



Wealthy Germany is Growing Poorer

An Enormous Challenge – even for the Church

Germany is a rich country. On a world wide scale the Germans still belong to the club of the wealthy. But the domestic economy is changing radically. In recent years the poverty rate has increased considerably, the gap between rich and poor has grown. Social laws have been changed, the social security systems have been taken down. The current social problems present an enormous challenge – even for the Church.

The German social welfare system has been in crisis for some 20 years. It's becoming increasingly difficult to finance. Everyone agrees that it has to be completely overhauled. But how? The debate on this subject is emotional and often polarized. The new laws are changing the very social welfare system that has developed in Germany since the industrial revolution in the 19th century. Back then workers had virtually no rights. They organized themselves into groups to fight for their rights – and were successful. Laws were passed to medically insure workers in case of sickness or work related accident. Then came the long term disability and old age insurances that guaranteed every worker a lifelong benefits.

Even with such benefits, pastors and church lay people were still needed to take care of the poor. The first children's homes appeared in cities to take care of children from the poor parts of town and for migrant workers. This was the birth of church social work, the "diaconal service", closely connected for example with names like Johann Hinrich Wichern or Friedrich Bodelschwingh.

In the following decades the social welfare laws were extended and expanded to complement national unemployment insurance. This unemployment insurance was financed, until a short time ago, equally by employers and employees. The government guaranteed national unemployment insurance with tax income. But the national debt has risen dramatically – what has till now been a wealthy country is growing continually poorer.

A lot has to change. The churches are pleading that the new reform laws don't overlook social justice. The Chairperson of the Council of the Evangelical Church



Somewhere in a city: Man begging at the entrance of a church.

in Germany (EKD), Bishop Wolfgang Huber in Berlin, has spoken out for a "solidarity of responsibility". A responsible society has to find an equilibrium between rich and poor, strong and weak. "The reform", says Bishop Huber, "should be made so that the poor and the sick are taken care of today and tomorrow. But it should also allow for education and the possibility of working, to support families without disturbing the relationship between generations."

It's not just that social changes are being discussed – the whole society is being put to the test. The social work of the Church has therefore already adjusted to suit the new society. Poverty has traditionally been an urban problem, but there are already church parishes across the countryside that distribute food to the needy or open their doors to the unemployed.

The church has to see itself in the light Jesus' solidarity with the poor as seen in the Gospel according to Luke. The selfishness of the well-to-do tested the moral fiber of society even back in the time of Corinth. Saint Paul, in his first letter to that parish, called for responsible solidarity in the use of wealth. This call still applies. (dk/mkr)

Reasons for poverty in Germany:

- Markets have now been globalized, the money goes where it can bring in the greatest profit.
- Unemployment has increased structurally – more work can be done by fewer people.
- Demographic developments of decreasing birth rates and increasing numbers of older people are causing considerable problems.
- The cost of old age pensions, unemployment payments and the health care system has increased.

A Meeting Place for the Unemployed: Model for Success for the Wrong Reason

Tears come to her eyes, "We thought we had made it, and now we might even have to move out of our apartment." Ms. M. comes to the "CaféZeit" for counsel. The Evangelical Family Service has organized a meeting place in Bad Soden, a town just north of Frankfurt. People who are out of work can come here for advice and solace. The new laws governing national unemployment payments are hitting people hard.

Klaus Wesemann, himself unemployed, is one of eight counsellors in the "CaféZeit". He is shocked at the number of middle class people who from one day to the next find they must deplete their savings after they lose their jobs. "A lot of them just can't believe what's suddenly happened to them."

Ms. M. explains that she had a good job in an advertising agency but was fired. Her husband was at that time marketing manager in a big company. He was forced to go free lance but was not able to bring in enough to live on. "We had everything taken care of, with a 130 square meter apartment and two life insurance policies". Now the couple will have to sell the apartment and cash in the life insurance policies at a loss. All this because they must spend down their assets almost completely in order to qualify under the new unemployment benefits regulations.

