

Spirit-Filled Immigrants Bring Revival to Germany

Ulf Bastian tramped into Christengemeinde Elim Pentecostal church in Hamburg, Germany, parading his punk-rocker duds: hair dyed a shocking bright color, black leather jacket, torn jeans and a T-shirt screaming the angry message, "Hate Mankind." His ex-girlfriend, who had become a born-again Christian (and is now his wife), urged him to attend.

"I thought she was crazy," he says. "I did not want to be part of Christian people."

Still, the Holy Spirit coaxed him to return a second time. Arriving late, he grabbed a chair in the last row. The worship music and pastor's preaching about sin and the cross of Christ hit home. Weeping, he rushed to the altar at the end of the service and told the pastor, "I need forgiveness."

He learned later that people had been praying for him from the first time he stepped into Elim, especially older members of the congregation. He was embraced by the group, despite his edgy appearance, and now serves as children's pastor. "Jesus did a great wonder in my life," he says.

Bastian's conversion took several years, a common trend in post-Christian Germany, where many tune out the gospel and, until recently, the spiritual fires of previous eras had been all but snuffed out.

Indeed, today's Germans are tough customers when it comes to believing in God and accepting the exclusive claims of Christ. According to a 2008 survey released by the University of Chicago in April of this year, only 2.5 percent of East Germans and 10.9 percent of West Germans claim a belief in God.

Despite a steady decline, Christianity remains the dominant official religion, accounting for 49 million people, or about 60 percent of Germany's population of 82 million. However, the reforming fires ignited by Martin Luther have turned stone-cold in traditional churches.

The official state-sanctioned Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), which includes Lutheran and Reformed denominations, reigns over the Protestant scene with 24.5 million members. The Roman Catholic Church, dominant in southern Germany, claims another 25 million members.

EKD and Catholic members support their denominations and clergy through a national tithe deducted from their income tax. The Free Church (outside of the EKD), operating without financial support by the state or government, numbers about 400,000 (Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites, independent Lutherans, Pentecostals and charismatics). That category includes an estimated 100,000 Pentecostal/charismatic believers.

For a long time, Pentecostals were shunned as members of a cult. "We were labeled as not being Christian," says Frank Schünemann, pastor of Christliches Zentrum Scala in Schorndorf.

Germany's Pentecostal church can be traced back to 1905, when a group of Lutheran Pietists from the Fellowship Movement experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The move of God, which happened in Mülheim in the Ruhr Valley, saw 3,000 conversions recorded in six weeks. Opposition surfaced after that, and Lutheran church leaders signed the Berlin Declaration in 1909, rejecting Pentecostalism as "from below."

Growing antagonism from the EKD, Catholics and other evangelicals persisted throughout the 20th century, forcing the new Pentecostals to form the Mülheim Association in 1914, Germany's first Pentecostal denomination. Additional

independent groups sprang up in the following decades, eventually birthing the five main Pentecostal denominations operating today and representing about 900 churches: Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (BFP), Church of God, Ecclesia Fellowship of Churches, Volksmission and the Mülheim Association.

Though the traditional church's hostile attitudes toward Pentecostals existed for much of the previous century, in 1996 the German Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostal leaders signed the Kassel Declaration, integrating Pentecostals and charismatics into the Alliance. Today Pentecostal pastors network regularly with other evangelical denominations.

Christians Have Left the Building

Despite this relatively newfound partnering, Germany's Pentecostal congregations have struggled to grow in recent years partly because most worship in nonchurch buildings that were former factories, apartment houses and offices—a turnoff to many tradition-bound Germans.

Nationwide, less than 7 percent of Germans attend Sunday services. Many remain Christian in name only, based on tradition, and espouse liberal views approving abortion, same-sex marriage and cohabitation.

Given a cultural rise in Islam—now the nation's second-largest faith with an estimated 4 million members—these Christians have become soft on Eastern religions and even the occult. Affluence, materialism and pleasure-seeking reign—trends seeping into Pentecostal churches as well.

Accordingly, Pentecostal leaders ache for revival. Although statistics show the charismatic church is growing annually by 2.5 percent, new converts have been scarce. According to several candid observers, the typical Pentecostal church gains only one or two converts annually.

“Members of our churches are very focused on their well-being,” says Moor Jovanovski, assistant to the general superintendent of the BFP, Germany’s equivalent to the Assemblies of God. “The Great Commission is not on their hearts.”

