

The Ramblings of a Spiritual Tourist in Northelbia

or

*Where beats the heart of the Northelbian Church?*¹

by

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This essay reports on a period of two and a half months Extended Study Leave spent as a guest of the Northelbian Church (*die Nordelbische Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* = NEK) in the states of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein in northern Germany in the late spring and early summer of 2006.

It is written formally for the Archdeacon of Ely (now rebranded as the Archdeacon of Cambridge), the Venerable John Beer, who is the supervisor of my time of Extended Study Leave but it is expected that it will be read also by my hosts in Northelbia. I have in mind also a further readership - those in the Diocese of Ely who are contemplating deepening our partnership links with the Northelbian Church and perhaps paying a visit to a Northelbian parish.

Particularly with this last readership in mind, I will have restated much that will already be well-known to most readers. I am sorry if I thus appear to be trying to “teach granny to suck eggs”, but in the area of ecumenical relationships it is so easy to assume that everybody understands everything when in fact a further explanation would either be helpful or is absolutely necessary.

Again, my Northelbian readers will no doubt find many examples where they will consider that I have failed to understand the true significance of something I have noted or where I’ve simply got things wrong. In these cases, I beg their indulgence and suggest that rather than simply blaming me for my failure to understand, we should ask rather after the reason why an observer from outside should have arrived at such a misunderstanding.² After all, you can never be absolutely sure of just how much you do not understand - particularly when there are questions of language involved.

1. The background - The Partner-Church Consultation of the Northelbian Church

In June 2005 the Northelbian Church (NEK) in the guise of the Northelbian Mission Centre (*Nordelbisches Missionszentrum* = NMZ) invited twenty-nine representatives of the overseas partner churches of the NEK to take part in a Visitation and Partner-Church Consultation (*Partnerkirchenkonsultation* = PKK) of the NEK. The title of the Consultation was “The future of the Northelbian Church and our Fellowship as Churches”.

The context for this Partner-Church Consultation was the so-called “Reform Process” of the NEK. This is essentially a restructuring process whereby the church seeks to slim down its structures in the face of a straightening financial situation as the church’s principal source of income, the church tax (*Kirchensteuer*),³ provides progressively less and less money.

1 See note 7 below.

2 It will be possible to share comments and corrections on the internet, and perhaps even host a discussion on particular points of interest.

3 It was not my intention to write about the church tax so early in this essay. The church tax system all too often assumes far too prominent a place in English discussions of the German churches. But it is in this case unavoidable with the decline in income from church tax playing a defining role in the impetus to the Reform Process of the NEK.

The church tax is a voluntary contribution made by civil tax-payers in addition to their income tax and set at about 9% of the amount of their income-tax payments. It is collected by the German government together with the ordinary income tax contributions and is paid to the church body nominated by the tax-payer (Roman Catholic, Protestant (*Evangelisch*), or even Anglican). The government charges the churches for operating this revenue collection service.

The church tax has traditionally provided a very good and predictable income for the churches of Germany which, as a consequence, have had to worry relatively little about money for several decades. But a peak in the income from church tax was reached in the early 1990s. At this time, following the reunification of the two Germanys, a non-voluntary reunification tax was introduced (also a supplement of about 9% of the income tax paid) and many people simply opted out of paying the church tax in order to pay the unification tax without noticing any change in their net income. I gather that even today, if you go to see a tax adviser, the first thing they will tell you in order to save you money, is that you should stop paying the church tax.

The fall in the number of people paying the voluntary church tax has two consequences. Obviously, there has been quite a large fall in the regular income of the churches. And this fall looks set to continue. The second consequence concerns the “membership” of the church.

In the NEK, you are a “member” of the church if you are registered to pay the church tax. The parishes all know exactly how many “members” there are in each parish; they are far less interested in the total population numbers. Only members of the church may have baptisms, marriages or funerals in the church - or even be a godparent. It is not infrequent that people will come to a church office seeking a *Patenschein* - a certificate that they are a paid-up member of the church to take to another parish so that they can be a godparent there.⁴

An interesting phrase arises when someone decides no longer to pay the church tax. They are said to “step out” of the church (*austreten*).⁵ It sounds so innocent, “to step out of the church” and yet such a positive act. But what it means is that you have decided to turn your back on the sacramental life of the church - you no longer wish to be regarded as a member.

Now, I must admit I’m tempted to write here: “you no longer wish to be regarded as a member of *the Body of Christ*”. But that would be wrong. I don’t think that the people who “step out” of the church see themselves as ever having belonged to any so theological concept as “the Body of Christ” - they are just turning their back on an organisation. In fact, in some cases people who have “stepped out” of the church as a whole still take an active part in the life of their local church and most certainly join in worship.

Now, in a sense, all this talk of church tax is a digression. Many people reading this will already be well aware of all of this. But, on the other hand, it is symptomatic of something significant: how easy it is, whenever you start to talk about the NEK, to find yourself talking about structures and finance.

But then I was explaining about the PKK in the context of the Reform Process of the NEK and, as

4 Some NEK clergy, for “pastoral” reasons, *do* conduct marriages, etc., involving people who are not “members” of the church. Their colleagues sometimes express regret that they are not thus towing the corporate line. We touch here on two very different views of how the clergy see themselves as being called to be pastors. Some see themselves as being called to be pastors exclusively to the “members” of the NEK. Others find their pastorate in all who in some sense can claim to be Protestant Christian, or baptised Christian, or just “Christian” in general. Yet others feel that they are called to minister to the population as a whole.

5 In English, we would probably say ‘leave’ or ‘drop out’.

we found in June 2005, many people in the NEK indeed saw the Reform Process as being primarily concerned with the structures of the church and its organisation, so this is hardly surprising.

For the first week of the Partner-Church Consultation in 2005, the members of the Consultation were divided into three groups each of which was based in one of the three episcopal districts (*Sprengel*) of the NEK. The groups looked at different aspects of the work of the NEK, but when they all came together again in the conference centre at Breklum in Nordfriesland, all agreed that although the NEK undoubtedly saw itself as facing serious financial problems, underlying these problems were various issues of spirituality. In the words of the 'Recommendations of the Partner-Church Consultation to All the Congregations and Institutions of the Northelbian Church': "What is needed is not an ever more finely tuned restructuring process but rather a work of spiritual renewal."

For me, during the months following the PKK, there was a nagging doubt that perhaps, just perhaps, this judgement had been a little harsh. After all, I had been part of the group from the Consultation which had made its visitation in Hamburg and had been charged with looking particularly at the *public* face of the church. Perhaps this work was inevitably going to come over to us as somewhat clinical and unspiritual. What if we had seen more of the day-to-day work of the NEK at a parochial level? Would we have found that there, there were more signs of an evident spirituality? But then I remembered how all three visitation groups had come to very much the same conclusion - not just the Hamburg group, but also those concentrating on the diaconical⁶ work of the church and on its worshipping life. But then, there was still the thought in my head that there was something that demanded a measure of further investigation in the area of NEK spirituality.

When the opportunity to take a period of Extended Study Leave emerged, it was thus an obvious move to seek to use this time to revisit Northelbia and investigate the spirituality of the NEK further. This became possible through the generosity of many individuals and parishes of the NEK, the NMZ and the organisational skill of OKR Volker Thiedemann and his team at the Dezernat Mission, Ökumene und Entwicklungsdienst at the Nordelbisches Kirchenamt (the Church Office) in Kiel.

2. The nature of the study - Spirituality in the Northelbian Church

Why did the Partner-Church Consultation come to focus on the question of spirituality? What did the members of the Consultation observe that engendered in them a measure of disquiet in this area?

Partly it was a reaction to the terms in which the issues behind the Reform Process were presented to them. We were told there was a financial crisis in the NEK - and yes, there was: that was clear. But we were told further that the financial crisis demanded a Reform Process which would be largely structural in nature. The Reform Process was an exercise in saving money - how to do this while causing the least damage and disruption to the services offered by the church and the least pain to its members and employees.

But here the members of the PKK wanted to pause and look deeper. The majority of the overseas members of the PKK came from churches which had been founded through the missionary efforts

⁶ The constitution of the Northelbian Church at its very foundation maintains that the church is built on the twin pillars of parochial and diaconical work (*Diakonie*). There is no easy way to explain this. The word "diaconical" doesn't even exist in English. The word "diaconal" does exist - but this refers to the work of a deacon within the threefold ministry of the Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches - and that is not what is meant here. *Diakonie* refers to the work of the church in society as a whole and is a major part of the work of the NEK, employing many pastors and other workers. I shall use the word "diaconical" to refer to this aspect of the work of the NEK.

of the German Lutheran churches or from churches which had suffered privations in Eastern Europe during a period of Communist rule. From their standpoint, however serious were the financial problems facing the NEK, the churches of Germany still looked immensely rich from the point of view of the partner churches. They would love to exchange their financial problems for those of the NEK.

The question to be asked of the NEK was not how to restructure itself in the new financial circumstances of the 21st century, but why were so many people opting out of their commitment to the NEK and hence causing the financial crisis in the first place?

After all, it is a common Christian understanding that if people are committed to the faith of Jesus Christ as it is proclaimed in a particular church fellowship, then they will seek to contribute all that is needed to carry on and, indeed, to increase the work of that fellowship. Get the proclamation right and sufficient money will be forthcoming.

To put it bluntly, the members of the PKK were concerned about the proclamation of the NEK. The church seemed complacent - there seemed to be virtually no internal missionary work going on, Sunday worship seemed dry and unenthusiastic - few even of the "members" of the church ever seemed to turn up or join in. There was a suspicion that even the pastors didn't feel the need to worship on a Sunday if it was not their turn to lead the worship.

And there were other questions. Why was there so rarely any expression of repentance in the public worship of the NEK? Why was there so rarely any reference to the saving work of Jesus Christ in the preaching and the proclamation of the church? Where was the deep ministry of prayer in the church - daily prayer, private prayer, corporate prayer, sharing prayer? Why was there so rarely any expression of enthusiasm or emotion in the worship of the church?

And there were concerns also about theological formation in the NEK, summed up in the often heard question: 'Why do we send aspiring pastors to university for so many years just to have all the Christian faith knocked out of them?'

And all these concerns crystallised in the question about the spirituality of the NEK.

But, of course, the truth is that this question was not about the practice of something called 'spirituality' (*Spiritualität*) within the NEK but about the whole quality of the spiritual life of the NEK. And these two things, although to some extent related, are quite different.

That said, it has to be observed that in the year that has passed since the Partner-Church Consultation, the topic of 'spirituality' has climbed up the agenda of the NEK - it was virtually nowhere - it is now quite significant.⁷ However, this interest in spirituality may not wholly be due to the influence of the PKK - I gather that 'Lutheran Spirituality' had been a principal theme of discussions in the VELKD (Union of Lutheran Protestant Churches in Germany) in 2005.

