

A social-missionary awakening in the non-traditional Brethren Churches in Germany using the example of two churches from the first decade of the second millennium

by Veit Claesberg, Germany

1. A new desire arises

In the last 5-10 years more and more churches in Germany have the desire to be noticeably relevant as a church for society. At the same time it is observable that the people who are lost, become a bigger priority. The churches want to bring the word of God to the people. To achieve this, they have to satisfy their needs which is why they first proceed to action. This happens without pitting word and deed against each other. This behavior is based on the greatest command that Christians should love God with all their heart and then love their neighbors as much as they love themselves. The churches want to make a difference in their cities. They want to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5,16)

I do not dare to talk about an overall trend yet but there are definitely signs for the beginning of a mini-trend.

The following examples refer to non-traditional Brethren Churches in the Association of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (www.agb-online.de).¹

There have of course been social-diaconal and social-missionary offers in the past. This includes good children and youth ministries. A recent study in the 150 churches belonging to the Association of Evangelical Free Churches has shown that a lot more churches than assumed are engaged in charitable activities. Some have even been including this in their ministry for years. Still there is a new-found awareness that leads to a desire for social-missionary work and also looking into that matter theologically.

2. From a welcoming concept to a sending concept

The basic idea of church is that it reaches out to the people, not wait until the people come to church. The church should send out their people not assume for the nonbelievers to come to them. No longer do people from outside the church simply come to their services or visit big evangelical events. There are some social classes that can only be reached through social work. With this, the challenge will always be to, on the one hand, be a church as an organization and on the other hand being a place where believers can come into God's presence and find new strength and motivation to go out and bring the word of God to the people.

In my opinion, this trend has been reinforced theologically through the books of Prof. Dr. Johannes Reimer, who was a frequent guest speaker at the Biblical-Theological Academy in Wiedenest² and by that influenced many full-time members in the churches.³

The German version of the book by US- American Shane Clairborne had a big impact as well.

In practice, Forum Wiedenest e.V. has been very involved in this trend, by founding the „Initiative Hoffnung“ (hope initiative). Initiative Hoffnung has been modeled on the British initiative „hope 08“. ⁴

For a few years now, there is also a diaconal initiative within the framework of the non-traditional Brethren Churches which is being supported by full-time staff.⁵

¹ The Brethren Movement in Germany exists in four streams (www.bruederbewegung.de). Worldwide and historical unique is the reunion between the exclusive stream and the open stream in 1942 because of the pressure in the Third Reich.

² <http://www.wiedenest.de/sonstiges/english.html> (21.12.2012)

³ <http://www.reimer-ministries.com/die-welt-umarmen/> (21.12.2012)

⁴ <http://www.initiativehoffnung.de/english-version> (21.12.2012)

⁵ <http://www.diakonie-fuer-christus.de/> (21.12.2012)

The following two projects have adapted the aforementioned need of society, respectively the new-found theological awareness to be locally active and invested as a church.

3. First example: The Evangelical Free Church München-Großhadern (Munich) plants a new church in Kleinhadern with a social-missionary aspect.

In the second largest city in Germany, a traditional Brethren Church has head off to reach the neighboring district of Kleinhadern.

This neighborhood represents a completely different social class than the members of the church in Großhadern. Which is why they came up with the idea, to found a new church in Kleinhadern that is financially supported by the church in Großhadern. An article in the church's newsletter from December 2012 said:

„God is great“, we have experienced that and still do so every day in our social-missionary church planting project. In the last quarter of 2011 we were able to start so many new projects as never before: a club for mothers and their small children, new sponsors, karate, a bring your own coffee club, and a youth group on Fridays which is open to people outside the church. Now it is time to continue the work that we have done so far and steady the projects that are new. The core of our work is the sponsorship program, where 12 teachers right now tutor 35 children from the deprived area of Ludlstraße. There they also build strong relationships to the children and their parents. And there is so much more we could do...if we could :) A new development is that, in addition to our neighborhood get-together „NaKlar!“ we've given more space in the „Epi-Zentrum“ Ludlstraße. Finally! Now we have more room for tutoring, the thrift store that we are planning to open, a prayer room and an apartment for students or interns.“

