

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development

Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras

## 1 Introduction

The annual international meeting of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) took place this year at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in Halle/Saale (Germany) with the title “Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development” on 10–14 June 2024. The host institution was the recently founded Centre for Empowerment Studies (CES).<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the annual meetings is to exchange research findings, promote critical dialogue and develop and discuss suggestions for missional, sustainable and context-sensitive church development. The guiding questions of the ICEF are: What are the specific conditions of our own context? How does God’s mission manifest itself in our environment? Where do we discover traces of the work of the Holy Spirit and how does church life develop in our contexts? What theological questions arise from this and need to be reflected upon in greater depth? What can we learn from each other? What can be empirically ascertained and how can it be interpreted theologically?

The topics of the conference centred in particular on secularity and empowerment. The East German context and the development of a missional church were the specific local resonance space for this. The term “empowerment” was intended to enrich the question of the future of the churches through critical reflection.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Key questions of the CES include: How can the communication of the gospel succeed under the current conditions of secularity? How can people experience the Gospel as enabling and empowering for their lives? The CES conducts research with different focal points on Christian empowerment in religious education and practical theological contexts. <https://ces-halle.de/forschung/> (22 November 2024).
  - 2 On the CES homepage, empowerment is understood as aiming to “provide life support that enables people to trust their own strengths and shape their lives independently. This requires certain skills and competences on the one hand and strength, power and courage on the other. Anyone who addresses empowerment looks at both the resources of the individual, i.e. the personal space of opportunity, and the resources that are available for this, i.e. the structural space of opportunity. Ultimately, the aim is to explore in more detail how, from a Christian perspective, the possibilities can be expanded so that people can live their lives in a self-determined way.” <https://ces-halle.de/forschung/> (22 November 2024).

Didactically, there were lectures and discussions, spiritual impulses, field trips and visits to church plantings and missional and innovative communities and congregations in the local context (Evangelical Church of Central Germany, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, Halle Free Church).

The public day, this time at the Halle-Wittenberg Faculty of Theology, addressed local and national theological issues in a special way, including the current German membership studies (Michael Herbst, Hanna Kauhaus), the approaches to empowerment in a hereditary-secular context (Michael Domsen) and international perspectives, such as the missional potential of interculturality (Harvey Kwiyan, Nigel Rooms, Ariane Schneider), as well as methodological impulses (Dorte Kappelgaard, Marten van der Meulen, Thomas Schlegel).

## 2 Personal Reflections

What do we remember after five days of thinking, discerning and “walking together”? Some personal reflections:

### 2.1 Academic discourse and spirituality

The special character of the meetings of the ICEF network is the combination of academic reflection, exchange of experiences, reading the Bible together (“Dwelling in the Word”), and consistently one text for each of the five days: Lk. 10.1-12. One can recognize the integrative approach of the consortium’s work in this: theological reflection and academic discourse are always combined with spiritual fellowship. However, one can also find the particular theological impulse that had a formative and determining effect throughout all the lectures and debates: that God not only “is”, but also works and can be experienced – and his work is first and foremost the impetus for missionary work in the church and through the church. The question repeatedly asked is therefore: “Where is God already at work here?” And only then: “What should we do about it?” It has always been clear in the background that this attitude after the Enlightenment is certainly controversial, but nonetheless necessary.

### 2.2 Mission

It is therefore a special characteristic of this community of academic theologians and church practitioners that they share a distinctive understanding of mission, which is based on God’s presence and his reconciling, healing and faith-creating work – and understands the church as a messenger who perceives where God is at work and then makes itself available to serve and celebrate God’s salvation. Andrew Root’s theological work has therefore been quoted in Halle repeatedly, including by Edwin van Driel: Root’s “project aims to empower churches in this new missional era by helping

them focus ministry on the presence and work of God”.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to a “functional atheism” that no longer knows how to speak of God’s presence and action and therefore places the entire burden of mission on human shoulders, spiritual discernment is called for here, which – taught by the Holy Scriptures – seeks to perceive God’s existence and action in the world.

### 2.3 God’s preferred future

Beyond what is “already now” and can be perceived, however, the church needs an eschatological mindset (the “not yet”). Those who follow Christ do not live in the perpetual repetition of the old, but rather seek “God’s preferred future” (Frederick Marais) and strive to embody something of it now. Here, social science theories about the diffusion of innovation (Everett Rogers) or the creation of prototypes and the “presencing” of the emerging new (Otto Scharmer) can support the spiritual insights and practical steps of the church.

### 2.4 Local congregations

Not only the meetings between theological and church leaders were in focus, but also the local congregations themselves. If an important task is for congregations to be independent actors in God’s mission (and not just “care cases”), then the task of spiritual formation is on the churches’ agenda. This was discussed using the example of a South African model (South African Partnership for Missional Church, Tom Smith), which introduces congregations (and not just their pastors) to a mission-oriented “rhythm of life” with spiritual disciplines and missionary explorations.

### 2.5 Secularization

Local churches develop in a very specific context, which also influences their mission. That’s why the subject of secularization was a recurring topic of debate in Halle, not least with reference to Charles Taylor’s insights into the “Secular Age”. But the East German context, with the experience of 40 years of state discrimination and marginalization of church life, illustrated Taylor’s insights in a highly impressive way.