3. The nature of spirituality

In broad terms my quest during my visit to Northelbia in late spring of 2006 was to enquire after the spirituality of the Northelbian Church. In shortened form it was often said that I was "looking for spirituality in the NEK." Almost invariably the response came back: "And have you found any?"

⁷ Though one press reporter that I spoke to was of the opinion that any interest in spirituality was already on the wane and that the focus of the church's attention had returned to financial and structural issues.

What prompts this reply?

I think we must return to the question of what is understood by 'spirituality'. I suspect that for many people associated with the NEK, 'spirituality' is seen as referring to something exotic, external, not part of the ordinary, everyday diet of Christian life and practice. 'Spirituality' from a Lutheran perspective is something that generally needs to be brought in from outside - if it is needed at all.

By contrast, in, for instance, a High-Church Anglican context, there would be no embarrassment and nothing seen as at all strange in enquiring after 'spirituality' in the life of a church. Spirituality is here seen as a natural component of church life and Christian living. It is not exotic, external - it is already within. And whereas in an NEK context, 'spirituality' is seen in terms of a catalogue of practices, methods and techniques, in other traditions 'spirituality' may be seen more as a general quality of Christian life rather than as a possible menu of activities.

This may relate back to an observation made to me that mind-set of the Enlightenment had found no more receptive home than in the north of Germany, in the churches of the EKD. And in that context, Enlightenment values and a rational outlook were most characteristically and consistently expressed in the NEK. In this case, concrete expressions of spirituality in terms of methods and techniques are to be preferred to any abstract understanding and application of the term. It is thus not easy or meaningful to ask after the general quality of spirituality of the NEK whereas it is possible to ask about specific instances. Hence the almost universal response: "And did you find any?"

In an NEK context, the term 'spirituality' is often seen as referring to various elements of Roman Catholic praxis or elements that are common in the practice of other world religions, particularly Eastern religions. In general bookshops, "*Spiritualität*" is usually found in the section on non-Christian religions or in "*Esoterik*" (*Esoterik* invariably occupies far greater and more prominent shelfspace than "*Religion*").

Even in a religious bookshop, "*Spiritualität*" occupied just one shelf blending into Other Religions. The Dalai Lama featured prominently on the "Spirituality" shelf. When asked to recommend a book on spirituality the bookseller suggested a translation of a work from an Anglican author. When pressed as to whether there was anything native to Northelbia, he pointed to a collection of essays edited by the Bishop of Lübeck but said that he knew of nothing more systematic.

But all of this was, of course, a little "off topic" when it came to pursuing my principal quest to enquire after the general spiritual life of the NEK rather than investigate to what extent any particular spiritual techniques were being practiced. A more incisive question was needed.

Pastor Frank-Michael Wessel, who has a responsibility for English links in Hamburg, most helpfully recast my question in the form: "Where beats the heart of the Northelbian Church?"⁸ But when this question was put to a prominent undertaker in Hamburg, his reply was (only half joking, I suspect), "Nowhere. It has no heart!"

Of course, the question then naturally arises of how you know that you are in contact with the spiritual life of a church, of how you know when you are feeling its spiritual pulse. What is to count as a relevant observation? What is to count as a valid observation?

⁸ Apparently, when the European Commission sets its mind to the remodelling of the English language to form an official "Euro-English", the first construction to be evicted from traditional English will be the formation of questions with the auxiliary verb, "to do". Pastor Wessel anticipates this reform.

On one side it may be postulated that the spiritual life of a church is a function of the spiritual life of its members. And perhaps this is the easier option to investigate. But in a more fundamental sense, the spirituality of a church is a function of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit within it. And that is far more difficult, if not impossible, to assess. All the same, I feel I must try.

So here is the question: if “spirituality” by definition refers to the presence of the Holy Spirit, how do you indeed know when the Spirit is present?

Should we (be able to) look for “signs” or “marks” of the the Spirit? Or does this sound too much like a method or list enabling us to form an arbitrary judgement so that if, say, we see more than *n* marks of the Spirit present in a particular context, then we may say that the Spirit *is* present there.

But no, this cannot do - the Spirit is an outworking of the Being of God; it’s not up to *us* to devise a numerical test to determine whether the Spirit is present or not. The Holy Spirit is not something we can trap in a box and measure.

Or perhaps we should just ‘*know*’ that the Spirit is truly present in something. But doesn’t this approach seem rather subjective? What if our ‘*knowledge*’ (our interpretation of our feeling) is wrong? It is entirely possible that the Spirit be *not* where we expect to find it or look to find it. We can all probably point to instances where we think that other people have made a mistaken judgement in this area.

So what then? This is the practical problem with the notion of “testing the spirits to see whether they be of God”. Only God knows the answer to this and, as such (publicly and objectively), he isn’t saying anything.

So what *are* the marks of the Spirit? Or, rather less self-confidently, what *might be* the marks of the presence of the Holy Spirit?

The marks of the Spirit (a putative list - but also with counter-arguments)

- People have a sense of joy or exuberance (but this could be of psychological or even of chemical (pharmacological) origin (= the same thing?)).
- Numbers in church grow (but there are techniques for getting people in - the growth could be at the expense of the integrity of the Gospel).
- There are miracles of healing (but these are notoriously difficult to verify: they could be delusional or psycho-iatric).
- There are acts of deliverance (but see the suggestion immediately above).
- People are active in prayer (but this could just be self-delusional).
- People respond to the Church with generosity (but they could be being fooled or manipulated).
- There are generous acts of self-giving, or even self-sacrifice (but people also do this in support of dubious causes).
- There is a feeling of fellowship - of working together for a cause - i.e., God’s gospel (but the cause doesn’t have to be worthy just because it is popular - you mould an army by developing in it an *esprit de corps*).
- People speak in tongues, etc. (but there are techniques to induce this sort of thing).

So rather, we might say, on somewhat safer ground, that

- The Spirit is active wherever peoples' lives are transformed.
- The Spirit is active where people come to penitence and turn to God in prayer.
- The Spirit is active in the small, secret miracles of life.
- The Spirit is active in the comings together of unplanned fellowships: "wherever two or three are gathered together..."
- The Spirit is active in the lives of communities (fellowships) of the Gospel which just get on with living the pastoral life of the Church - which do not write books - which publish no papers and appear neither in films nor in television series - which leave no lasting wake on the sea of life - that are simply faithful to God without making any deliberate impact on the society or on the community in which they find themselves situated.

So, where do we find the Holy Spirit active in the life of the Northelbian Church - if we can ever tell?

4. Spirituality in the NEK - a response to the observations and recommendations of the PKK

In the end, the Partner-Church Consultation produced two documents. One was a *Letter of the NEC-Partners to all Members of the Northelbian Church*. The other was a *Report of the Consultation and Recommendations to all Congregations and Institutions of the Northelbian Church*. Both of these were originally written in English and later translated into German to facilitate their more widespread dissemination.

By all accounts, these documents have received a mixed reception. In some quarters they have been completely ignored. In other areas they have been enthusiastically received and vigorously debated. Some pastors decided that the PKK documents had nothing to say either to them or to their congregations. Others thought, yes, it's time somebody dared to say that. Some thought the documents provided a starting point for what could be a valuable debate - though, of course, they pointed out that outsiders couldn't possibly *really* understand the situation within the NEK. And then someone put it to me that many pastors just couldn't accept the ideas in these documents because if they did so, they would effectively be admitting that they had been getting things wrong for the last twenty years.

A particularly thought-provoking response came from Bishop Hans-Christian Knuth in a paper he presented to the NMZ in March 2006. Its title is *Aufbruch zur "Geistlichen Erneuerung" unserer Kirche? - Fragezeichen!* and its subtitle *Consequences from the Partner-Church Consultation of June 2005*. As I understand it, the basic message of this paper is that it is less that the NEK needs to bring in from outside new forms of spirituality (*Spiritualität*) but rather that the church needs to rediscover and reinvigorate its own traditional Lutheran forms of piety (*Frömmigkeit*). Again, I gather that this paper has given rise to a continuing debate of which I do not know the result.

But in any case it is clear that we must ask after the traditional forms of spirituality practised in the NEK and the extent to which they are still normative and general.

But this will not be easy because so often the past is seen through rose-tinted spectacles and this distorts our insight into the reality of what was once normal. In the end we will probably all make a selection of the features that we choose to count as significant on the basis of our creative imagination.

It is far easier to observe the contemporary spirituality of a church and than perhaps seek to identify the elements which are traditional. But on what basis might we make this identification of the marks of a traditional Lutheran spirituality (*Frömmigkeit*)? Where would you find the reality of such a thing? In books? In memories? In particular communities which have been immune to the ravages of time? So perhaps this task is impossible because all of these yardsticks are problematic as potential objective sources.

Perhaps the closest I came to experiencing a traditional spirituality of Lutheran worship was when I attended a conference at Breklum for the children and other relatives of missionaries who had been sent out from the churches of Northelbia. For morning prayer before breakfast each morning, the participants would all be present in the chapel at least ten minutes before the published time for the service to start. They sat in absolute silence - a voluntary silence (no need to say, 'Let us now keep silence for a while' - a very positive silence - a very worshipful silence, a silence full of depth and prayer. There was a very dignified intensity to their participation in the service. The hymns were sung with a fervent care and precision. The address was listened to attentively and reverently. Here was faithful worship of the Christian Trinitarian God. And I thought, yes, this must be what the traditional *Frömmigkeit* is like.⁹

5. Contemporary spirituality

Where can we identify the spirituality of the life of the contemporary NEK? We must observe its life, its praxis and its members. Any survey will be more or (more likely) less scientific, more or less subjective. Its validity will depend on the time and resources available for observation and the skills and the knowledge base of whoever is making and interpreting the observations. This particular survey is very limited in its scope, depending on the observations of one person and the conversations that a limited number of people have shared with him. It is a set of impressions which possibly reflect as much on the observer as on the observed.¹⁰

That said, we can make a start by asking what it is that the church does. What are its enterprises, what are its activities?

One way in is by looking at the worship of the NEK. After all, one of the reasons usually given for the existence of the Church of Christ is that it exists to worship God. So we ask: how is this done and with what flavour of spirituality? How important *is* worship in the life of the NEK?

The NEK provides an opportunity for public worship every Sunday in the vast majority of its urban and suburban parishes and also in many country parishes. In other country areas worship opportunities may be less frequent, perhaps fortnightly - and that even in seemingly significant parishes with well-cared-for church buildings.

The worship (*Gottesdienst*) is usually timed for 10.00am or thereabouts and is generally non-eucharistic. Holy Communion (*Abendmahl*) is offered¹¹ perhaps once (or twice) a month. In larger parishes there may also be an evening service, though this is comparatively rare.

