

EDITORIAL

Special Issue: Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development in Germany

Felix Eiffler

It is my pleasure to introduce this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, which offers some papers that have been developed from lectures given at the annual gathering of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) in Halle/Saale in Germany in June 2024. It was hosted by the *Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity*,¹ a research centre of the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. The conference was titled “Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development”. The **Conference Report**, written by Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras, gives a nuanced insight into the meeting and its different inputs, themes and discussions.

The golden thread running through this special issue is the current circumstances and challenges of the Evangelical Church in Germany. As in many Western countries, the churches in Germany are facing a steep decline, which has gained pace and dynamism since the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Germany is in the special position of being still divided – at least in terms of religion, faith and church membership. Since the majority of people in Western Germany are still members of either the Evangelical or the Catholic Church, the large majority (76%) of people in East Germany (the former GDR) are non-affiliated to any religious organization. Even though the West German states are catching up in many areas there is still a distinctive difference in terms of church membership, religious affiliation and secularity between the East and the West part of Germany. The latest Church Membership Survey (2022–24) showed that 13% of the entire German population is religious with affiliation to the church (evangelical and catholic). Another 25% of Germans are religious-distant and the majority of 56% is secular-oriented. In East Germany this is even true of 73% and in West Germany this is also applicable to a majority of 53% of the population. In East

1 www.ces-halle.de (05.05.2025),

Germany the group of religious-distant people is 27% and in West Germany 13% of the people. The people who are religious in an ecclesial way, constitute 9% in East and 14% in West Germany. These numbers show the stark differences between East and West Germany in terms of religion and church membership (Wunder 2024).

However, society is shifting towards secularity – and this affects East and West Germany equally. Thus, secularity is no longer a solely East German issue. Besides the fact that East and West Germany are still different in terms of religious affiliation, the last Memberships Survey also showed that the majority of the German population (56%) is secular-orientated and only a small minority of 13% is religious in a Christian and ecclesial form. This is a challenge for questions of sustainable church development and religious communication and sets the frame for this special issue.

The current situation and the expected trends and perspectives are thus the reason for founding the *Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity* at the University in Halle. This interdisciplinary research centre combines different theological traditions and methodological approaches to research Christian faith and practice as well as religious communication and church development in a strongly secularized context like East Germany. One leading question is how Christians can be empowered by local congregations, the wider church and academic theology to express their faith in a mature, responsible and sustainable way. Another aim is to reflect theory and practice to communicate the gospel with as many people as possible, no matter if they are members of the church or not.

The team of the research centre takes a multifaceted approach, which combines different theological traditions as well as scientific fields like religious education and pedagogy, practical theology, psychology and sociology. It also combines different research approaches like empirical studies, discourse analyses, participative research etc. The team of researchers is convinced that only a poly-perspective approach is able to examine and describe the situation properly and is also more likely to develop (at least some) ideas and perspectives to deal with the German ecclesial situation and its challenges in a helpful way. Thereby the different discourses on empowerment prove to be inspiring dialogue partners, who offer helpful insights and impulses. By combining theological reflection with different empowerment-related discourses, the *Centre for Empowerment Studies* aims to develop forms and variants of a Christian formatted empowerment. The intention is to develop a Christian empowerment that serves regional churches, local congregations and individual Christians in their different attempts of religious education and their various ways to communicate the gospel and express their faith in the triune God.

In the first article **Michael Domszen** introduces the idea of Christian empowerment in a secular context. He outlines the genesis of this idea born out of the observation of a changed self-evidence: for a long time, Christian religion functioned as the

defining medium that shaped collective perceptions of reality, but this has undergone a fundamental transformation. Thus, the Christian worldview, which was very influential for a very long period, has become one perspective among many – at least in the Western world. East Germany is a context in which one can observe these developments in a quite advanced arena. As a result, a threefold crisis can be described for the church in Germany: financial decline, losing trust due to sexual abuse and a broad loss of significance, relevance and influence. Domszen identifies two major questions: How can the gospel be communicated under secular conditions and how can people have meaningful and relevant experiences with the Christian faith? The situation outlined, and its challenges, lead to questions of empowerment and this perspective opens new discourses and interlocutors from different academic fields, like theory of social work, disability studies, critical pedagogy etc. The proposed translation and understanding of Christian empowerment in the field of practical theology and religious education is *Befähigung* (enablement) and *Bevollmächtigung* (structural authorization).

