

Visit to Magdeburg April 2016

I was invited by Bishop Ilse Junkermann to represent the Diocese of Worcester at the ordination service in Magdeburg Cathedral, and as it was my first visit to our partner diocese, arranged to spend a few days familiarising myself and learning about church life in the former East Germany. Jens Lattke, who oversees partnerships for the EKM, organised a rich programme for me, centred around exploring the ways people have adapted their church buildings to make them fit for purpose in a changing context. Like us, in rural areas the diocese is facing the issue of vast numbers of crumbling church buildings, with shrinking elderly congregations, clergy covering vast areas with responsibility for many parishes, and scarce resources in terms of both people and money. So, here is an account of my visit, with some reflections and observations, and photos to illustrate what we saw, which may be of interest to those in the Diocese of Worcester seeking to grow in our Kingdom People characteristic related to buildings, one of our recently identified strategic priorities:

Kingdom People Characteristic 8 Committed to making our buildings fit for purpose

- as a spiritual and community resource the church building is accessible during daylight hours
- prayers are offered in the church building on a daily basis
- buildings have been sensitively adapted so that they offer hospitality to all kinds of groups, meetings and activities
- there is a strategy for encouraging and welcoming visitors to the church

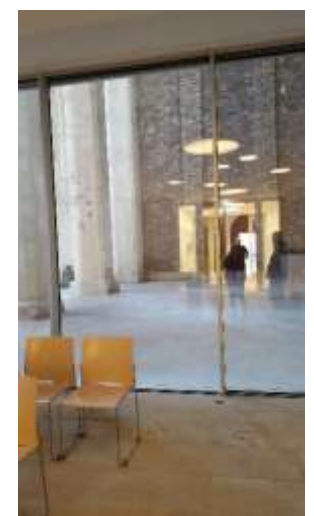
Friday - A church within a church

I arrived on Friday around lunchtime, had a walking tour of the area, seeing the impressive cathedral for the first time, and experiencing what a beautiful city Magdeburg is. The river is a major feature, of course, but I was struck by the immense variety of the buildings here, due to the destruction of many wars. There is a real juxtaposition of old and new, and quirky!

My first formal visit was to a church where, in a huge building, two congregations (Reformed and Lutheran) meet in different ends of the church, both so huge they feel like two massive churches stuck together, but in one, a revolutionary new church has been constructed within the shell of the old church. It is completely reversible, having done no damage to the original church. The only permanent change is a trench under the floor in which the plumbing, electricity and air extraction is channelled to the outside. It has enabled a small, elderly congregation to continue meeting in a purpose built 'capsule', complete with upstairs kitchen and small meeting rooms with offices, all accessible by lift as well as stairs. For special events the doors can be fully opened so the whole church building can be used. It had to be seen to be believed!

Saturday - The Golden Church Tower Awards

Saturday was spent at a symposium for 'Friends Groups'. Opening worship was led by retired Area Bishop Reinhard Werneburg, who preached an inspiring sermon based on Peter telling the man begging at the temple gates to "Get up!", saying we needed to speak life in the same way into many of our buildings. Silver and gold we may not



have, but with God's help miracles can happen. The keynote talk was about the factors facing rural communities, which are similar, but more extreme than those we face, as the area east of Magdeburg is vast and sparsely populated, with much longer distances between communities.

The high point of the day was the award giving ceremony, where the winner and runners up received large cheques towards their innovative projects to restore their church buildings. The event was filmed and shown on local TV that evening, as there is much interest in the prize, awarded by a jury who visit all the shortlisted projects and evaluate their work. It is an idea I will explore in our diocese, as it engenders local interest, inspires imagination, and enables sharing of good practice, with interesting stories of transformation. On Monday I would be visiting some of the prizewinning churches.

The afternoon was spent in a variety of workshops, and ended with Kaffee und Kuchen in true German style.