Worship is generally led by a pastor, though a services may be conducted by a licensed lay minister

9 But many people have pointed out that Breklum is a special case within the NEK. The spirituality of Breklum, both the institution and the parish had always tended towards the pietistic at least from the mid-19th century onwards. Though, in former times, it is clear that there were also other parishes with similar leanings elsewhere in Schleswig-Holstein.

10 But isn't that always the case?

11 "Offered" in the sense of 'made available (to worshippers)', not in the sense of the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass!

(*Lektor*). Holy Communion is generally presided over by an ordained pastor, though lay ministers may be given permission *pro loco et tempore* (in a particular place and for a particular period of time) to preside at the eucharist (and conduct baptisms)¹².

Quite a number of larger parishes have more than one pastor on the staff. In such cases the pastors will generally take it in turns to lead the Sunday worship. It seems to be rare for more than one minister to take a leading role in any given Sunday act of worship.¹³ Even if there is more than one pastor in a parish, generally only the pastor who is on duty for that Sunday will be present in church on any particular occasion.¹⁴

Within the Lutheran tradition, the sermon is seen as the high point and focus of normal Sunday worship and considerable effort is put into the preparation of sermons. Sermons should be substantial, well-constructed, rational, closely argued and delivered unemotionally. There is a suggestion that sermons should be of at least twenty minutes' duration, though many pastors recognise that in today's soundbyte world, the attention of members of an average congregation can rarely be held for more than ten or a dozen minutes.

So much effort is put into writing sermons that it seems a pity that so often so few parishioners are present to hear the result. I don't know what the average attendances are at Sunday worship in the NEK, but I believe it is not unusual for a parish of, say, 6,000 members (and a total population of 10,000) to have 30 or 40 people in church on an ordinary Sunday morning.

For many people in the NEK, even those who see themselves as active members of the Church, participation in Sunday worship is not seen as an essential part of their activity as members. So this brings us back to the question about the role of worship within NEK spirituality.

Now it may be that 'ordinary' worship is just not seen as important or something that NEK Christians need to involve themselves in. What they see as important is that the Church be *present* in society, perhaps even in the person of the pastor, though this might be seen as going against the Reformation principle that no intermediary is needed between the individual Christian and God. It could be that the spirituality of the NEK is a very private spirituality which is evident only to God alone and thereby is not readily observable by mere mortals.

But if 'ordinary' Sunday worship is not seen as being particularly important by many members of the NEK (and I say nothing here about the views of the pastors), it can be suggested that a much greater emphasis is placed on what in England are called the 'occasional offices' - marriages, funerals, baptisms and, of course, confirmations.

These are the points at which the work of the Church cuts across significant happenings in ordinary life and it is interesting that in Northelbia, there is still a relatively high demand for birth, marriage and death to be marked by a Christian rite. The clergy see the provision of marriage, baptism and

12 Permission to officiate in this way should generally be in writing and granted by the bishop of the district, though I gather in emergency, more local permissions have been given. The church authorities are quite clear that such permissions do not constitute ordination - and so authorise a genuine lay presidency at the sacraments. I understand that lay presidency is the subject of a current debate in the VELKD. There is, of course, a continuing debate about the significance and nature of ordination itself among many in the protestant churches worldwide, the NEK being no exception.

13 It is remarked upon (favourably) when two or more pastors in a parish are seen to cooperate with each other and share in the leadership of worship every Sunday.

14 It is difficult to be certain, but it is suspected that pastors who are not on duty on a given Sunday may generally absent themselves from any public worship on that day. There is a question about what 'message' this gives to the laity about the importance of weekly Sunday worship.

funeral rites as a high priority for them and preparation for confirmation as an important part of their regular work. All these rites are offered in the context of an act of worship - in the cases of baptism and confirmation, often on a Sunday morning, either in the ordinary worship or as an extra service.^{15,16}

Many clergy also see it as a duty to visit elderly members on significant birthdays and anniversaries, though this is not generally in the context of worship.¹⁷

Clergy, of course, also engage themselves in 'ordinary' pastoral work with members of their congregations and also involve themselves in work with young people, men's groups and women's groups, lunch groups, musical groups and all the other things that go to make up the life of a socially active church.

In the past there have often been specialist employees of the NEK tasked with taking the lead in youth work, children's work, work with the elderly, etc. In the straightened financial circumstances of the Church, many of these have been the first to be 'let go' as being less secure in their employment terms than the pastors who have a particularly protected "official" status. There is currently a move in the NEK to seek to fill the gaps left by the loss of employed specialists with volunteers since it is seen to be important that the work they undertook be continued.

Another large sector of the life of the NEK is found in the work of *Diakonie*.¹⁸ This emphasis has to be seen as an expression of NEK spirituality even if the expression of this diaconical work is rarely explicit in having any spiritual dimension.

One of the regrets of the Partner-Church Consultation of 2005 was that there was so rarely any explicit reference to Christian faith in undertaking the work of *Diakonie*. It was suggested that an opportunity for propagating Christian mission was being missed here.

There have been many responses to this perceived criticism. One often heard response suggests that the diaconical work of the Church should not be given a subsidiary task of promoting Christian faith, not just because this would muddy the objectives of the diaconical work, but also because this work was undertaken by the NEK as a *Volkskirche* for which any explicit reference to faith would be inappropriate.

But why is it inappropriate for the diaconical work of a *Volkskirche* to make any explicit reference to Christian faith? What is a *Volkskirche*?

The word *Volkskirche* has no easy translation. There is a sense in which it doesn't mean a 'people's church' or a 'national church' or a 'state church', but these are related ideas. I was told that it went back, like so much in Germany, to the first Diet of Speyer (1526) at which the principle was established that in any sovereign district (or petty state) of the Holy Roman Empire the religion of the people would follow that of the ruler (the prince). Could it be that because people had no alternative as to which flavour of religion they found themselves adherents of, it wasn't necessary for them to be fully informed or even personally committed to the church of which they found

15 In the NEK tradition, a pastor is the minister at confirmation services - the involvement of a bishop is not required.

16 It is interesting that the forms of service used at many of these services are not liturgically demanding - the liturgy often seems to be reduced to a bare minimum. This contrasts greatly with the very high standards that are demanded of listeners to the sermon.

17 Birthday visits may be one of the first casualties when reductions in pastoral appointments (either by the cutting of full-time posts or by the reduction of a full-time post to a three-quarters or half-time position) necessitate a cutting back on the work of the clergy.

18 See note 6, above.

themselves to be members? But surely that cannot be the answer!¹⁹

Within the realm of *Diakonie*, the work of hospital chaplains clearly has a large spiritual element²⁰ and those hospitals which are run under Church auspices stand in a long tradition of Christian activity in healing and healthcare, even though the funding for these hospitals is largely secular²¹ and the medicine practiced in them is identical to that which would be found in any hospital with a secular foundation.

Other workers involved in *Diakonie* work in social work, the care of the elderly, work with immigrants, children, etc. The role of the church in running *Kindergarten* is very significant.

But it should be recognised that much of the best of this work is in fact undertaken by Church organisations as subcontractors to the state authorities. The bulk of the funding of this work in fact comes from the state.

National Church research (at the level of the EKD) indicates that the principal reason most often given by people who do not actively involve themselves in the life of the Church as to why they continue to pay the voluntary church tax is that they do so in order to support the diaconical work of the Church. The Church is therefore most anxious to maintain the image of the Church as being a body which continues to undertake such work and to see this as an important part of its mission. Thus a billboard advertising campaign portraying the work of *Diakonie* with the homeless and other socially disadvantaged people could be seen on railway platforms and the like during my stay in Germany. The aim of this campaign was presumably to keep the diaconical work of the Church in the mind of those who otherwise were only lightly attached church-tax payers (even though in fact much of the work highlighted is possibly only partly funded by the Church).

Another element in the spiritual life of the NEK is that of the role of faith in the home. I suspect the saying of grace (*Tischgebet*) at meals is more widespread in church families in Northelbia than it might be in England. And perhaps also bed-time prayers for children?

The expression of faith often seems to be very private in Northelbia. It is to do with families and family events rather than parishes or churches.

On the other hand, there is in the wider society a large and perhaps even growing prevalence of what in Britain is called 'folk religion'. While this may contain elements derived from Christianity - mixed in quite indiscriminately with elements from other spiritualities ('*Esoterik*') - this contrasts markedly with the very rational and intellectual spirituality of the official church. And yet, those affected by 'folk religion' no doubt make up quite a proportion of even the official membership of the NEK - the large majority of that membership which plays no regular part in church life.²²

19 I must admit that I have never quite got the bottom of what it means to be a *Volkskirche* in this sense. One suggestion is that although the *Volkskirche* is the church of the majority, it must provide the diaconical services both for those who are its members and for those who are not. It is for the sake of those who are not its members that the diaconical work of the church must be carried out without any reference to its Christian foundation. Presumably this applies *a fortiori* in Hamburg where the NEK is not even the church of the majority. This contrasts considerably with churches in other parts of the world who are only too anxious to explain and proclaim how their work in and for society is a direct consequence of their understanding of the Christian gospel.

20 Though there is, I observed, considerable frustration on the part of some of the parochial clergy that professional hospital chaplains, who are supposedly fellow Christian ministers, so rarely play any part in the life of their home parishes or that there is often so little link made between the work of say, a church-sponsored hospital and the parish in which it is situated. This is perhaps symptomatic of a compartmentalisation of life (life-work balance?) that is possible in the NEK. Is it possible that the faith of some hospital chaplains is just for their work?

21 i.e., from the state and from personal medical insurance.

22 Some at least of the inactive membership of the church support the church financially because they think it

Before closing this section on the nature of spirituality, I should note that there is another usage of the word 'spirituality' in the British context which has nothing at all to do with its usage in a theological or church context. Some years ago, the word 'spirituality' was hijacked by secular educationalists who were seeking to define an aim of school education in England which did not depend just on learning skills and information.

State-funded schools in England are thus required to have a 'Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Policy' which informs all the activities and life of the school. It is sometimes difficult to pin down precisely what is meant by 'spirituality' in these terms. It explicitly has nothing explicitly to do with faith, religion, God or the Holy Spirit. It has everything to do with the human spirit - what it is to be a well rounded human being engaged with and at ease with the world around it. Important skills in this spirituality are those of reflection on what has been experienced (in school or in life), meditation (in a non-religious sense) and, in particular, the experience of 'awe and wonder' at what is experienced in the social, cultural and natural environments.²³

For many people in England, this secular understanding of 'spirituality' is now primary. The word has effectively been lost to the faith communities.

6. Music in the spirituality of the NEK

Music clearly has a very important place in the spirituality of the NEK.

Many parishes still employ a paid professional musician as organist, though the financial constraints of recent years have led to cut-backs and redundancies in this area. Some church musicians are part time and must support themselves primarily through teaching and music tuition outside the church environment.