Sigurd Sartorius is a social worker and specialist at the "CaféZeit". He can easily calculate in his head how much each unemployed person can own and still qualify for unemployment benefits. It's not a lot. Since January 1, 2005 the new unemployment regulations apply. Social worker Sartorius is well acquainted with all the red

tape. "With the new law we are in uncharted waters." But he knows how to get through the administrative jungle so that the money can be paid out faster. "But if the Application for Urgent Treatment is denied the applicant is stuck with court and legal fees." This is very difficult for people who are already down to almost nothing. A cold wind is blowing through Germany. (as)



People without job visit the "CafeZeit". Ms. Cornelia Zimmermann-Müller helps them to go through all the forms for relief in order to fill out the correct applications.



The cross besides the flag of the trade union: If a lot of people join together they can reach their aims more easily.

WESER5 in Frankfurt – A Place for Help and a Church for the Diaconical Work



Rush hour in the soup kitchen. Every day around noon many needy people gather to receive some food.

Five is an address on a street, Weser Street, in the middle of Frankfurt's train station district – a district with a lot of social problems. Five is the number of fingers on the whole hand. And the help offered to the homeless can be counted on the fingers of one hand: a daily meeting place, street social workers, social counselling, a place to sleep, temporary housing.

Automobile Plant Plans to Cut Work Force Church Supports Affected Auto Workers



Pastor Guth brought one hundred cloth flags sewed together to make a banner. Passers by wrote on them whatever was going through their minds. "The right to work is for everyone, not just the privileged" it says on one flag, "Work and Mother Nature are the source of all Wealth" it says on another. These short texts will be read together as an appeal at a church service. Afterwards pastor Guth will cut them apart and distribute them among the parishes in Rüsselsheim.

The pastor's concern is the political discussion. "We have to look at where the structure is wrong and take ideology out of the argument", he explains. This man of the cloth is pleading for a more just distribution of work. The Automaker's crisis is also a reason to think about the economic structure and the distribution of work. "All economy is there to support life", says pastor Guth.

Reverend Kurt Hohmann, Dean in the Rüsselsheim Deanery, also calls for the presence of the Church in hard times. "Nobody expects the Church to solve the problems, we're not a catch-all. But we do have to simply be there." He concedes that the Church has distanced itself from the world of labour for the past 150 years. He speaks of the Church's roll saying, "We have to stick it out together. We can't change things. And we have to talk about work, about the distribution, and about the dignity of human existence." (as)



Reverend Volkhard Guth (on the right), together with Gerhard Degen a member of the workers-committee, presenting the concerns of the Opel-workers to God and the people.

The Opel automobile plant in Rüsselsheim is the largest industrial installation in the area of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN). Opel is in a financial crisis. The German plant belongs to the US company, General Motors, which has decided to cut thousands of jobs in Europe.

The people in Rüsselsheim feel threatened. The Church was present on a community action day. Pastor Volkhard Guth says, "I'd like to remove the gag from those affected." The Opel employees in his parish, often young people with families, draw back in silence. They want to know: "Is it going to affect me? If it does, where can I find another job?" The final decision on who has to go will be made soon.

What is the target group for WESER5?

Men and women who sleep on the street corner on a piece of cardboard find a safe place to come in and out of the cold during the day. Here they can have breakfast, take a shower or wash their clothes. The counselling office, the sleeping room and the temporary housing are there for men who have lived on the street, lost their apartments, or have just come out of jail. Experienced social workers work together on

solutions, help the people through the jungle of official forms and offices, help them to survive and look for a new chance in life.

What's next?

On the corner of WESER5 is the Weißfrauen Church, "Church of the White Ladies". The former parish gave the church to the Church Social Service Agency in January 2005. Now Weißfrauen has become a Church for Social Work and will be converted into an example of

diaconical work. A spiritual place and a place for discourse on the problem of social justice in the city, with social church services, social debates, evening meals, diaconical dialogues and much more. Church social work never exists for its own sake. It always reaches out to those in need. (as)



Gerald Hintze, WESER5, Frankfurt



Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, in these days of Pentecost

2005 you receive the 7th edition of our Newsletter. The articles were written under the impression of fundamental economic and social changes in our society. "The Wealthy Germany is Growing Poorer" – how people and initiatives of our church react on this challenges we want to share with you.

As editor for the last seven years I want to say good bye. The newsletter is one of our possibilities to share with you as respected partners the challenges we face in Church and society. Since January 31st I'm in my new office as Vice President of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau. In the past years I had many occasions to meet and to learn from you as our partners. I want to thank you very much for all good cooperation and sharing experiences and faith.

Yours in Christ

Cordelia Kopsch
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Everyone has the Same Human Dignity

A Project to Study Wealth and Poverty

The gap between wealthy and the poor is growing. In Germany, as in the rest of the world, private wealth is counterbalanced more and more by "public poverty". That's why "Wealth and Poverty as a Challenge for the Church" is the name of the study commissioned by the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN). The subject matter is the ethical responsibility of wealth as well as the idea of social justice.

The aim of the project is to place the discussion of wealth in the face of poverty in a new light both in the Church and in society. Within the EKHN there are organizations involved in the project such as the Center for Ecumenical Work, the Center for Social Responsibility and the Social Service Agency of the EKHN, the "Diaconical Work in Hesse and Nassau" that, following their own agendas, have a particular interest in the theological and



and humanitarian aid organisations cooperate through it. (dk/mkr)

In Germany the number of children and young people depending on social welfare is increasing.

socio-economic repercussions of the root causes of poverty and wealth in Germany.

For these institutions the message of the Bible is the basis of their work. That message is that everyone has the same inalienable human dignity. This dignity is infringed upon when people are not allowed access to life sustaining resources. So the Churches are working for more justice and a more appropriate distribution of public wealth.

The EKHN's study is part of a greater study "Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the 21st Century", initiated in 1997 by the European Union of Churches, APRODEV. APRODEV was founded in 1990 in order to strengthen the cooperation between the European development organisations which work closely together with the World Council of Churches (WCC). At present, 17 development

Report

Cordelia Kopsch new Vice Church President

Rev. Cordelia Kopsch is the new Vice Church President of the EKHN. She was elected during the fall session of the Church Synod in November 2004 and was inaugurated in January 2005. Rev. Kopsch is the first woman in this position and is the successor of Rev. Hans-Helmut Köke who retired after 13 years in office. Rev. Kopsch had been responsible for Mission and Ecumenism in the EKHN for the last 8 years. After her study of theology in Germany she worked and studied for some time in Israel. Later on she served as pastor in Frankfurt and became the first Reverend for Peace-Work in the EKHN. (mkr)

Youth Convention again a Success

More than 6.000 young people participated in the Second EKHN Youth Convention which took place during 4 days in June last year in Wiesbaden, the Capital city of the State of Hesse. "I got to know young people and I learned a lot about God and the Church. I will come back again", said a 14 year old girl after the Convention. The next youth meeting is planed for 2006. (dk)

Jochen Kramm new Head of the Ecumenical Center

On February 1st, 2005 Rev. Dr. Jochen Kramm started his work as successor of Rev. Dr. Karl Heinz Dejung who had retired as head of the Ecumenical Center in March 2004. Rev. Kramm gained ecumenical experience during a one year stay in South Africa working with an AIDS-Project in Kapstadt. One focus of his work is the Islamic-Christian dialogue. He had studied Islam for 18 months in Cairo. (dk)

60 Years of Peace – 60 Years End of World War II

On Sunday May 8th, the EKHN will celebrate an ecumenical worship commemorating the day when in Germany 60 years ago World War II ended. The capitulation ended the death of soldiers, the sufferings of concentration camp prisoners and set the seal on the defeat of Germany. With the end of the war Germany was liberated from the Nazi governance, a perversion of leadership. The day of commemoration on May 8th has many faces, it is a reason for mourning and joy, lamentation and thanks. (sk)