Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

11th- 15th September, 2026

'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

'The "Nordkirche" – Bridging the Gap between East and West'

A presentation by the Rev Dr Sebastian Dittmers, Pastor in Bad Segeberg, which was delivered and augmented by Dr Kai Funkschmidt because illness prevented Dr Dittmers from attending in person

Dr Funkschmidt began: I will now try to impersonate a person who is much younger than I! Sebastian Dittmers is a Pastor of this regional Church and we asked him to introduce the Church not just in a general manner but to speak about how this Nordkirche came into being because the Nordkirche is one of those Churches in Germany which, after German Reunification, was forged out of three regional Churches which all pre-existed. As you can imagine that is a very specific German thing. We have the reunification of two parts of the country, we have the same language, but the East was more secularized than the West though we both have the same heritage and the same Lutheran tradition. However, East Germany was behind the Iron Curtain. As a student I was unable to go and visit the Luther sites in Eisenach and so on. So, we thought it would be interesting to look at the Nordkirche, as it's now called, from the perspective of what it meant to unite East and West, something that was not always straightforward.

However, I was blissfully aware of the fact that Dr Dittmers had been taken ill and was unable to come in person until about an hour ago, but I have volunteered to do it because I probably know a bit more about the German Landeskirchen and so on, but please bear with me if I'm not up to scratch in answering any questions you might have. He has given us the script of his presentation and PowerPoint slides which you will all receive after the conference. In his CV he points out that he studied Lutheran Theology here in Hamburg which I found interesting because most students of my generation studying theology didn't point out what variety of theology it was. But because we have Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches in Germany he clearly points out that he is a Lutheran. But he got an international ecumenical background because he got his Master Degree from Toronto Divinity School. That's why, when I spoke to him, he was so happy to come here so he could practice his English! So, it is sad for him, and for us, that he can't be here. He wrote his PhD on the topic I am going to present – the conversion of the Church in 2012. He was ordained in 2014, I think, having served a two-year Vicariate, and is now a Pastor on Schleswig-Holstein in this Nordkirche.

So, I will partly read out his script and sometimes go into greater detail because I think you might need some more explanation of the maps he has prepared, and so on.

Dr Dittmers begins, 'Welcome to the Nordkirche! I deeply regret that I cannot be with you today. I was very much looking forward to our exchange of learning from your perspectives on the state of our Church and the role that mergers play on different levels of our Churches. But I can at least share some of my thoughts with you and hopefully can start and interesting discussion.'

On the map on the next page you see a picture of the Nordkirche which spans most of North Germany between Schleswig Holstein and the Polish border. There is another Church in the North which goes

all the way to the border with The Netherlands called Lower Saxony. But Nordkirche is territorially one of the larger ones in Germany.

the East you see the Church of Pomerania and Mecklenburg, and then to the West is Schleswig-Holstein which consists of a number of Church dioceses or circuits. The two Churches in the East have only two Landeskirchen. Why? It is because church membership in the East is so extremely small. The poor Dean of Mecklenburg has to travel for two or three hours on bumpy roads to get from one end of his deanery to the other whereas here in Hamburg there are two Landeskirchen in the one city. We shall find out why that is later.

A merger recommended

Dr Dittmers wants us to focus on the time when the merger that created the Nordkirche was negotiated and he will explain what was at stake and how people reacted to it. He will consider the constitution of the Churches that merged at that time, and will aim to explain the shape of the Nordkirche by tracing how it came to be and by looking at various strands of the Church political landscape.

His PhD thesis was given to he Heads of the Churches when they were discussing how to become one Church, where were the problems, where the opportunities and where were the tensions, because even today there are still issues – you don't unite different cultures so quickly! There are four Bishops inherited from the time when they were three Landeskirchen (one had two Bishops).

Now you see from this map that the Nordkirche is one of 20 regional Churches (Landeskirchen in German) and while German participants may know all this my experience, says Dr Funkschmidt, is that English and other participants may not! All these regional Churches are independent. The EKD is only an umbrella organization. Despite its name it's not really a Church. It funds Churches overseas but usually these call themselves national Churches. Of the 20 Landeskirchen the largest is Bavaria. All these different Churches come from the time when Germany was divided into City States. You may know the history of the unification in the nineteenth century. So, the Nordkirche is in the north. In addition to the 20 Landeskirchen there is also a Reformed Church. They are not territorial; they are Calvinist and there may be a few dozen congregations all over Germany. In addition, in Germany there is a large number of United Churches in the middle part of Germany. These United Churches often have a political background. They were united on the orders of the King of Prussia and these Churches eventually formed a union across this part of Germany which was formerly Prussia. In the past it was the regional rulers who determined the nature of the Churches, and these United Churches are now part of the EKD.