Many church musicians are of a very high standard and the excellence of their musical contribution is important to the ambiance and (dare one say?) the spirituality of the worship.

Traditional Sunday worship begins with the *Vorspiel* - a piece of music (usually on the organ) - to which the congregation listens in attentive silence. Or perhaps some would say '...through which the congregation prays and/or meditates'. Is the *Vorspiel* just a performance demonstrating the musical skill and interpretative excellence of the musician? is it a 'lead in' to worship - a settling down space? - or is it offered as a contribution to, or a medium for, the worship itself?

I gather that there is something of a classical debate about when the worship actually begins. Whether it is with the ringing of the bells to summon the worshippers to church, or whether it is the *Vorspiel* which begins at the appointed time for the worship²⁴, or whether it begins with the Greeting (*Gruss*) immediately after the *Vorspiel*.

important that there should be a church available to the community, even if they see no need otherwise to involve themselves in its life. Some people may even be motivated by a residual fear that, well, if it *did* turn out that there was a God after all, it would have been wise to have supported his Church. And in fun, even church members have referred to the paying of the church tax as a wager or to the doing of some good work as a *quid pro quo*: On the great day of Judgement they will be able to recall their years of paying the church tax or their good works and hope thereby to buy an easier passage into heaven. I cannot but help reflect that it was said to be the sale of indulgences in the medieval Church which allegedly so provoked the righteous indignation of Martin Luther.

23 For an explanation of this educational usage of 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' in the English context, see *Spiritual Development in Schools* by Alan Brown and Joan Furlong, published in 1996 by The National Society (Church of England) for Promoting Religious Education.

24 It is not usual for the organist to play a sequence of pieces *before* the time of service as is usual in England.

Again, the singing of verses from a hymn is generally preceded by a *Praeludium* - a prelude. This usually takes the form of a more or less elaborate set of variations on and developments of the melody of the hymn. Often the prelude will be a classical composition from a published source, but free improvisation is also common and is seen as demonstrating the particular skill of the musician. Rarely is it possible for a stranger or newcomer to pick up the melody they are then expected to sing from the prelude. It is rarely the case that the prelude is a simple playover of the tune as is generally the case in England. There is an assumption that worship is for the *cognoscenti* - that everyone has learned the traditions of worship (including the melodies of the traditional hymns) in childhood and in preparation for confirmation. Worship is not always as mission-oriented or stranger-friendly as it might be in the churches of the NEK.

Often the organist is physically separated from the congregation, the organ console (and instrument) traditionally being found in a west gallery. If there is a choir, this will also often be placed in a gallery, sometimes out of sight of the main congregation. It can be difficult in these circumstances to engender the sense of there being a single worshipping congregation.

In some parishes, however, the organist sees it as a vitally important part of their role to facilitate and to accompany the congregation in their worship. And here there is a sense of unity and common purpose in worship.

And, of course, you do have the debate, no doubt common to all branches of the Christian faith where worship involves music, as to whether or not it is necessary for a church musician to be an active confessing Christian. Is it more important that the music of the church be of the highest technical standard or that the musicians be enthusiastic members of the crew of the ship of faith? To put this in terms of spirituality, is having fine music a vital expression of the spiritual life of the Church, or might it be seen as a substitute for such a spirituality?

The hymns themselves are, of course, a vitally significant component of NEK spirituality.

As with the Methodist Church in England, much of the theology of the Church seems to be expressed through its hymnody. The hymns themselves are often quite long and it is usual for only selected verses to be sung rather than the whole text the hymn on any particular occasion. Often a series of selected verses from a particular hymn will be sung at different points in a single service.

The hymns used in traditional worship are generally to be found in the *Gesangbuch* which combines the functions of a hymnbook and a prayerbook (service book). Most of the hymns in the *Gesangbuch* are common to all the churches of the EKD, though each *Landeskirche* has its own supplementary collection bound into the main body of the book.

All copies of the *Gesangbuch* include the words and melodies of the hymns and also music for the canticles used in the services. For any strangers who are able to read music, it is very helpful that the melody of the settings is included in the *Gesangbuch*, particularly as the melodies of the older hymns often have a quite irregular rhythmic structure (unlike the hymn melodies of the UK where the rhythmic structures are usually very regular)²⁵.

25 The tunes from the German reformation tradition found in British hymnbooks usually have their rhythmic patterns simplified - and there are often also differences in detail in the melodies which present traps for the unwary. Even well-known subjects of translation such as *Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren* and *Nun danket alle Gott* have such alterations in their melodies and are not quite as interchangeable as is sometimes imagined. The melodies of the hymns are generally known by the first line of the hymn for which they were originally written and do not have separate names as in the UK. The organ edition of the *Gesangbuch* for most of the individual State Churches is published in three volumes. For most of the hymns this organ edition includes a setting in four-part

Unfortunately, many churches assume that the congregation all know the setting of the service used in that particular church and so do not advertise the settings of the liturgy used in any given service or the variations in these. Even where there is an outline order of service (often stuck into the back cover of the *Gesangbuch*, but rarely advertised as such) this will often indicate only, say, 'Gloria' and not indicate where to find the words or music, which can be very frustrating to the visitor who is either unfamiliar with the *Gesangbuch* or with the pattern of the liturgy used in that particular parish.

This may be symptomatic of an attitude which assumes that everyone present in a particular service knows exactly how the service is sung or said in that particular parish. Perhaps everyone is assumed to have learned all the texts and tunes in childhood or when they were prepared for confirmation - but increasingly this will not be the case. Perhaps it just shows that there is a very low expectancy that anyone who is not familiar with that particular church and/or will be present in the congregation. This is not mission- nor outreach-minded. It is very rare for anyone to speak to a visitor before or after a service, even the pastor. A result is that a stranger can feel very left out of things and disinclined to return to experience such a feeling of alienation on another occasion.

On the other hand, an indication of the seriousness with which the Protestant churches of Germany view their heritage of hymnody is the biographical notes on the authors and composers of the hymns which can be found included in the *Gesangbuch*. This too is an indication of a spirituality in the culture of the NEK.

The brass band is also an important part of the tradition of the Protestant churches of Germany. A band, which may belong to a particular parish or to a group of parishes or district, may accompany the singing of hymns on particular occasions (particularly outdoors) or play outside the church on a Sunday morning to help usher the congregation in and establish the setting for and ambience of worship. The participation of so many people in church brass bands is an expression of the spirituality of the NEK as much as the participation of the congregations in worship. Of course, you might ask about the theological *meaning* of this spirituality, but there can be no doubt that it is a genuine and significant expression of an NEK spirituality.

In most of the smaller parishes that I visited in 2006, there was no church choir as such. The music of worship is expressed through organist and congregation alone. There are choirs in some parishes though these are rarely robed or process as would be relatively common in an Anglican church. And as noted above, where there is a choir, it will often sit apart from the congregation.

Some choirs are musical societies which will tackle secular as well as sacred music. Often they perform in concerts as much as in the context of regular Sunday worship.

Indeed, many churches offer the public a programme of concerts which seem to be far better attended than the regular worship of the church. (Though the simple fact that there is a concert offered will not always guarantee the attendance of a large audience, even if the musical standard is very high.)

Again, we need to look at this from the points of view of the performers, the members of the audience and the church authorities.

harmony and one in three parts, making the book useful for a variety of situations, both where there is a choir and a large organ and where the singing is unison and there may be only an organ with a single manual. There is no choir edition as such. The full-music editions of the *Gesangbuch* published by the Protestant Church in Bavaria are somewhat different and are particularly prized.

Is the fact of rehearsing and performing a programme of music in a church of spiritual significance for the performers? Does it make any difference if they are professional or amateur musicians? Does it make any difference if the music is secular or sacred, or if sacred, whether it belongs to a Lutheran tradition or to that of some other denomination? When a setting of the Mass is sung in a concert performance, does it matter if the worship which the music was written to accompany was not worship according to a protestant tradition or assumes a non-Protestant theology? If the latter is the case, is this an expression of a genuinely ecumenical outreach, is the Church being simply careless with a theology that it is otherwise so careful to protect. Alternatively, is there an assumption that music transcends theology when the music is of sufficient merit or popular appeal?

As to the members of the audience, does it matter that a particular piece of music is sacred or secular, come out of a Catholic or a Protestant tradition, or that they experience it in the setting of a church, a place whose primary purpose is (or perhaps was formerly) the worship of God? Is attending a concert in a church building for some people - whether members of a community of faith or unattached to any faith community - the occasion of a spiritual experience? And if there is no spiritual dimension to their experience of a concert in a church setting - if the building is just another convenient or comfortable concert hall - why is the Church in this business?

Again, we can ask: from the point of view of the Church authorities, is the staging of a concert in a church building seen as a source of revenue, as a way of giving back to the community something of the benefit of having a building (particularly if it is a fine or historic building) supported through the church tax contributed by many who do not ordinarily present themselves at divine worship, or is it seen as a means of outreach, encouraging people who are unchurched to step over the threshold into a place where worship takes place, a place that they might otherwise had some reservation at or fear of entering?²⁶

Again we return to the question as to whether the offering of a programme of fine music, of whatever style, in a church setting is an expression of an NEK spirituality or a substitute for having any such spirituality.

Of course, the churches of Northelbia do not just make use of music in the older traditions of Reformation hymnody and the classical repertoire. In some parts of the Church there is great enthusiasm for modern church music, for so-called 'World Music', for music in the style of the Taizé and the Iona Communities, for Christian rock music, for Gospel music and for other music derived from the United States' Christian traditions.

One advantage, of course, of singing words in a foreign language is that you don't always have to know what they mean. It is doubtless very good to be ecumenical in worship but theologies are perhaps sometimes adopted into worship which, in the cold light of day, the intellectual side of NEK spirituality might have certain reservations about promoting.

Again, some of the words of worship songs from 'World Music' or other language traditions

26 I am trying to express these questions without making any presumption as to the validity of any concept of 'sacred space' or 'holy space', recognising that it is an issue in the NEK as to whether any space or building can be regarded as 'consecrated' (either liturgically or by simple usage) to the worship of God. In an Anglican setting, you might indeed ask whether it would be appropriate to perform a secular or even non-Christian musical work in a consecrated building. There is a sense in which you might regard a building as being 'hallowed' by prayer and worship. But in the NEK many would hold that a building, as such, is of no ultimate religious significance (other than the sentimental attachment many may have to it), that there is no such thing as a 'sacred space' into which a non-practicing Christian might be enticed so that they might there have a spiritual experience at least in part depending on the context of the building.

sometimes seems to be a little short on content - songs for which text seems to be made of simply of 'Alleluia's or 'Amen's. While it is enjoyable to sing fun music, has perhaps something of the depth of meaning of the traditional Reformation hymns been lost?