As Germany’s largest Pentecostal denomination, the BFP represents 776 churches with more than 46,000 members. Among those congregations, 483 have 50 or fewer members, and only 23 churches report more than 250 members.

Yet the most fascinating trend developing in this segment of the German church is the changing look—and sound—of the local Spirit-filled community. The BFP’s growth in recent years has been dominated by non-German-speaking churches planted by foreign-born nationals from Africa, the Middle East (mostly Iran and Turkey) and Russia. These non-German-speaking churches represent 36 percent of the BFP’s churches—176 of which are predominantly African.

Internationale Christengemeinde in Freiburg typifies the trend. Originally a student fellowship led by Palmer Appiah-Gyan while a university student from Ghana in 1994, the church draws 250 diverse worshippers on Sundays, from Germans to Africans to people of other countries.

The Holy Spirit is stirring other churches as well. Senior Pastor Matthias C. Wolff reports that Christengemeinde Elim, the BFP’s largest church, with 1,200 members, gains about 100 new people every month for its three Sunday services. Services are racially mixed and alive with praise. Tuesdays find more than 150 people lining up by Elim’s entrance with shopping carts and bags waiting to receive a bounty of appetizing foods from a team of 20 church members and friends.

The BFP is also finding success through its Royal Ranger program. Interdenominational in scope, it has grown to more than 330 outposts with 17,000 young people, 50 percent of whom

come from non-Christian families.

Foreign Faith

Alongside this influx of new young believers, God is also moving among the Muslim community in Germany. Babak Keshtkaran, a youth leader at Elim who is scheduled for ordination in October, is a prime example of how Jesus is breaking through religious boundaries to reveal Himself. Raised in an immigrant Muslim family from Iran, Keshtkaran sustained serious injuries in an auto accident in 2001.

The doctors' prognosis was grim: He was told he would be paralyzed in his legs and his hospital stay would be lengthy. Desperate, his mother phoned an uncle in San Diego who had become a Christian. The uncle told her, "Pray to Jesus and you will see."

Keshtkaran's mother prayed for God to bring him back. When she returned to the hospital expecting bad news, the doctor told her everything was OK and that she could return home with her son.

Through that incident Keshtkaran's mother and family turned to Christ—everyone except for him. Three years later, during a time when he was contemplating suicide, he cried out to God to forgive his sins. He graduated from the Berean seminary in Erzhausen in 2010 and joined Elim soon after.

"The Iranian people are very hungry for God," he says. "In the last two years, more Iranian people have come to church and are getting saved."

Signs of a Breakthrough

Explosive growth is also evident at the Hillsong Church Germany-Konstanz, a BFP church on Lake Konstanz near the Swiss border. Founded by co-pastors Freimut and Joanna Haverkamp, 800 people attend three Sunday services in a former factory.

After completing training at the Hillsong College in Australia, the couple began home meetings in 2004 while Freimut worked a secular job.

He attributes the church's current growth to the blessing of God, strong leadership, and an emphasis on building genuine relationships and investing in people.

"People in Germany don't have a problem with God, but they have a problem with church," he says. "We want church to be a place where people can come home. We help people come home to Jesus."

Though the gifts of the Spirit are regularly encouraged in weekly meetings called connect groups, Haverkamp believes the greatest miracle is when 15 to 20 people lift their hands for salvation every Sunday. Hillsong members follow up with new converts immediately and equip them with the basics of their faith through discovery classes for new Christians. The church will also begin a one-year Bible college in September.

Despite a lengthy season of spiritual drought, Haverkamp is excited about God currently moving in Germany. "People are really seeking God," he says. "Germany is ready for a breakthrough and could be the key for revival in Europe."

If such revival is in store for Germany, church leaders agree that the country's believers can't approach sharing the gospel from the same paradigm of previous generations. This is certainly true with longtime Assemblies of God missionary Paul Clark, who believes church planting is currently one of the most effective tools of evangelism in Germany.

His current church plant was birthed in 2008 in Bad Dürkheim, a spa town near Heidelberg. Initially, he attracted seekers through newspaper ads, an information booth, the Internet and a Sunday afternoon cake-and-coffee event. The first convert was a 73-year-old man who visited a youth outreach.

Despite the unique challenges of the day, the Pentecostal church in Germany is ripe for revival.

“There is a feeling we are just waiting for God to break through,” says Alex Mulholland, youth pastor at Scala Christliches Zentrum. “There are enough Christians that could really rock Germany.”