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## **2 THE PAST AND PRESENT FOREIGN MISSION ACTIVITIES OF GERMAN BRETHREN CHURCHES**

**Daniel Herm**

The first German Brethren assembly was founded through the ministry of George Müller in 1843, at Stuttgart, but within a few years the influence of John Nelson Darby—as a result of his wide travels, his friendship with Karl Brockhaus and his help in the translation of the Bible ('Elberfeld' translation)—became so strong that the Stuttgart assembly and many others developed into 'exclusive assemblies'. It has been estimated that about 100 years later two-thirds of the Brethren movement in Germany were of the 'exclusive' type.

This, of course, means that there was hardly any missionary interest or activity. During these 100 years the exclusive assemblies had only a handful of missionaries in Egypt and in China.

The missionary activities of the 'open' assemblies began towards the end of the 19th century through the influence of Dr Baedeker and the founding of the Bible School in Berlin in 1905. In this school many young men from the whole of Eastern and Southern Europe were trained and went back into their home countries, establishing Brethren assemblies there.

Only a few German Brethren who had been trained at the Bible School went into overseas missions, eg to Turkistan, China, South Eastern Europe, Belgian Congo and South America, the latter in fellowship with Mennonite Brethren refugees. This situation continued until 1937/38 when most German missionaries were required by the Nazi Government to return to Germany.

In 1937 the same government ordered the exclusive assemblies to register or cease to exist. So most of the 'exclusive' assemblies joined together with the 'open' ones and formed the 'Fellowship of Free Church Christians'. This was followed in 1940 by the union of the Baptist Churches with the Free Church Christians, in the 'Fellowship of Evangelical Free Churches'.

After the return of religious freedom, following the Second World War, three branches of the Brethren movement developed in Germany.

- 1 A number of exclusive Brethren returned to their old exclusive practices.
- 2 A second group called the 'Free Brethren Group' left the fellowship with the Baptists and now consist of about 120 assemblies and a number of house groups with their own activities, eg their own magazine '*Wegweisung*', young people's work, children's work, home missions (tents and mobile halls) with about 20 brethren in full time ministry. In addition they have about 10 missionaries in Japan, Zaire and Brazil and are supporting national assemblies and full time workers in Portugal, Italy and East European countries.
- 3 The remainder of the Brethren stayed within the Fellowship of Evangelical Free Churches.

Another activity which has developed within the Brethren movement is the *Zentral-Afrika-Mission* (Central Africa Mission) under the leadership of Martin Vedder. Their main ministry is the distribution of Emmaus Bible Correspondence Courses and other Christian literature in the francophone areas of Africa. They have no missionaries from Germany but support national workers.

Most of these activities in the area of foreign missions had their beginning or motivation through the developments in the Bible School in Wiedenest just after the Second World War and especially through the ministry of Ernst Schrupp.

After freedom had returned to the country and the support of missionaries became possible, a new vision developed among Brethren assemblies concerning their responsibility for foreign missions. So missionaries went to Austria (1952), Nigeria (1952), Japan (1954), Pakistan (1955) and Tanzania (1957). Later on others were led to Nepal (1958), Brazil (1958), Argentina (1958), Afghanistan (1968), Italy and recently to France. There are at present about 110 missionaries in these countries, mainly working in fellowship and cooperation with existing Brethren assemblies or in cooperation with evangelical missions like the International Nepal Fellowship in Nepal and the International Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. In addition, individual friends and assemblies are supporting via 'Wiedenest' the ministry of national workers and assemblies in Italy, Spain, Argentina, Brazil and East European countries.

### **Growth of Structure**

During these 35 years certain structures have emerged which were not consciously planned but developed out of the desire and conviction of the churches which had commended workers, the missionaries themselves and the Brethren in Wiedenest, who see their ministry as a coordinating one.

Representatives from all churches supporting missionaries meet once a year in our 'General Meeting'. There are about 180 assemblies and

churches represented and an additional number of friends and former missionaries. Out of these 200 about 20 are elected to form a 'Council of Brethren' (*Bruderrat*) which meets at least three times a year to interview missionary 'candidates', hear financial reports, and make decisions about bigger projects and concerning the teachers of the Bible School and other 'staff members'. From the Council of Brethren an executive committee (*Vestiband*) is elected, usually comprising seven brethren, three of them from the school or the *Missionshaus* and four external ones. This council meets about four times a year and is kept informed about the work on the mission fields, the school etc.

Another way of fellowship and cooperation has developed between churches supporting missionaries in a particular country. A number of brothers and sisters from these different churches meet with missionaries on furlough about once a year for a whole day when reports of the work are given and many aspects can be discussed in detail.

In the area of finance the principle is that churches having commended workers are informed about their financial need. Missionaries and projects have an internal account and all earmarked gifts are used only for that purpose. There are no deductions made for the administration etc, but all 'staff members' trust that God will provide for them what is needed. Resources are pooled, eg if churches cannot fully support their missionaries, gifts received for free distribution are used to make up such deficits. It is possible for assemblies and churches not having commended someone of their own fellowship to 'adopt' a missionary or a family after a time of fellowship and opportunity to get to know each other and find the basis of fellowship and cooperation.

### **Evangelical Cooperation**

The Wiedenest Bible School has from the very beginning cooperated with the Evangelical Alliance. Men like Johannes Warns and Erich Sauer were members of the general council of the German Evangelical Alliance. This practice was continued after the Second World War, and Wiedenest as *Missionshaus* and Bible School is a member of the Association of Evangelical Missions and cooperates in the postgraduate School for Missions (*Freie Hochschule für Mission*) in Korntal and *Hilfe für Brüder* (Help for the Brethren) which is a fund for evangelicals and their projects in evangelism, church planting and theological training.

Generally speaking it could be said that there is a new missionary interest among evangelical young people in Germany, not only in foreign missions but also concerning the challenge of our own country and Western Europe. There was a time when 'development' in third world countries and social responsibility were considered as having priority, but

this has changed during the last five or six years so that we hope that many of the areas in our own country without evangelical churches or Brethren assemblies can be reached within the next three or four years, and that a number of those called can be commended and supported for their ministry in Western Europe.

In the area of finance there has been a slow but steady growth in the giving of individuals and churches which we have received in Wiedenest. We do not solicit any gifts, and financial needs are only made known to local churches concerning 'their' missionary and his work. At the request of the annual meeting we give information once a year, usually in the autumn, about the current financial situation.

Our magazine '*Offene Türen*' is published bi-monthly, and each number has a theme, eg 'Literature in Evangelism' or 'Gospel and Culture' or 'Teaching and Training'. The circulation of '*Offene Türen*' is about 12,000.

At the beginning of every month we publish a 'prayer letter' which is sent to about 7000 people. In addition to this, of course, each missionary has his own prayer letter sent to his local church, and to his friends.

In all our ministries it is our desire to fulfil the Lord's command concerning evangelism and teaching in Matthew 28:18-20 and 2 Timothy 2:2 and in so doing we have close fellowship and cooperation with all Brethren churches in other countries, and, where necessary and possible, fellowship and cooperation with other evangelical churches and institutions.