Again, with Gospel music, perhaps it isn't always sufficient simply to sing all the right notes fast and loudly. The music comes from the heart, it isn't just a matter of singing staccato and aggressively. The music derives its power from the Spirit of God working through the singers, uniting the meaning of the words, the vibrancy of the music and the expressiveness of the actions in a potent mix of worship and praise. Worship is not just performance. You cannot just sing the music without taking the words to heart and assume that the result will be authentic and inspiring worship.

7. *Streichelspiritualität* (Hands-on Spirituality)

It is perhaps curious that a Church which sets such great store by the intellectual excellence of its theology should also feature such a strong, if recent, tradition of a very tactile, physical form of expressing faith, comfort and solidarity.

Worship is no longer confined to word and music: the visual and the tactile are also very important - at least in practice if not in theory. Or rather, perhaps the theory has not yet caught up with the practice.

I notice the popularity in the general community of the *Streichelzoo* where children encouraged to stroke, feed and touch the animals - giving them a very hands-on kind of experience. (Obviously such collections contain mainly small and domestic animals - one is not encouraged to stroke the lions and the tigers.)

But the NEK also seems to encourage a sort of *Streichelspiritualität* - evinced by the distribution of items like a small brass angel, to be given to contacts and enquirers and of which the press and publicity department of the Church was said to have distributed some 600,000 examples by mid 2006. These angels are things to hold and to feel - indicating a very physical and hands-on form of spirituality.

Similar are the 'finger crosses', made out of shaped and rounded wood, designed to fit easily into the hand and given to people in situations of illness or anxiety so that they can feel and play with the cross in the fingers, giving them a sense of physical contact with the cross, to bring comfort and hopefully to facilitate prayer.

Perhaps these both owe something to the German tradition of the *Mitbringsel*, the little gift that a visitor brings with them to give to their host. The pastor should have something physical to give to reinforce the words of comfort and of prayer. Traditionally this will often have taken the form of a candle or flowers. Now there are further alternatives.

Very popular also, by all accounts, is the *Perlen des Glauben*, the 'Pearls of Life, devised by the Swedish Lutheran bishop, Martin Lönnebo, and distributed in Germany by the Publicity Service of the NEK. The beads on the Pearls of Life bracelet are invested with meaning and offered as an aid to prayer but not in as prescribed a fashion as is implicit in the use of the Roman Catholic rosary. (Interestingly enough, I note that various 'prayer bracelets' have now begun to appear in the catalogues of Catholic church suppliers in England.)

Clearly many people find it helpful to have a physical aid to prayer and devotion in a form which

would not perhaps be typical of a protestant tradition. In recent years the NEK seems to have become very eclectic in its spirituality.

Other forms of hands-on spirituality that I observed were various forms of 'write and post a prayer', either in a prayer letter-box, or on a whiteboard or noticeboard, or in a niche in a 'prayer wall'. There are opportunities for hands-on calligraphy - "copy out a psalm like the monks of mediaeval times". And then there is a very widespread use of votive candles - offered for lighting in many open churches.

Now whether these really *are* votive candles, was not easy to determine. The theology behind the practice is usually unstated. It has apparently grown up within the past dozen years or so, obviously taken over from what would be a more catholic tradition. Some churches admit that to some extent it is a matter of giving the visitors what they find helpful - and offers an opportunity for fund-raising into the bargain, particularly if tea-lights (which can be bought very cheaply in bulk) rather than proper candles are used.²⁷

There is great variety and ingenuity in the design of votive candle stands and candle trees, etc. - almost an art form in itself.

And this brings forward the issue of the place of art in the Northelbian spirituality.

Many of the older churches in Northelbia are full of the devotional art of earlier times. Often, of course, this was not 'art' as such but rather the expression of the work of the craftsman to beautify the church to the glory of God as an act of thanksgiving or of piety on the part of a patron or sponsor.

Often such work is didactic, educational or devotional. There are depictions of scenes from the Bible. The reredos, the altar piece, the stain-glass windows, the font, the panelling on the gallery, on the pulpit or on the ceiling, the figures of the apostles, the candle-sticks, the angel fonts, the figures on tombs and memorials - and, of course the crucifix - all have provided opportunities for the expression of the creative arts in the worship of God through the adornment of the fabric of the church.

The figures of the passion and crucifixion of the Christ are often particularly striking and powerful. And sometimes not a little grotesque and terrifying. The crucifix at Bosau, in particular, raises mixed emotions - with the blood of Christ flowing as wires into chalices held by angels and *fleurs-de-lys* sprouting from the wounds caused by the crown of thorns. (But are we supposed to have emotions such as these aroused in the theological rationality of the NEK?).

The more modern churches have also been well endowed with works of art as sculptures and tapestries and paintings. There is often a great visual devotional feast in the churches of the NEK.

The buildings themselves are kept in a remarkably good and clean condition. But it is sad to find a beautiful church, wonderfully maintained and cleaned, perhaps even open to the public, and sited at the centre of a large community, but which is used for public worship perhaps only once a fortnight or once a month. Or is it simply a fact of the spirituality of the NEK that the devotional life of the church does not depend on the use of a church building for public worship but rather on its

²⁷ It was also suggested to me that it means more to those who are not personally involved with the practice of prayer to be told 'I have lit a candle for you,' rather than to say to them, 'I have prayed for you.' The physical action of lighting a candle is more acceptable as a sign of concern than the somewhat dubious religious phenomenon of saying a prayer.

availability as the setting for the individual and private devotions of its members? So much more the pity that so many of the churches are kept firmly locked most of the time. Particularly galling and regretful are the signs outside some locked churches which explain in careful detail the glories of the art and architecture of the church that the visitor could have seen had they been able to get in.

It is not uncommon to find temporary exhibitions of art in churches, particularly those which are part of the Open Churches scheme or in tourist areas. Sometimes the art is clearly of a devotional nature and is able to engage the visitor on a spiritual level. But often the exhibitions have no obviously devotional focus and will sometimes include exhibits that, in England at least, would raise a few eyebrows at the thought of their being on open display in a church. These are effectively secular exhibitions of art being staged in a church building. But there is perhaps no problem with this if there is no concept of the consecration of such a building or of its possible role as 'holy space'.²⁸

8. Angels

The cult of angels seems to be much more highly developed in Germany than it is in England. In the 'Esoterik' section of bookshops, there is usually a large collection of angel books. And, as mentioned above, it has to be observed that, generally, the 'Esoterik' displays in bookshops are much larger and more prominent than anything to do with conventional religion.

The angels themselves seem to occupy a sort of middle ground between Christianity and the more exotic spiritualities that to seem to sell so many books in Germany (and, increasingly, in England also). But while, admittedly, there are angels in the Bible and in Church tradition (though perhaps more so in the catholic tradition than in the protestant), the angels seem to be more at home in a sort of folk-lore religion than in the teaching of the official churches.

The cult of the "guardian angel" (*Schutzengel*) is very widespread and popular in Germany, much more so than in England, again perhaps deriving mainly from the pre-Reformation teaching that was developed on the subject and carried forward into modern Roman Catholic tradition. Although there is something very comforting about the thought of having a personal spirit/angel who looks out for you, this notion is in origin a pagan and non-biblical, Jewish concept, even though it is referred to by Jesus in the case of children.²⁹ The named angels of the Bible are either the messengers or warriors of God and possibly derive from the *elohim*, the other or lesser gods (or the gods of the other nations) of pre-monotheistic times.

In the popular culture there seem to be angels of nearly everything: angels of the four seasons, angels of this, of that and of the other. Sometimes it seems as if the 'old gods' are making a comeback in the guise of angels. Has a thousand years of Christianity gone for nothing?

There are also 'angel cards', similar to tarot cards, on sale, which even church members are reported as using to divine their personal futures and what they should do day by day. "Consult the angels" reads the advertisement in the bookshops. (Angels must be all right - after all, they are in the Bible.) But this all seems to be far too closely related to the practice of astrology and the casting of horoscopes, and the like (so popular in the modern, post-Christian western world) than to be of any value as a genuinely Christian expression of spirituality.

All the same, some of the churches which are regularly open to the public seem happy to cash in on the popularity of angels in their displays and in the activities they provide for visitors. This seems

²⁸ See section 12 below and note 26 above.

²⁹ Matthew 18.10

to be an example of the generous eclecticism than can be found in some parts of the NEK. But does this openness to ideas and practices from other traditions reflect a lack of confidence about the NEK's own distinctive tradition and teachings?

Throughout the life of the NEK there seems to be on the one hand an intellectual rigour and awareness of its protestant and Lutheran traditions and on the other hand all around it an openness to accept exotic ideas and practices from anywhere and everywhere. It seems that the traditional fare of Lutheran spirituality is just not enough any more to sustain the life of a living church at the beginning of the 21st century.

9. Liturgy and prayer

The relationship between spirituality and liturgy is close and complex.

The spirituality of a church radically informs its liturgy. The liturgy of a church offers clear signposts as to its corporate spirituality. And the liturgy of a church allows its worshippers to give expression to their personal spirituality.

However, if the actual practice of worship in a church is at variance with its theoretical liturgy, this can be misleading to the observer and may have important things to say about the spirituality of the church as a whole.

But, of course, it will not be surprising if the range of liturgy used in any particular church is somewhat more restricted than the whole corpus of liturgy offered to the church as a whole.

The *Agende* of the EKD, even as summarised in the *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch*, provides a wonderful library of liturgical material. The *Gesangbuch* itself has great riches of worship resources. And yet, one suspects, many of the churches of the NEK avail themselves of a very limited variety menu of liturgical fare from such largesse.

Of course, people like regularity. Of course, people like to know where they stand in worship - they don't want the service of the church to be too different every week. But one wonders, dare I say it? that in some churches the fare of worship is too bland, that perhaps there isn't a certain dullness in the worship? That, perhaps, if expectations are not high, they are relatively easy to satisfy.

Now, of course, the high point of a protestant service is the sermon. The former part of the service leads up to the sermon; the prayers and the ending reflect its themes. And it is important that the sermon be a logical and learned exegesis of the *Predigttext* - the passage of scripture (from a six-year cycle) appointed for that Sunday - delivered dispassionately and in measured tones. This is the Lutheran tradition. This is the expression of an NEK spirituality.

But is this the only way? Indeed, is this still the *best* way to present the gospel of Jesus Christ in the 21st century - in the era of the audio-visual soundbyte?

Why is what is billed as the *Gloria in excelsis* so often just a small part of the *Gloria* set in a metrical version?

Why is so little read in worship from the Bible in a Protestant tradition in which one of the founding principles was the free and open access to the Bible?

How can the liturgy of baptism be reduced to the parents' request for baptism, the administration of

the water and the giving of a text verse (*Taufspruch*), slipped in between a couple of hymns after the sermon on a Sunday morning?³⁰

Amidst great riches there is sometimes great liturgical poverty.