Sunday - Ordinations in the Cathedral

I was made to feel like a very honoured guest, and I think it meant a great deal to the ordinands, and to the Bishop, that Worcester was represented. Some of the ordinands had visited Worcester last summer, and had been at our equivalent service, so the bond is strong. I read one of the readings, helped administer communion, and gave a greeting at the reception afterwards. At the communion two of the newly ordained pastors presided, which must have been nerve wracking for their first time, in a packed cathedral! The Catholic Bishop gave a wonderful greeting during the service, which felt profoundly gracious, as there was not one, but two, female bishops ordaining. The church in this part of Germany seems further on in the area of ecumenical partnerships and women's ministry than we are, but as someone pointed out to me, under the former East German regime it was more important for Christians to stand together, so internal differences mattered less.

Monday - rural restorations

A series of visits had been arranged by Susann Bähre who drove Jens and I, together with Reinhard Werneburg, on a two day tour of the area.

Certain amounts of funding are available from the EU for church buildings in Germany if groups can develop a unique concept, a clear plan for specific new uses which will benefit the whole community, not just the church congregations. So Friends Groups are springing up in many rural communities, usually comprising a mixture of church folk and villagers who would not describe themselves as Christians, but care about the building. The balance of these groups varies from place to place, and can give rise to tensions! It was projects run by such groups that we visited.

Gollwitz, the first village we visited, has a population 70, about half of whom are in the Friends Group, and a good number of whom were there to meet us! This group, although at the earliest stage of their project, had won second prize in the Golden Church Tower Awards, and were hugely proud and delighted. They have plans for their tiny church which involve multiple uses by the community, for example film shows and concerts, even without toilets. But this is all to enable the church to stay as a living building, and the pastor was very engaged in helping people make faith connections. They have also



created a cycle route linking this and several other churches, accessible from a mainline rail station, which brings many visitors, and is well publicised and sign posted.

We next visited a church in Karo which has been beautifully restored on the outside, and work was beginning on the inside.

In Kade we met a very strong Friends Group with a charismatic and engaging leader who passionately gets the whole village involved and is able to motivate working parties by sheer strength of personality, seemingly holding lightly to regulations - there was an issue about some restoration to a roof and guttering which had to be redone as it did not comply with the desires of the conservation societies - but they had pushed on regardless! The church is used for weddings mainly, with people travelling for miles to be married there, but the worshipping life of the congregation seemed less important, and fewer church members were involved. The emphasis here was more on the building and the community, than the church as a place of worship. There was press coverage of my visit here, as they are very connected in to ways of publicising their work.

Our final visit of the day was to Isterbis. The unique concept here is that the church is one of several in the area with an unusual winged altar. The Friends Group have designed a trail, starting at this church, where one end of the building has been turned into a trail information centre, with beautiful information boards, kitchen and toilet facilities, and a wonderfully restored church interior. This was my favourite of all the buildings we visited.

Tuesday - climbing walls, baptism angels and pilgrim lofts

Our first stop was Bebertal, a village with three churches, where they have closed one, and have ambitious plans to turn it into a climbing centre; all but closed a second, used only for baptisms due to its spectacular baptism angel, and focussed on making the third a useable church for regular worship.

Next we visited Schwanefeld, where much work is being carried out on restoring a medieval church near the former East/West border. Here the Friends Group is very active in putting on medieval fairs to raise awareness of the church's history.

Our final visit was to Hodingen, where people have realised the potential of the roof space in their church, and are in the process of transforming it into pilgrim lodgings for youth groups.

It was interesting that many of the churches we visited, (including the Cathedral!), have 'winter church' meeting locations in other venues. Either they have no heating, or can't afford to use it. It is now normal practice, and something worth considering for some of our churches perhaps

In the evening I met with area bishop Christoph Hackbeil, and talked about his upcoming visit to Worcester with a group of people similar to our rural deans, who are interested in visiting some Fresh Expressions of church here.

It was a wonderful visit, where I experienced the warm hospitality of our partners in ministry, met some wonderfully enthusiastic and visionary people, and realised I had never learned the German for gutters or medieval stonework!

Nikki Groarke
Archdeacon of Dudley