### 2.6 Abundance

At the same time, this context should not put local churches in a depressive mood: There is abundance in places of scarcity. The conference did not just coincidentally take place in East Germany, one of the most secularized regions in the world (Felix Eiffler). The model of the “Volkskirche” (folk church) as the church of the majority

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3 E. v. Driel refers to several publications by Root (2017; 2019; 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2023). The books are presented as volumes of a series entitled “Ministry in a Secular Age”.

is obviously coming to an end here. The church finds itself in the *diaspora*: smaller, poorer and older. This became apparent, for example, at the presentation of the latest church membership study (Michael Herbst, Hanna Kauhaus). What was remarkable, however, was the less depressive mood that was conveyed, e.g. in the field trips, but also in the theological reflections on the *diaspora*. Without glossing over the situation, it became clear that there is abundance in places of scarcity. An East German pastor told of small new beginnings, e.g. of a church children's choir led by an atheist – and some of the children were then baptized. Equally revealing was the report of a pastor (Martin Golz, Halle) whose congregation has a presence in the middle of a socially deprived area with a construction trailer and has become a contact point for people from the neighbourhood – for fellowship, counselling and church services. They are not a church *for* others, but *with* others, and they experience in their ostensibly deficient situation: the resources can be found in the context. At first, secularity seems to be primarily a problem, but it is precisely when congregations seek God's presence and work anew that it becomes clear that this challenging starting position can also be a gift. Can one even say that the church in East Germany could be something like the "forefront of the church" (Dorte Kappelgaard)?

## 2.7 Crisis

Another danger was addressed in the discussions in Halle: The crisis of the Western churches could lead them to only concern themselves with themselves and to see the actual mission of the church as "fixing" the church. Marten van der Meulen distinguished between *crisis 1* (the decline of the church) and *crisis 2* (the forgetting of God's mission). Although *crisis 1* cannot simply be ignored, it is precisely in *crisis 1* that it is important not to lose sight of the right order of things and to recognize God's work. Signs of abundance can then be found in completely normal people, and shalom can be experienced in poor communities - as in the feeding of the people in the desert (with enormous leftovers!) according to Mt. 14.

## 2.8 Resonance

In addition to Charles Taylor, Hartmut Rosa's reflections on *Resonance* were repeatedly referred to. In a certain context, resonance also became a criterion for congregational development. Knut Tvetereit used case studies on various communities to show that resonance is contextual: "What resonates in one place, might not resonate in another place."

## 2.9 Experiencing faith

However, according to Edwin van Driel, resonance arises through being *with* and not only through being *for*. The first experience of resonance is that people experience faith: There is someone who hears us. Faith carries with it a promise of resonance.

That is why joy is its characteristic. God not only wants to remedy our needs (being *for*), but also to be with us and on our way (being *with*). “The church is the community in which God’s gift of being with is already experienced.” The fact that it exists, that people gather to listen and pray, is in itself a sign of God’s goodness.

## 2.10 Unanswered questions

Of course, there are still unanswered questions regarding the willingness to learn new things, especially in times of uncertainty. The question was raised several times (and quite emotionally) as to whether the European church is finally ready to take the experiences of the African churches seriously and learn from them. The question arises not only with regard to global contacts, but also on their own doorstep: to what extent are the ministry and insights of the migrant churches (especially in Central and Western European cities) being taken seriously by the long-established majority churches? In the end, we are left with gratitude for the special opportunity to reflect on the church and God’s mission with theologically and ecclesiastically active leaders from four continents, but also the challenge of continually entering into an intercultural dialogue on an equal footing.

## 3 Conclusion

To sum it up: There is a unique character of the ICEF network, which integrates academic theological discourse with spiritual fellowship, particularly through practices like Bible study. It emphasizes a theology rooted in recognizing and responding to God’s active presence in the world, shaping a mission-oriented approach where the church discerns where God is at work and participates in it. This mission focuses on celebrating God’s reconciling and transformative action, avoiding a purely human-centric view of ministry. Additionally, the church is called to adopt an eschatological perspective, seeking “God’s preferred future” by embodying innovation and spiritual discernment to navigate the present and future challenges of faith and practice. The local congregation is an active participant in God’s mission, focusing on spiritual formation and contextual engagement. Using models like the South African Partnership for Missional Church, churches are encouraged to adopt a mission-oriented lifestyle. The challenges of secularization, illustrated by East Germany’s history, highlight the potential for abundance in scarcity. Stories of small beginnings and community-focused ministries reveal that even in declining or marginalized contexts, God’s presence and resources emerge in meaningful ways. The discussions also warn against inward-focused “crisis management” that neglects God’s mission. Instead, the church should prioritize recognizing God’s work, as exemplified by moments of unexpected abundance (e.g., feeding the multitude). Concepts like “resonance” (Rosa) highlight the importance of contextual responses and the

promise of faith as relational joy, grounded in God's being with" people rather than merely "being for" them. The church itself embodies this divine presence, offering hope and purpose through shared worship and prayer.

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