I don't know. Do people not attend church because of the unattractiveness of the worship? Or is the worship unattractive because it doesn't seem to be worth the effort of making it more attractive?³¹ (Particularly in areas where the local tradition is clearly one of non-attendance of regular Sunday worship.)

And then there is the question of prayer and daily worship.

In the *Gesangbuch*, there is provision offered for a pattern of daily worship, offering texts (and plainsong settings) for Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Prayer at Midday and Night Prayer (Compline). I didn't come across any context in which these particular expressions of 'The Daily Office' were regularly used either in public or in private by the clergy.

A pattern of sung daily prayer is maintained in the Ansverus-Haus at Aumühle near Hamburg, but, as in so many things, the Ansverus fellowship seems to be an exception to the rule in the NEK rather than common exemplar.³² The original rule of the Ansverus Community from 1956 prescribed that the brothers would pray Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer daily, which perhaps suggests that even at this date, this was not common practice.³³ The singing or recitation of the Psalms is, of course, central to the worship of the daily office and the Ansverus Community has its own psalter, compiled and composed by Dr Karl Heinrich Ehrenforth, one of the founding members of the community.³⁴

One item which seems to be missing from the liturgical armoury of the NEK is a daily lectionary. There seems to be no established pattern for the daily reading of the Bible available to all its members.

The source which is in practice used if a biblical text is required for an *Andacht* (a devotional service) or a few words at a civic event on any particular weekday, is the '*Herrnhuter Losung*' for the day. The *Losungen* come from the Bohemian Brethren (Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine) who apparently choose an Old Testament text (the "*Losung*") at random and then find a New Testament text (the "*Lehrtext*"), together with a verse of a song, a meditation or a prayer, that goes well with

30 As I have observed, the liturgy of baptism is often greatly truncated. There is no need to give the congregation a text or even an outline of the liturgy because it is so often (but not always) reduced to its absolute minimum.

31 These questions can, of course, be asked just as legitimately of worship in many other traditional churches, many in the Church of England included. But the issue seems to be more acute in some parts of the NEK even if the church buildings themselves often seem to be in much better condition.

32 Ansverus was a monk (latterly Prior of a community at Ratzeburg) who was martyred by pagan Slavs in 1066. In the mid-1950s a fellowship of pastors was established in his name which found its spiritual home in Aumühle, centred on a building belonging to the local parish which became known as the Ansverus-Haus. Today, although the original Ansverus Community is diminished through death, there is a wide circle of friends and supporters. At the Ansverus-Haus itself, there is a small resident community of young people under the leadership of a *Spiritualin*, Pastorin Dr Kirstin Faupel-Dreves. It is interesting to note that it seemed that whenever I enquired about 'spirituality' in the NEK, it was to Dr Kirstin Faupel-Dreves that I was referred.

33 Indeed, much of the tradition of the Ansverushaus is close to common medium-to-high-church Anglican practice. The building itself offers a retreat centre of a type commonly found in England even if its basement chapel is rather more Germanic in style.

34 Another "High Church" Fellowship which has a small but perhaps influential following in the NEK is the *Michaelisbruderschaft*. This Brotherhood of St Michael possibly had its origins in a liturgical revival in Germany in the 1920s. The Brotherhood has, I believe, a pattern of daily offices, a daily lectionary and its own hymnbook.

the verse from the Old Testament.³⁵

Now, wonderful though this series of texts is - it has been published unbroken since 1731 - its somewhat random nature provides no substitute for an officially published shared pattern for the systematic reading of the biblical texts in a liturgical or private-devotional context. The 'shared' is the key word here: there is great communal strength to be derived from a whole church reading the same passages from the Bible on the same day, even if they are reading individually and separated by great distances. Also, it may be a very Anglican question, but I wonder what the authorisation is for the use of the *Herrnhuter Losungen*.

Another question reflecting on the spirituality of the NEK is that of the use of prayer and of Bible readings in the ordinary business meetings of church bodies. In many parishes, meetings of the *Kirchenvorstand* (the Parochial Church Council, PCC) will begin with a Bible reading (or at least the daily *Losung*) and with prayer. And the meeting will end with prayer as well. But this practice may not be universal and the suspicion exists that the higher up the administrative ladder one progresses, the less likely it is that a business meeting may be held in the context of prayer.

That said, I attended the worship with which the week begins in the chapel of the NEK Church Office in Kiel. This included a full biblical reading, a psalm said antiphonally (*im Wechsel*), a hymn (sung in two sections) and an exegesis of the biblical passage. The chapel was comfortably full, but if all the 140 people who work in the Office had attended, there wouldn't have been room even for everyone to stand.

10. *Beichte* - a special case

The members of the 2005 Partner-Church Consultation (PKK) noted that there was rarely any element of confession and absolution in the public worship of the NEK that they had attended and posited that this might be symptomatic of a deficiency in the spirituality of the Church. In his essay in response to the report of the PKK, Bishop Knuth³⁶ is somewhat critical of this view, particularly with respect to the possible lack of readiness to repent (*Bußfertigkeit*, contrition) in the Church.

From my observation, it is indeed the case that the ordinary worship of the churches of the NEK rarely include an acknowledgement of sin or an expression of the divine forgiveness. When this does occur, it tends to be in the context of Holy Communion (*Abendmahl*),³⁷ though it was also present in some, though not all of the Confirmation services that I attended, even if these did involve Communion.

To those who come from a Christian tradition in which regular general (public) or private confession is normal, and, indeed, to quite a few members of the NEK with whom I spoke, this absence of the prayers of penitence from public worship can appear to be a matter of arrogance

35 See <http://www.losungen.de>

36 See Section 4, page 7 above.

37 Even when there is an expression of penitence, this tends to take the form of the Kyries rather than a particular prayer of confession. The text of the *Gottesdienst* in the first basic form in the *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch* does indeed include a *Bussgebet* or *Sündenbekenntnis* (confession of sin) and a *Gnadenzusage* (absolution) - and offers various alternative forms of text as well as the *Kyrie eleison*, but these are not included in the form printed at the opening of the *Gesangbuch*. A note in the *Gesangbuch* does allow the inclusion of a *Beichtgebet* (prayer of confession) as preparation at the opening of the *Abendmahl* (communion) section, although no text is printed. A form of public confession is, however, included in the *Gesangbuch* for use on Good Friday (*Karfreitag*) and *Bußtag* (or *Buß- und Betttag* - the Day of Penitence and Prayer during the last week of the Church's Year). The *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch* also provides (on p. 543ff) a further form for public confession. It seems that public confession may take place in three positions in the service: in the opening phase, at the gathering of the congregation; in response to the sermon, or in preparation for the communion. But it doesn't always happen.

before God and indeed a defect of spirituality. The apparent confidence on the part of many in the NEK that they stand in no need of penitence or confession is clearly of concern to other members of its fellowship. They admit that there is often a falling away from the Christian ideal on the part of all Christians in the course of everyday life and that it is spiritually advantageous if this falling short can be (liturgically) acknowledged.

So we need to ask what might be the thinking behind this common omission from worship of the prayers of penitence?

One possible argument that was not, as far as I can remember, advanced to me was that there *is* an element of confession in the Lord's Prayer ("And forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.") and this is very commonly included in NEK worship. Perhaps this is because it might not be immediately apparent that the "debts" in question might have to do with sin.

The basic reason why there is so rarely an expression of penitence in NEK worship is that the concept of a petty, or everyday, sin doesn't seem to be widespread. Sins are the big things which proscribed in the Ten Commandments - and these are not in general misdemeanors that we commit every day. So why should we need to make confession for things that we haven't done? I was told that it was not unknown for older folks to express puzzlement and even horror at the thought that their parish church should offer Holy Communion more than the traditional three or four times a year. "Why, what have we done that we need to confess," they ask. Clearly, for them, confession of sin and the reception of God's forgiveness is all too closely associated with the commemoration of the Lord's Supper.

Various other suggestions that were put to me regarding the omission of any element of repentance in the services of the NEK were:

- 1) because confession and absolution were considered to be Roman Catholic practices and anything that the Catholics do is not done in the NEK;
- 2) because it was part and parcel of the old theology of fear - it is only because we fear a wrathful God that we need to worry all the time that we may not have recently enough have received a valid assurance of his forgiveness.³⁸
- 3) because of the association of Schuld (guilt, blame, indebtedness) with the "special history" of the German people.³⁹ The acknowledgment of guilt/blame/indebtedness was a one-off thing after 1945 and does not need to be repeated.

This last explanation (3) is distinctly controversial and while it was advanced by some correspondents, it was vehemently denied by others.

Another suggestion offered for the lack of any need for regular prayers of penitence and forgiveness in the NEK was that since we have received the forgiveness of Christ in our baptism, this forgiveness does not thereafter need endlessly to be repeated.⁴⁰ A yet further suggestion was that we do not need to make further atonement for sin since everything - past and future - was settled up in the passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

38 See section 13 below.

39 See section 11 below.

40 "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over..." John 13.8 The meaning and significance of baptism does seem to have changed in the NEK over the past several decades. This was put explicitly in one sermon that I heard where the preacher suggested that today we see baptism as a (sign of) blessing whereas in former times it was seen as a washing away of sin (*Schuld*). And on other contexts we heard too that the principal meaning of baptism is that God is now acknowledged as your friend - with no suggestion that this has anything to do baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.

But if the practice of penitence in the public services of the NEK is comparatively rare, the practice of individual confession and absolution seems to be very rare indeed.

This might seem quite strange because, by all accounts, Martin Luther himself was quite keen on the idea. It was reported to me that he wished to make *Einzelbeichte* a third Sacrament of the Church - and that he was only prevented from doing so by the opposition of other more radical reformers.

In the *Gesangbuch*, there are indeed two texts for individual confession. One is in the Little Catechism of Martin Luther, though a note to the text reports that the section on the Office of the Keys of Heaven and of Confession was not part of the original text of the Little Catechism. There is also a section on *Die Beichte*⁴¹ in its own right and this includes modern texts for the practice.

I suspect that the order for individual confession is very rarely used if at all across the whole breadth of the NEK. However, it has its place in the spirituality of the *Ansverus-Haus* where there is a small confessional adjoining the chapel.

Individual confession is also sometimes used in the ministry of deliverance when some particular action, situation or memory needs to be offered up into the grace of God so that a person can make a clean break with the past and a fresh start in the knowledge of God's love.

But on the whole it has to be said that the NEK is a Church whose spirituality does not stress the need for Christians to open up their conscience before God in a liturgical setting on too frequent a basis.

11. The “special history” of the German people

The “special history” of the German people refers to the period of the ascendancy of Hitler and National Socialism between 1933 and 1945 and the experience of World War 2 and its aftermath.

