

## Conference EvAKiZ/GHI

14–16 June 2018 London

### German Protestant Communities Abroad in the 20th Century

Between National Protestantism and Ecumenical Christianity

The history of the German Protestant community abroad stretches back to the Reformation period. At the initiative of merchants in trading cities such as Venice, Lisbon or Stockholm Protestant migrants living outside their German-speaking country of origin gathered together to practise their religion.

For a long time these communities acted independently of the churches in the country of origin. This was not to change until the 19th century when the expansion of worldwide trade relations, the acquisition of colonies, and even more so the world economic crises and pauperism sparked massive migration by Germans to all parts of the world, thereby significantly increasing the number of German-speaking Christian communities in foreign countries. It was only now that “Protestant communities abroad” emerged that were contractually linked to the churches of the German *Länder* and from 1871 of the German Empire.

After defeat in the First World War and the subsequent losses of German territory the “Germans abroad” and with them the Protestant communities abroad became the focus of a national revision policy that justified its territorial claims by positing a cultural community of Germans that existed before the nation state.

Protestantism in Germany, overwhelmingly national-conservative, played an active role in this since it equated caring for religious life abroad, “caring for the diaspora abroad”, with caring for the “German *Volkstum*” – a maxim that was to define the actions of the church’s foreign office under Bishop Theodor Heckel during the Nazi period. Against this backdrop it comes as no surprise that in 1933 many of the Protestant communities abroad demonstrated a susceptibility to National Socialism.

Yet National Socialism also had a polarising effect, both within the communities abroad and as regards co-existence with society in the host country. Attempts at *Gleichschaltung* by the NSDAP foreign organisation led to conflicts just as much as pastors who represented the positions of the confessional churches or emigrants from Germany fleeing from racially or politically motivated persecution.

In retrospect the two World Wars prove to be caesuras for the Germans abroad. As members of the enemy in the war they were subjected to widespread repression such as confiscation of property, expulsion or internment. On top of this came the mass expulsion of Germans from eastern and central Europe at the end of the Second World War, and indeed the politically determined

migration of Christians with a Nazi background („denazification emigrants“) to South America etc.

Those communities that continued to exist in foreign countries after the war were still administered by the church's foreign office – until 1956 led by Martin Niemöller. This now encouraged a development in which the communities abroad increasingly detached themselves from Germany and the Protestant church there, at the same time intensifying their relations with the host country and integrating themselves into new religious communities. This is the context in which the church's foreign office was officially disbanded and in 1983 was absorbed into department IV of the EKD church office with its sub-sections ecumenical Christianity and work abroad.

The aim of the conference is to examine the important factors in the development outlined here using as examples various types of Protestant communities abroad with their differing theological and church-political orientations, thereby contributing to 20th century migration history. It hopes to outline a path leading from the Protestant communities' close cultural and political links with the German nation and church to access to larger church communities and integration into the host country.

The papers should focus on the significance of religious identity in this process. This should be seen in connection with people's self-perception as Germans and the changing political mentalities. Attention should also be paid to the role of language, social standing and communicative networking with Germany and the host country.

In chronological terms the conference covers the 20th century. The main emphasis, however, should be on the period from National Socialism to the present.