Also on the map you can see that the Nordkirche which we are here to talk about is not the only one that was created by a merger. In 1971 there was a Federation of Protestant Churches in Lower Saxony, but they didn't unite. They work closely together so as to be able to negotiate with the State over such matters as education. That is a very good reason for having a Federation of Churches within one Federal State, in this case Lower Saxony.

When he became a Pastor Dr Dittmers tried to find out how the Nordkirche came about. He went to the library and looked for a book. He couldn't find one, he says, so he decided to write the book himself! He did, and that was his PhD.

A series of mergers

He decided to go back to the time when the merger was being negotiated at the beginning of the present century, and to examine the make-up of the three Churches (what were they like before they merged). Negotiations took place between 2002 and 2012 when the merger happened. There had been unions in the 19th century, already mentioned under the King of Prussia, and then there was a second wave of mergers between 1933 and 1935, the time of National Socialism. Here in the Nordkirche in 1934 we had political union and the Nazis wanted control over the two Churches in the East. In Mecklenburg there were Christians closely associated with the Nazi movement. They wanted to do away with the Old Testament and they wanted to purge the Church from Jewish influence. The Nazis wanted to centralise everything including the Churches, and these two were happy to merge when the Nazis encouraged them to do so. There was very little discussion, and the people in the pews had no say in the matter.

The Pomeranian Church had a different history. It wasn't the product of a merger but it was nonetheless a product of the Nazis. It used to be much bigger than it is today because after 1945 a portion of it was in Poland. Being such a tiny Church it suffered under the repressive GDR state from 1945 to 1989. The GDR tried to do away with regional identities; it did away with the Federal States. Today there are five Federal States in East Germany which were re-founded after the reunification, but the GDR had broken their land into 15 Districts because, when people have a strong regional identity, they tend to become a bit outspoken when the State wants to plan something. They have pride in their locality, so one way of suppressing the people is to take away their regional identity by breaking down the structures. The GDR also wanted to get rid of the Church but they withstood, something which became important when the time came for the creation of the Nordkirche because the people had developed a certain mentality and tended to stand up against change.

We go back to the Nazis again: they not only wanted to form bigger Churches but also the Federal States. On the map on the following page you can see the city of Hamburg before 1937 – and Hamburg today!

It was the Nazis who created what we know today as Hamburg. Before that the city was surrounded by about 20 hamlets but they united them all into the one city. The old city of Hamburg had its own Landeskirche whereas the surrounding lands were in another Landeskirche, so now the enlarged city fell under two Landeskirchen! That wasn't very convenient because if the Mayor wanted to talk to the Churches which one would he go to? To the north there is Schleswig Holstein which had three regional Churches before 1939. So, you can see that there is a long history of uniting Churches under political pressure. Then, in 1977, the Church North of the Elbe was created from these three regional Churches.

When I was a student, Dr Funkschmidt said, it never occurred to me that the ministers in this regional Church had all been ordained into three different regional Churches! These ministers would all have remembered what it was like before and many probably regretted the beautiful things that had been lost. When in 1977 these Churches united, they created a new constitution. That constitution may well have been shaped in part by the prevailing social milieu. The early 1970s were a time of student uprisings, and life was becoming more egalitarian and a fully experienced democracy in Germany. Dr

Dittmers says this was influential in the creation of this constitution, though he doesn't spell it out. Dr Funkschmidt thinks it may mean that it became a more democratic Church with a strong Synod.

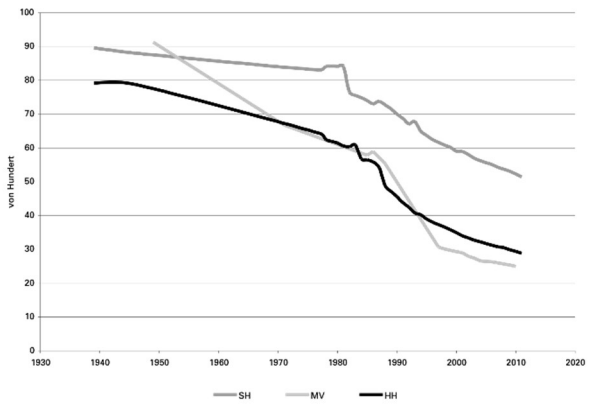
West-East Relationships

After 1945 the Churches that were later to form the Nordkirche were all in close contact. Pomerania and North Elbia had a strong partnership and the Western Churches were doing their best to look after the Churches in the East. In East Germany, the GDR, it was hard to get building materials, for example, because these materials were there but they were being traded on a kind of black market. So, the Western Churches gave these Easter Churches hard currency, something the GDR authorities allowed because they wanted the foreign currency from the West. In addition to this practical assistance there was also an exchange of people. Encounters were organized. For example, when I was a student, said Dr Funkschmidt, I went on a student exchange in a church context. That all meant that when reunification came there was already a strong history of interaction and partnering.

