

The Father's Heart in the Fatherland

In Germany, a nation once torn apart by Nazi hatred, God is bringing healing through the message of the Father's love.

The fatherhood crisis in the church is certainly universal and a well-known feature of our modern times. But in Germany it takes on an added dimension because of the abusive authority figure who once ruled that country: Adolf Hitler.

The concepts of vaterland, or "fatherland," and vaterlandsliebe, or "love for your fatherland" (that is, "patriotism"), had long been intrinsic to the German soul when Hitler perverted the meaning of the words to fit his Nazi propaganda. In consequence, after Hitler had been defeated and his devilishness unmasked, Germany was thrown into a corporate identity crisis. Something that had been very much a part of people's positive identity—and even the word "father" itself—now evoked dreaded memories of death, deception and an awareness of unresolved guilt.

In addition, the post-war generation grew up virtually fatherless because large numbers of fathers never returned from the battlefield. Many of those who did were so hurt emotionally that they were unable to afford their families the benefit of a father's loving care. This holds true in the United States and other countries, too, but no country was as wasted by Hitler's war as his own.

The plight of some Christian leaders in this nation reflects what happened to the population at large. Take Manfred Lanz, for example.

“Two years ago,” the 54-year-old Pentecostal pastor from southern Germany says, “I was thrown into a deep crisis and ended up depressed and burned out.” Though successful as a minister, Lanz privately felt he had failed: His teenage son rebelled, and his wife was miserable with him.

But the most “shocking thing” to Lanz was that even God seemed to distance Himself from him. “I felt that God accused me [of being a failure], and condemned me, and that was the deepest crisis of them all.”

Memories of childhood revealed to Lanz a possible root to the issues troubling him: the broken relationship with his own father. “Unexpectedly I remembered different situations in which I had felt threatened by Dad,” he says.

And seemingly—even though half a century had passed and Lanz was now a mature man and nationally respected church leader—these childhood traumas determined his heart’s perception of both himself and God.

He had not felt safe with his dad. In the crisis he did not feel safe with his heavenly Father either.

Thankfully, this crisis turned out to be a new beginning for Lanz.

“One day I sat down to write a letter to God,” he says. “I wrote down all the things that I would have loved to hear from Dad, but never did; things like: ‘Son, I like you the way you are. Son, you don’t have to be like me.’”

“And when I looked at what I had written I just knew: This is what my feeling of homelessness is all about!”

The sudden insight threw open the door to Lanz’s heart, and he was again connected with God. “I heard God the Father’s voice, and He told me all those things my dad had never said!”

From his home half an hour’s drive from Bodensee—the three-nations-lake that connects Germany, Switzerland and Austria—Lanz leads the Church Planting Ministries of the German Pentecostals. He is now a man at peace with himself, his family—and his God.

“I have a new life and a new life message,” Lanz concludes, “focusing on one Scripture: You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

From Curse to Blessing

Many hours north, in the city of Hannover, another German pastor with a national ministry shares a similar story. He, too, suffered severe depression, encountered God as his loving father—and then saw his life and ministry take off on a new road.

Matthias Hoffmann, 46, was a pastor in a leading Baptist church in Germany when he was touched by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the 1980s and decided to plant a charismatic church. “We started in 1992, believing that revival was at our doorstep,” recalls Hoffman, now a leader of D-Netz, a network of charismatic churches. “But revival didn’t come, and we got frustrated.”

There were mistakes, misgivings, friends who left, disappointments that crept in—and then depression struck. “In 2001 I felt like living in a black hole,” Hoffman says. “I detested getting up in the morning.”

Finally he cried out, “God, come to me!” and heard like an echo in his heart, “Come to Me!” Out of obedience and desperation he closeted himself in a mountain cabin with the Lord for a full month.

“From day one God revealed Himself to me as a father,” Hoffman exclaims. “He showed up just for me, loving on me and healing my soul from deep wounds, both old and new.

“And He filled me with new inspiration! I wrote new songs, I prepared some 60 sermons, and I painted pictures. It was a month of ongoing revelation!” His life focus, Hoffman says, was turned around.

And while the pastor was gone, his church experienced a new beginning, too. “The day I left for the mountains the financial crisis [of the church] was resolved,” Hoffman says. “Also, new people started coming.”

In the last two years Hoffman’s Ichthys church has almost doubled—from 100 to 170 members. In 2003 it joined Partners in Harvest, the network born out of the outpouring at the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship in Canada. This outpouring was referred to by its leaders as the “Father’s Blessing,” and to Partners in Harvest (grown now to some 5,000 churches, all but 150 located in southern Africa) “receiving and giving away the Father’s love” is the undisputed focus.

Just ask Rainer and Regina Frohms, the first Germans to visit Toronto after the outpouring and for years now the representatives of Partners in Harvest in Germany.

The focus on God as Father is not replacing but releasing what was given in former renewals, the Frohms claim from their home a few miles outside Hannover. "In Jesus' life," Rainer points out, "signs and wonders, evangelism, faith, the gifts of the Spirit and discipling grew out of His intimate relationship with the Father. After all, Jesus only did what He saw the Father doing. If we go to the Father, the way He did, we stand a better chance of becoming a little bit more like Him!"

With great intensity Regina testifies to her conviction that "Germany has a prophetic calling."

"God wants to restore our country," the mother of seven says, "as a true vaterland, or 'land of the Father'!"

The "perversions of fatherhood" that have been haunting human history ever since the fall of humanity reached a climax with Hitler, Rainer adds. "But Germany's true calling is to give to the world fatherly love and healing, not hate and destruction! Satan knows this, and that is why he did what he did in the Nazi era.

"But God intends to turn this curse also into a blessing, and that is why He is doing what He is doing now in our country."

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