In the second article, **Michael Herbst** presents the idea of regio-local church development and the ecclesial challenges it addresses. The structural background for this new approach to church development is the parochial system of the regional churches in Germany. Its aim is the pastoral and sacramental care of all church members in a certain area. Those who are members of the church are automatically listed as members of a local church when they choose their place of residence. This system is under severe pressure and proves itself as increasingly dysfunctional due to the rapid decline Protestant churches in Germany have been facing for many years and which have grown in pace since the Covid pandemic. One way to react to shrinking church membership is through processes of regionalization. This means that communities, parishes and places of worship are becoming increasingly united in the region. Mostly it begins with cooperation and continues with joint worship service plans and united parish offices. Eventually there is often a complete merger. Regio-local church development tries a new approach and combines the necessity to act strategically more on a regional level with the potentials of local ecclesial life, which is more linked to the everyday life of those living in the parish. Besides practical insights and arguments, Michael Herbst offers also a theological rationale for developing church in a regio-local manner.

In the third article **Felix Eiffler** (i.e. myself) offers an introduction into the so-called *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial) – an innovation programme of the Evangelical Church in Central Germany – and the research which accompanied the programme from the very beginning. The text sketches the contextual conditions and development of this programme, which started in 2015 and functioned as a role model for

similar programmes in other regional churches in Germany. The article outlines the criteria for being an *Erprobungsraum* and what forms of new ecclesial expressions grew out of this attempt so far. Furthermore, the text gives some insights in the scientific evaluation, which started in 2016 and was finished in 2023. Since 2022 a redesign of the research was undertaken and among other perspectives an empowerment-orientated approach was influential. Next to results and the redesign, the text also depicts the challenges and limits of ecclesial innovation as well as the potentials and limits to research those innovations and to learn for a wider discourse and practice of church development and communication of the gospel to people today in an increasingly secular society with its specific chances and challenges.

The fourth article, by **Thomas Schlegel**, is thematically closely linked to the text about *Erprobungsräume*, because Schlegel is outlining insights about ecclesial innovation which he gained by initiating and developing *Erprobungsräume* in Central Germany. His main question is how innovative expressions of church emerge in mainline churches (*Volkskirche*). He asks about the formal and informal connections as well as the reciprocal dynamics between the different ecclesial levels that are part of this process. On the one hand is the “below” level of new expressions of church, which are mostly bottom-up grass-roots initiatives. On the other hand, is the “above” level of the institutional church and her aim to foster new initiatives without institutionalizing them. The new expressions need time (and freedom) to grow – sometimes in a different direction from that originally intended. This process is important; to engage with the surrounding (mostly secular) context of those initiatives and it often depends on the willingness of the institution to grant the needed time and space. To describe the reciprocal dynamics of levels, people and rationales, Schlegel refers to the heuristic model of church being a hybrid with different paradigms (that of institution, organization and movement) existing along each other and shaping the different ways church is organized. Regarding the *Erprobungsräume* Schlegel detects and describes four ways of how new expressions of church (new congregations, respectively) emerge in mainline churches.

The fifth article, by **Hanna Kauhaus**, presents reflections about diversity in local congregations and how more diversity can be fostered. The ecclesial context is the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and for the aim of diversity she asks two main questions: What variety of people show up in local congregations? And how well are those present included and have the chance to participate and contribute? For this purpose, she introduces into the concept of diversity management (DiM) and asks what churches and congregations can learn from it – in theoretical reflection as well as in practical implementation. To put the learning from DiM into congregational practice Kauhaus developed a framework with two parts. The first part is about raising

awareness that (non)accessibility and exclusion often reach further than expected. The second part explores areas of church activities where actual barriers can be found and removed. Within the model, she describes four levels of accessibility and exclusion, which build on each other: basic accessibility, understanding, positive experience and belonging. Besides levels of accessibility and exclusion, Kauhaus also identifies and describes areas of accessibility. To structure the areas, she provides a framework of five areas of congregational activities: information and public communication, buildings and times, content and culture of events and meetings, personal contacts and networks, and opportunities for participation and contribution.

This issue outlines the current socio-religious dynamics in Germany and the latest ecclesial attempts to deal with these realities. It shows how extensive and rapid the processes of secularization are and how fundamental their effects for the churches. It also sketches the consequent transformations the churches in Germany are undergoing currently. The perspectives might be helpful for other contexts with similar societal dynamics and ecclesial challenges.

About the Author

Dr Felix Eiffler is head of the research unit for *Missional Church Development* at the *Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity* at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg (GER). He also works as ordained pastor in the Evangelical Church in Central Germany. Contact: felix.eiffler@theologie.uni-halle.de

Reference

Wunder, Edgar. 2024. "Ost-West-Vergleiche zu Religiosität und Kirchlichkeit – die Unterschiede nehmen zu, nicht ab", in SI/KAMP (Hg.): *Wie hältst du's mit der Kirche? Zur Relevanz von Religion und Kirche in der pluralen Gesellschaft* Analysen zur 6. KMU. Leipzig: 192–207.