But there was a downside. The flow was always in one direction – West to East. It became a burden on these partnerships because on the one hand the money was needed because church buildings were slowly collapsing and the people in the East couldn't easily buy the material because the Church there was always last in line to get anything simply because the State didn't want it! Indeed, it was so bad that if you were known to be a Christian you couldn't take the equivalent of A-levels or go to university. With the flow of money only going one way there was always a sense that the Eastern Churches were needy which could easily lead to feelings of superiority and inferiority on either side. That was true at a personal level too. People from the West could travel to the East, but the people in the East could not travel to the West. Those from the West could always cross the border and go home which meant that there were often tears at the border because everyone knew that people in the East were unlikely to be able to make a return visit. So, there was a lot of baggage in this relationship between East and West Germany.

Decline in Membership

All three Churches, like any others in Germany, have lost many members in the last decades. This graph shows the rate of decline from 1930 to 2015.



You can see that Mecklenburg was the one that dropped the fastest. Then you have Hamburg, which for a long time was the most secularized city in Germany with less than 50% Christian these past 20 or 30 years. The North of Germany has always been more secularised than the South, where Protestants tend to stay in the churches longer than the Roman Catholics surrounding them! The North was never very pious or Christian. Church is a very hard thing to sell in this part of Germany!

This decline has led to dire financial crises, and especially in the Pomeranian Church. This was one reason that the EKD recommended that the Churches should merge. The Pomeranian Church has a very strong identity but it is only the size of one large merged congregation in some other parts of Germany! But though they were in danger of dying as a Church, people said that if the merger took place they would be losing their Pomeranian identity. The said they had a very special history. Because they were originally part of Prussia they belonged to the Union of United Churches in Germany. It was only from 1990 that people were allowed to say they were from Pomerania. Under the GDR that was

not allowed. They were afraid that under the merger their identity would once again disappear. They would disappear once again from the map!

At this stage Dr Dittmers wanted the meeting to go into three break-out groups:

Group ONE to discuss secularization.

Group TWO to consider 'Patrons or Partners' - the role of financial resources in church unions

Group THREE to discuss democracy and minority rights: the role of membership size in church unions

The participants split into roughly three equal groups and enjoyed lively discussion. Each then reported their 'findings' when they gathered back into plenary.

But for now, what matters is how you, dear reader, would approach those issues.

Dr Dittmers offered the following explanation for declining church membership:

> "It is neither is the failure of church actors the cause of declining religiosity in Northern Germany, nor can this trend be reversed through changes in church practice alone. The decline in religiosity in the area of the Nordkirche is not attributable to a poor supply but to declining demand among the population. As prosperity increased, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, larger sections of the population grew up with a sense of existential security and therefore had less need for religious content or religious practice. The churches have no significant influence on the extent of this demand for religion."

Today people are much more concerned about their wellbeing and security and the churches are remiss if they do not recognize this and work hard to meet this need. That is necessary if the decline in church membership is to be halted and reversed.

He offered this quotation that underlines the sense of anxiety that members of a smaller Church may have over a merger with a larger Church:

> "We are giving up our identity; we are no longer a regional church. It is only since reunification in 1990 that we have once again been allowed to call ourselves Pomeranian. In future, we will no longer have a blocking minority in the Synod. Under Section 13 of the Introductory Act, the protection of the continued existence of the church districts of Mecklenburg and Pomerania applies for only 15 years. After that, we will no longer be able to prevent the church district from being dissolved, and with it the word 'Pomerania' from disappearing for good. I can only agree to the constitution if I do not abolish myself entirely; I need assurance that no one will dare to tamper with the Pomeranian church district."
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> (Wolfhard Molkentin, Verfassunggebende Synode, Oktober 2011)

And one driving force behind the proposal that the Nordkirche be created was this:

> Negotiations about the church union of the Nordkirche had started as a response to precarious financial situation of the Pomeranian Church.
> *Kirche der Freiheit*
> *EKD Gutachten 2003*