Its relevance to the spirituality of the contemporary NEK is controversial. Some of the people I spoke with traced many of the current traits and problems of the present NEK back to this time. Others held that it was now so long in the past as to be totally irrelevant to the present situation.

There is, however, still a great interest in the ‘performance’ of the Church during both this time and in the immediate post-war period. This finds, perhaps, its greatest current focus in the issue of how the churches responded in the years after 1945 to the actions of clergy during the previous twelve years: who was rehabilitated in the post-war period; who was restored to office, and who was, as it were, put on the back-burner of history.

There are three areas in which the “special history” of the German people is of continuing relevance for the Church of today.

One is that this time, and particularly the immediate post-war period was formative for many people who remain members, and sometimes leading members, of the NEK in the present day. This history is their own personal past, or at least the past of their parents, and has deeply influenced their lives, both social and spiritual, throughout the intervening period and into the present day.

The second area of influence is through the generation whose youth and intellectually formative

41 Sections 792-802

years found their focus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some people hold that the culture of the so-called '60s generation was at least to some extent a reaction to what were seen as the failings of the previous generation both in the 1933-45 era and in the post-war period. Much of the present culture of the NEK comes from pastors who were educated and trained in this period (the 1960s) and their spirituality is thus constructed in reaction to what was perceived as being the failed spirituality of the previous generation. (This may or may not be the case - but some people certainly hold that it is so.)

The third continuing impact of the war period and its aftermath concerns the surprisingly high proportion of people I came across who themselves or whose families had come to Northelbia from the lost lands of the east and from the German communities of the Baltic States at the end of the war. It was suggested to me that there was perhaps a greater degree of attachment to the Church among these refugee families than was traditional among those whose families were native to Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein. Furthermore, it was suggested that in some church communities such members of former refugee families provide the majority of the current active membership of the Church and that the churches would be empty indeed if it were not for such people.⁴²

12. *Heiligkeit* - Holiness

Does a notion of *Heiligkeit*, holiness, have any place in the spirituality of the NEK? Is it possible to identify anyone who might be described as a 'holy person'? And, given that, in Roman Catholic usage, die *Heiliger* are the saints of the Church, is there any sense in which a 'holy person' might be described as a 'saint' in an NEK context?⁴³

The people that I asked about this sometimes began from the *Sanctus (Dreimalheilig)* from the Lord's Supper (and from Isaiah 6.3): "*Heilig, heilig, heilig ist Gott der Herre Zebaoth...*" and the suggestion that only God can be described as holy.⁴⁴

In the New Testament, 'the saints' are all the followers of 'the Way', that is, the whole Church community. So why should any one person be singled out as a particularly good example of holiness?⁴⁵

And although people I spoke with found it very difficult to identify any individual person in modern times as a 'saint'⁴⁶ there was an understanding of the idea of 'holiness' and, when challenged by Thomas Hirsch-Hüffel of the *Gottesdienstinstitut* at the *Diakonie* Offices in Königstrasse in Altona, most of a group of pastors could speak about an experience of holiness they had felt or of a holy event that they had witnessed or had affected them. Most of these had arisen in the course of worship (particularly the confirmation services which they had then recently conducted), though some involved moments of spiritual awakening or of a particularly intense awareness of the

42 I don't know whether there has been formal statistical research regarding this suggestion.

43 Once again, it was often suggested to me that if the Roman Catholic Church had saints, then a Lutheran church clearly couldn't.

44 I was reminded that one of the classic descriptions of holiness is in Rudolf Otto's *The idea of the holy (Das Heilige)*, 1917, English translation 1923). Here it is suggested that we consider holy what is 'other' to us: what fascinates us and what we fear. We repeatedly return to the thought that in times past, people were taught that God was principally to be approached in awe and fear.

45 Perhaps there is a parallel here between saints and priests. There is a collective priesthood in the Church of Christ and yet some Christian confessions appoint particular people as priests. Similarly, there is a collective sainthood in the Church of Christ and yet some churches designate particular people as saints.

46 The single name which came up most often was that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, only for it to be rejected in almost the same breath. Bonhoeffer would never have wanted to be thought of as a saint. There was also some reference to various unsung local heroes of the NEK - often people who had had a particular spiritual influence on the person I was speaking with - these people were real saints, but they'd never want to have been thought of as such.

presence of God, or of sensing that God was present in a particular situation.

A question I had which I never quite managed to formulate in a way which elicited a coherent answer was that of whether there were any particular spiritual or practical consequences that were felt to flow from the fact of being a member of a Church whose title included the name of a particular person, in this case, obviously, Martin Luther. Particularly when this person, however significant as an historical figure in the life of the Church universal, was a person who had well documented fallibilities and who would never have claimed to be a saint.

This is not a problem for someone who belongs to a church which includes in its name an arbitrary geographical designation and clearly it was no more an issue for most of the Lutherans I spoke with - in fact it was completely irrelevant to them: *Lutherisch(e)*- was just a name. But for others, it was clearly important. And the first question they asked when any issue was put to them was, 'What did Luther say on this subject?' Unfortunately I didn't press anyone as to what of those writings which today we would be regarded as indicative of Luthers' fallibility. Is it easy to set these aside without having just a little tinge of conscience that we are being traitors to the cause?

Another discussion touching on the question of holiness is that concerning the possible existence or not within a Lutheran context of *Heiliger Raum* - a holy space or holy place. This is of particular practical significance in the present time when it comes to questions of the amalgamation of parishes (*Fusion*) and the closure of church buildings.⁴⁷

The question is whether or not it is possible to have a holy space. And if it is possible, whether such a place is hallowed by usage, by the prayers of the faithful or by a deliberate liturgical action? If a building can be set apart for liturgical use (and do we call this 'consecration') can it also be stood down from such use by using a liturgy of de-consecration? Or do you just hand over the keys to a new owner to do with it what they will? Or is it better to go in with the demolition ball or purify the site by fire?

The official Lutheran answer seems to be that there is no such thing as a holy space, that there is no sense in which a Lutheran church can be regarded as sacred or consecrated.⁴⁸ So there is no problem about closing them and handing them over into secular use. But that is not how people feel. Their church building has been hallowed by use and by prayer. Cult objects and artwork has often been ceremonially given into that space 'for all time'. So how can the church authorities just close and decommission and dispose of such a building? Perhaps we have here a clash between a practical folk spirituality and an official theology. Do the laity of the NEK have a more vibrant understanding of a certain kind of spirituality than the trained theologians?

13. The nature of the faith

There was a feeling of shock among some members of the Partner-Church Consultation (PKK) when, in a discussion about the home-mission work of the Church (*Innere Mission*), it was suggested that the 'old language' of redemption and salvation that was formerly used to describe the work of Christ was no longer appropriate to be used in presenting Christianity to the public in 21st-century Germany. What's more, the inference was made that, not only was this 'old language' considered to be inappropriate, but that the concepts behind it were no longer felt to be necessary

47 And as I have suggested above this might also have relevance when there is discussion of what sort of events and exhibitions it might be appropriate to stage in church buildings and on church premises.

48 In this context, the 7th Article of the Augsburg Confession is much quoted to the effect that the one, holy, Christian Church is present wherever the people of God are gathered together, the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Word of God.

components of a Christian faith - indeed, that it was the case that the concepts behind the 'old language' were not just obsolete but that they were actually untrue.

For some members of the PKK, who came from churches which had been founded by missionaries sent out from Breklum and other centres in Germany, this was felt to be truly shocking. The missionary Church (the mother Church) was perceived as having abandoned not only its own Christian tradition, but with it the faith which it had passed on to the new churches that it had founded in that tradition.⁴⁹

So the questions arise: is this reading of events correct? was the inference drawn by the members of the PKK correct? or was it all just a misunderstanding, something that had gone awry in the mismatch of languages?

One of the objects that I had set myself in coming to Germany in April 2006 was to investigate these questions further. And at the outset, I must say that I came to no firm conclusion in the matter. Well, no one in the Church is going to say 'I don't believe.' Many will tell you in more or less measured terms what they *do* believe. And others will say, 'It's actually none of your business what I do or do not believe.'

The observations I make come from talking to people and from listening to sermons. Now, of course, in practice, people are going to say different things in different contexts, so my two sources of evidence are not equivalent.

As to the sermons that I heard, it has to be said that these did not in general speak of salvation wrought in or through the work of Jesus Christ. They did not speak of sin or redemption from sin. The 'old language' of salvation and atonement did indeed seem to be studiously avoided. Of course, from the time of year of my visit, I was perforce listening to sermons preached on the Sundays of Easter, and indeed, at the beginning of my time in Northelbia, the Church was in the thick of the confirmation season. In retrospect, I would perhaps have liked also to have heard what was said about the cross in Passiontide and on Good Friday - and, indeed, what was said about the resurrection on Easter Day. But I wasn't there and so I didn't hear this.

But I have to say that it seemed to me that some of the sermons I did hear, including some those I heard during the confirmation season, to my way of thinking represented something of a lost opportunity. For often there was no sense that this was the beginning of the confirmation candidates' adult life in Christ, a life to be lived in a living relationship with the living Christ. There almost seemed to be a defeatist assumption that after the young people were confirmed, the Church community would never see them again until they came back to marry or bring their children for baptism. If I hear that story about how to get rid of bats or church mice again,⁵⁰ I think I will scream. It should be banned - it isn't funny; it is defeatist.

But is the local church a living fellowship of the friends of Jesus Christ? And if it is not, how can anyone be surprised if perceptive and impressionable young people do not wish to join it?

But before going further, I should perhaps explain a little of where I am coming from.

For me, the Church is the fellowship of those who trust that they are forgiven through the work of Christ on the cross - those who are reconciled to God in whatever sense by the passion and death of Jesus. As members of the Church we have joy in Christ and in each other because we have the

49 I hope I have understood this correctly but it impressed me very strongly in June 2005 that this was the case.

50 ...if all else fails, confirm them - and then you can be sure that they will never be seen in church again.

hope in us that we are a community of those whose sins (i.e., whatever brings us to alienation or separation from God) are forgiven.

Now, within the understanding of many members and pastors of the NEK, I know that that puts me within the ranks of the 'Evangelikal' and that the designation 'Evangelikal' is not always used as a term of approval. But then, I suspect that in *these* terms some 95% of the clergy of the Church of England would find themselves classified as 'Evangelikal', including many who would not be included among the 'Evangelicals' as the term is understood in the Church of England.

