just as many standing outside. So when we began, Ziemer decided to broadcast anyway. Nevertheless, the loudspeakers remained silent. Later we found the wires had been cut.

Soon the prisoners were released. In the Youth Office we experienced incredible scenes of doubt, sorrow, rage, and deep anxiety, but then also of joy and thankfulness. In the following weeks nearly 400 reports of arrests, interrogations, and abuse were recorded. Just in Dresden, more than 1,300 people had been arrested during those days of October. Many people helped us with the difficult task of comprehending and sharing the pain and anger in the souls of those who had been violated. The reports contained evidence of the Communist system's disdain for people and its brutal treatment of them in the face of their demand for basic human rights. For a long time it was feared that there would be an attempt to destroy this evidence of the dictatorship's inhumanity. Initial publication of the reports of these incidents led first to angry protests by the true believers among the Communists, but then to deep shock.

The weeks continued to be excessively full and strenuous. The situation remained tenuous and confusing clear up to the occupation of Stasi headquarters by "the people" in early December. Often we had to operate far beyond the statutes and laws of the GDR. In the end, it was a grand gift of grace to have experienced this Peaceful Revolution, to be allowed to contribute a bit to such a process, and to stand side by side with people in need and fear, all as part of my pastoral ministry. ⊕

MARTIN HENKER is a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony. In 1989, he served as lead youth pastor for the city of Dresden in the German Democratic Republic. Currently, he is Superintendent for the Church District of Leipzig. Henker has been recognized twice for his role during the Peaceful Revolution. In 2009, he received the Medal of Freedom from the Free State of Saxony. In 2012, Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota, granted him the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris causa.

PAUL ROGERS, translator of this article, is a retired ELCA pastor living in Minneapolis. In addition to serving congregations in South Dakota and Minnesota, he has lived in Germany and Switzerland: as a student in the 1960s, a pastor in a German congregation in the 1970s, and on the staff of the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland, in the 1980s. From 1998–2012, Rogers was coordinator of the Leipzig Connection, a partnership between the Minneapolis Area Synod, ELCA, and the Leipzig District of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony.