

**Report on visit to the 32nd Deutscher
Kirchentag in Bremen
20th – 24th May 2009**



Rev. Colin Campbell;
Mrs Dorothy Knights of Ecumenical Forum of European
Christian Women.
Mr Douglas Anderson.

This year the 32nd German Protestant Kirchentag took place in Bremen, Northern Germany, from 20th to 24th May 2009. Some 300,000 people attended the events including some 3481 overseas visitors of which I was one. The theme could be translated as ‘Man or mortal where are you?’ which certainly offered a challenge to Christians to stand up and be counted and the issues of ‘Faith, Ecology and Economy’ were on the agenda.

There were literally hundreds of events catering for every interest and these events were mainly centred around three areas of the city. At the outset visitors were encouraged to be selective and choose a balanced diet. With hundreds of stalls in the ‘Market of Opportunities’ to visit, indoor and open air concerts, worship, Bible studies, lectures, discussion groups to name a few, it was possible to try and do too much.

Pastor Renke Brahms, moderator of the Bremen Protestant Church, in his opening address, outlined some of the challenges facing Christians today.- Issues of poverty and starvation; the threat to the whole of creation through climate change; old conflicts demanding a peaceful solution and the danger of new conflicts over water and raw materials. All of this set against a background of global financial and economic crisis. Yet the Christian does not need to hide

from the tasks. He needs to have confidence in God, celebrate, tell others and act.

There were many people from other faiths and churches at the Kirchentag as well. The Jesuit Order had their stall, along with numerous others in the ‘Market of Opportunities’ and I did have the opportunity of bringing greetings from the ICC to the RC Bishop of Osnabruck.

There were many opportunities to celebrate. After the opening ceremony, there was a street carnival which took the vast crowd through the streets of Bremen and culminated in a most moving epilogue and candle lighting ceremony. On the second evening some 65,000 people attended an open air concert. There were ships in the old harbour where the focus was on service and outreach.

However, as with many festivals, one important value came from the opportunity to network and talk informally to people from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. Some 200 folk had travelled from Kenya to take part. Another exciting benefit of being with so many other Christians was the stimulation and incentive to return home and share some of the ideas of how we can further God’s kingdom here.



Colin Campbell with Peter Caldwell from CTBI

Colin.

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The Kirchentag (or German Church Congress) has been described as “a mixture of a Bible convention, Taizé, Greenbelt, an Open University summer school, a Party Conference, a Synod, the Edinburgh Festival (and two fringes), an Eisteddfod, a brass band festival (for 500 bands!), an Ideal Homes Exhibition and a Cup Final – all rolled into one and all going on at the same time.....” That just about sums it up!



Colin Campbell (NSPC), Dorothy Knights (Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women) and Douglas Anderson (PCI) at the Kirchentag

The first impression is the scale of the event. It was attended by well over 100,000 people, and there were over 2000 events to choose from. Bremen was crowded. There was a massive resource exhibition filling several halls, with hundreds of stalls ranging from Greenpeace to the Jesuits! It was therefore impossible for any one person to experience any more than just a sample of what was on offer. At one of the opening services, held outdoors in the exhibition grounds which were approximately equivalent to Belfast’s King’s Hall, Waterfront and Odyssey Arena combined, there were some 70,000 people present. This was followed by a carnival procession in to the city centre.



Opening service attended by over 70,000

Another lasting impression is the level of recognition the Kirchentag enjoyed at national level. The opening service was addressed by the German Federal President, Dr Horst Köhler, and the following day, the Chancellor, Dr Angela Merkel, was interviewed for the best part of two hours on the subject of “Human Worth and Democracy”. There were also other leading politicians, past and present, in attendance. It would be hard to image Gordon Brown or David Cameron identifying so closely with the church in the UK!!



German President Horst Köhler addresses Kirchentag participants

I was also intrigued and encouraged to see the number of times explicit reference was made to the atrocities of the 1930s. It is a tradition for the Kirchentag to begin with a time of recollection of what happened during those dark years, and this year there was a service of remembrance outside St Peter's Cathedral in the city centre. Also, Michael Goldmann-Gilead, the Auschwitz survivor and lawyer who was instrumental in the arrest and trial of Adolf Eichmann, spoke of his experiences, as did four children and grandchildren of several prominent Nazi officers. The German church appears to be determined that the rising generation should not forget the horrors of the past. This is significant in a country where, within the past 15 years, attempts have been made to deny the Holocaust.

There was also a strong musical side to the Kirchentag. Rap is definitely in! But there were numerous times of community singing from the Kirchentag song book. For me, one of the highlights was an open-air presentation of excerpts from Handel's Messiah on the final evening with orchestra and assembled choirs.

While there was much that was interesting, I was most concerned that several events I attended took a stance that was at variance with historic Christianity. In an early session, for example, a visitor from Greenland told the assembly that he was going to invite the spirits of his ancestors to be present. Several minutes of gesticulations and howls followed. Again, in a session entitled “What is written?” several presentations were given which stated blatantly that homosexuality was compatible with the Bible. The gay lobby also had several stalls at the resource exhibition. Then there was the issue of the relationship between different religions. In a most interesting discussion between leading “Christian”, Muslim and Jewish scholars on the subject “Are we all in the same boat?” the key word was “dialogue” rather than “mission” or “evangelism”. These are all matters of grave concern. All is not well with the German State Church.



Interfaith dialogue – complete with waiting boat!

Still, the Deutscher Kirchentag was an interesting and informative event and well worth attending, and I thank the Irish Council of Churches for the opportunity to participate.

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