To me, if you take away this 'old language' of salvation and reconciliation with God - or at least that of the sense of acceptance that comes with faith - then you have removed the whole reason that we have for hope and faith in Christ or to bother at all with membership of his Church.⁵¹

But this is not to say that the clergy of the Church of England almost universally accept a theory of substitutional atonement in which a sinless Christ, taking the place of sinful humanity, dies on the cross and in order to satisfy the need for justice of a God whose righteousness exceeds his propensity for love. Rather, the truth is that the clergy of the Church of England doubtless adhere to many different theories of the work of atonement - and will by no means be consistent in their adherence to any particular flavour of these many theories. For perhaps it is the case that we are happy to work with linguistic inconsistencies in a way that the pastors of the NEK do not feel is open to them.

By contrast, the pastors of the NEK feel that they may preach only what they can defend as belonging to a consistent linguistic, dogmatic framework. They may preach only what they personally believe and can justify in terms of a consistent theology. There is no room for talk of a looseness of language, or for regarding any usage as poetic, fluid or flexible. The language of theology must be precise and precisely understood.

And this, I think, is the context in which the 'old language' of salvation is rejected. For this pattern of speaking about the role of Jesus is all too bound up with theories of atonement in which the death of Christ is held to be necessary to appease or to satisfy an essentially vengeful or wrathful God.

And it is clear that a greater or lesser proportion of the pastors of the NEK have indeed set aside or abandoned this 'old language' of salvation. 'It no longer means anything to people in the modern context', they say - and no doubt rightly so. This language is not common, popular usage in contemporary Western society, whether in Germany or in Britain.

All the same, there is a sense in which perhaps 'the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater'. A whole raft of New Testament ideas and vocabulary - a whole range of theological understandings which predate and postdate the scholastic teaching of a doctrine of substitutional atonement - has been lost to the Church in this rejection of the 'old language' of salvation. The problem is that this *is* the traditional language of faith in Christ, so the Church must either find an alternative vocabulary to express and convey its feelings of release and joy in Christ or it must work to re-establish the credibility of the old one (albeit without the discredited connotations of belief in a vengeful and wrathful God).

And what is offered in place of the 'old language' of salvation? Well, the language of peace (God's peace) and love (the love of God) and acceptance by God. Also the need for personal, social and

⁵¹ I don't know if it is an effect of the avoidance of the 'old language' but the prayers of the Church do seem more often to be addressed to God rather than to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. This could also have to do with the avoidance of non-inclusive language, where there is a reluctance to address prayers to 'the Lord' (*der Herr*).

political action in the service of Christ and in the community. And, of course, there is nothing wrong with this. This is all part of the Christian gospel. But it is not stand-alone; it is consequent upon the saving work of Christ upon the cross - and we do still need a vocabulary to talk about this - and preferably a vocabulary which is related to the language and ideas of the New Testament. After all, if you take the cross and the resurrection out of Christianity, then we've lost it.

And, come to think of it, 'peace and love and action' do sound a bit 1960s in their vocabulary. And, as I have noted, some people maintain that we are indeed dealing here with a '60s' rejection of what was regarded as a failed theology - a theology which drew its authority from the fear of a jealous, righteous and vengeful God⁵², who ruled his creatures through the fear of judgement rather than through the cords of love - and further, some people maintain, a theology which was seen to have failed to enable the Church to stand up to what was evil and wrong in the State during the years between 1933 and 1945.

In other words, this is not just an Enlightenment or rationalist rejection of traditionalist or Catholic teaching about sin, forgiveness and salvation: it is a moral rejection of a theology whose fruits were bad and which was in itself incapable of redemption.

Now I found that there was a measure of hurt felt by some pastors of the NEK that the Partner-Church Consultation (PKK) had seemed to question their faith. I was assured that they do indeed have faith - only that it is not common for them to express it demonstratively. The personal faith of the pastor is held to be as private as the private life of the pastor - these should not be open to public scrutiny. It is sufficient that they do their job: that they preach, teach, lead worship and undertake the pastoral and administrative work that is assigned to them faithfully and effectively. The Church is not seen as a community of faith with a mission of sharing a faith. The people say, "I am responsible for my own faith."

How did this privatisation of faith come about?

There are, no doubt, many explanations. One story that was told to me suggested that this went back to the Reformation where Martin Luther had thought that by handing the administration of the Church over to the secular powers, he had thus freed the clergy to get on with the work of God. But in practice he was found to have instituted a situation in which the clergy came to be seen merely as an arm of the secular authority: a sort of moral police force, enforcing the conformity of the people to the secular authority by using the fear of God as their means of control.

The people were compliant to this authority, partly because they had no choice,⁵³ and partly because compliance came to be accepted as a *modus vivendi*, and for many this became the accepted order of things, indeed, the way things *ought* to be. Though some felt this as a form of oppression. The effect was, however, that while the expression of faith was a public matter, its inner nature was private to the individual.

The story went on that with the revolution of at the end of the World War of 1914-18 and the abolition of the monarchy and the authority of the aristocracy and all the associated structures of authority, right down to the local level, the clergy also lost the source of their authority, though perhaps many did not realise this at the time and they continued to seek to lead their people through

52 Described to me once as "the Prussian High-Church God of judgement" from the middle years of the 20th century. There had apparently been a high-church movement in the Schleswig-Holstein Church in which, for instance, individual confession had been practiced and which had links to the Michaelis Brotherhood.

53 Is this again a consequence of the Diet of Speyer (1526)?

reference to the wrath of God and by trying to instill the fear of hell.⁵⁴ But perhaps now, for the first time since the Reformation, people felt themselves free to express their Protestant privatised “faith” by *not* attending church. After all, the local landlord could no longer compel them.

Perhaps this story that was told to me would not stand up to detailed historical analysis. But might it go some way towards explaining the empty churches of Schleswig-Holstein, the way that faith is something that doesn’t need to be spoken about, even in private, and perhaps also towards explaining the rarity of the practice of either public or private confession in the NEK?

And could this mean also that the issue about the faith of the NEK, and in particular, that of its pastors, is just a misunderstanding? Is the rejection of the ‘old language’ of salvation just a rejection of a particular theory of substitutional atonement and of a God who was presented to people in the guise of a wrathful rather than a loving deity? Or is there indeed a deeper uncertainty at large about some of the traditional teachings of the Christian faith?

I don’t know and I’m not sure that we can know the answers to these questions. But however uneasy we may be about the theory of substitutional atonement - and even if we reject it outright - I still wonder whether this must deprive us of an ability to speak about the death of Christ on the cross as having any meaning for us in terms of forgiveness, salvation or reconciliation with God?⁵⁵

In the present day in the NEK there is a growing number of younger and more recently trained pastors who, perhaps with no first-hand experience of the shortcomings of the old theology and having never been taught to regard God principally through the emotion of fear, are prepared or even eager to explore once more the ‘old language’ of salvation to see if it still has a validity for the sharing and the understanding of Christian truth.

Some of the older serving clergy regard this development as a betrayal. “We had to fight long and hard for the right not to preach and teach in terms of the ‘old language’ and now here are you giving up this hard-won right voluntarily!” they complain. But for many, the ‘new language’ of peace and love and action is just too bland a fare to fuel enthusiasm for the Church of Jesus Christ. The inability to speak about faith and to share faith, the continuing privatisation of faith, these are seen as leading the Church into a spiritual and organisational *cul-de-sac*. Society has been moving on during the past 60 years - perhaps the Church needs to regain its confidence once more to strike out in a different direction - and speak out about its faith in Christ.

14. The spirituality of the NEK and the future of the NEK

Does the NEK have a spirituality? Does its heart beat? Where can you feel its pulse? It has a past and a present - but does it have a future?

Of course, the NEK has a spirituality. Its heart does beat. Its pulse can be felt in many places. And it clearly has a future. I suppose the questions then arise: what kind of spirituality? What kind of beat? What kind of future?

54 I gather that this was the era in which the title ‘bishop’ was reintroduced in the churches of Northelbia. For the first time since the Reformation, the secular princes could no longer provide headship for the Church.

55 As I have said, I suspect that there is a certain linguistic looseness, a poetic quality, in the language of Anglican theology which allows the theologian to speak in less than logical terms in the traditional language about the saving work of Christ. And it is also clear that there are some voices influential in the NEK who, through their teaching, are indeed permitting pastors and others to view the language of theological expression with a similar looseness and liberality. After all, if the NEK can find a place for what look like votive candles and prayer beads and the like, can it not also find a place for poetry and metaphor in the expression of its theology and faith?

The NEK is a large and varied church. In its present form it is only a quarter of a century old. It is at present in the middle of a process of re-forming itself in structural terms. Mind you, some would say that structural reform is the last resort of those who cannot imagine what else the might be called to be doing. And if structural reform is driven from financial motives, well, I fear the truth is that it never yields the savings that it promises - either in personnel or in cash terms.

The truth is that a church is its people (the *laos*, the whole people of God) - understood to be the living Body of Christ in the present age and mediating the gospel of Christ into the society in which it finds itself planted.

The future of the church is the future of those people as they give themselves in prayer to be directed by the Holy Spirit. The future of the NEK is in the people active in the life of the parishes and in the pastors, particularly those pastors who come newly into ministry, full of enthusiasm, keen to seek out what the Spirit is saying to them - how they should spend their lives in the ministry of Christ's Church.

The pastors of the NEK are a very highly trained, and some would say a privileged bunch, though the recent administrative changes which deny so many of the new recruits a church-funded living mean that not all are equally privileged. All are described at their ordination as 'theologians' - and after perhaps six years of university study and two of *Vikariat*, they bring a considerable expertise and *gravitas* to their calling. I suppose the question is, is this really what the Church needs? Some suggest that a Church needing more theologians is rather like America needing more lawyers.

That said, the spirituality of the NEK includes the fact that the pastors are highly trained in theology. The question is, what other skills and qualities are needed to carry the church forward through the 21st century? I think I would pray that openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit of God is a must. Coming with that is a sense of calling to mine at the coal face of church life and not in its higher echelons.

Being open to the promptings of the Spirit will not mean that all are charismatics or pentecostalists - the Spirit of God can work through all the flavours of Church thought and practice. But there will be those whose ministry is more concerned with outreach to those in the unchurched community as equally there will be those whose style is more meditative and concerned with the building up of the spiritual strength of church life.

I would pray that there might be more openness to the possibility that theological truth might be discerned through the poetic and figurative use of language as well as the systematic and clinical. So much of the language of the Bible itself is poetic rather than analytic and didactic.

The challenge for all the churches is how to engage with a world which has moved on far beyond the stage at which the churches played any significant part in the social and political life of the community. Most people just don't see the relevance of the Church to their lives any more, many who in the Northelbian context are still technically church members. There are those who say that this is no concern of the Church. And while this may have been part of the historic spirituality of the NEK, those who still maintain this are perhaps burying their heads in the sand.

The hope for the NEK is that each new generation will be ever more open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For then, in the fellowship of Jesus Christ, the Church can be true to its calling to proclaim the Christian gospel afresh and anew in every generation.

Fen Drayton, April 2007

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