An employee writes: At the beginning of December we moved into our apartment in the Ludlstraße and we love it there! We live in a neighborhood full of social housing amidst some of the families whose children we support through the projects. It really is a completely different experience living amongst these people. We are excited to find out God's next step in building his kingdom here and we pray that the people will see God's glory and love through us.“

4. Second example: The Evangelical Free Church Wuppertal-Vohwinkel is starting a food bank for children

In North Rhine-Westphalia in the city of Wuppertal, a small, traditional Brethren Church has head off to reach the children of their city. Even though the church itself has no longer got a children ministry work. This is what it says on their homepage⁶:

The work of the food bank for children in Vohwinkel has become a daily social-diaconal offer for the people of the neighborhood Wuppertal-Vohwinkel. The program includes not only lunch for the children and the staff, but also tutoring and many fun activities.

The non-profit charitable supporting association „Kinder-Tisch Vohwinkel e.V.“ is supporting the food bank for children in Vohwinkel and offers the children a healthy diet and good education. The organization is not bound to government associations, political parties or a certain denomination. Everything that the Kinder-Tafel Vohwinkel offers is non-bureaucratic and open for everybody. Every child is welcomed there.“

At the same time the church states: The society is changing and has different needs now so it is our wish to fulfill our mission to engage in charitable activities as a church. „Look for the best in the city!“ (Bible) challenges us to act and be active for the children of our city. We have given so much so we can serve others. The difficult financial situation in Wuppertal motivates us a lot, we love our home town. We are convinced that it makes sense and is necessary to invest in the children of our neighborhood.“

Michael Heinze, one of the founders and coordinators, who is also active in the framework of the Brethren Churches regionally, writes:⁷

⁶ <http://www.kinder-tafel-vohwinkel.de/home.html> (21.12.2012)

Otto Rehagel once said: „The truth lies on the field!“ It was to remember what is of real importance. Over the years, football in Germany was no longer all about what happens on the field. The most popular sport in Germany now combined the economy, politics and the society. So the successful coach saw his responsibility in reminding the people what football is really about. Till this day there are no goal scored in discussions. The same applies to mission. Nobody can be reached by the gospel when all the christians stay in their church buildings. „When he saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them. They were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, „A large crop is in the fields, but there are only a few workers. Ask the Lord in charge of the harvest to send out workers to bring it in.“ (Matthew 9 36-38) During my travels to many different churches I often hear about the same problems: „The members of our church are to old“, „There are no new people coming to our sunday services“, „Only a handful of people are really contributing“ „The ones that were motivated got frustrated and left“, „Nobody is finding Jesus here anymore“ and so on.

Maybe for years now, churches have been trying to relocate the field into their church building. And this although Jesus speaks about a large crop out on the field?! Jesus did not know the church as a building. The kingdom of God was not limited to certain buildings or even firmly established. Jesus sees the need of the people, he goes out to them, he feels sorry for them and he explains to his disciples, that the crop is in the fields.“

5. Pending questions

There are many more examples like that. They all have in common that christians want to bring word and deed to the people at the same time. There are of course some pending questions. For example how the connection can be made from deed to word, without seeming insincere. Or how can the impression be prevented that the deed is only a means to an end? Is evangelization being the real reason for helping people?

At this point the idea helps that we need two legs to stand. A bird needs two wings to fly. The good Samaritan „only“ helped the man but through that become an example. The focus has to be on the people, not on the word and not only on the deed. Every individual has to be seen in its entirety. He needs a helping hand and the word of God that sets him free. Both aspects come up short without the other.

6. Conclusion

To speak of an awakening in our movement in Germany based on the given examples would be too much. Still these examples give hope and motivate us. They give fresh impetus to work in Gods kingdom. They are reaching the people of the 21st century and bring them the gospel. I am very grateful for that. I also wish this to the churches in Great Britain.

A quick remark at the end: the initiatives link to the model of Georg Müller, the founder of the Brethren Movement. And by that we Germans are still very traditional ☺.

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⁷ <http://www.efg-vohwinkel.de/Gemeinde.2.0.html> (21.12.2012)