

**“Conversations in Leipzig”, a sermon based on Matthew 13:1-9. 18-23, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 16 July 2017**

There are about 80 million Reformed Christians in the world, including Presbyterians. The international body is the World Communion of Reformed Churches. It has 228 member churches, including ours, from 108 countries. About 1,200 people representing 228 member churches.

The General Council of the World Communion is made up of delegates from the churches and it meets every seven years.

This is the fourth I have attended - the first in Debrecen in Hungary in 1997, then in Accra Ghana in 2004, and then in Grand Rapids Michigan in 2010, and just three weeks ago in Leipzig in Germany.

Over the next few weeks I want to talk about what happened. I begin with three conversations.

The first with a local Leipzig person and I expand it out to emphasise its significance.

We were together at the Reformed church near the central railway station and she told me the story of the 1989 uprising. Remember the context.

In the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev was president and he had started to speak of glasnost and perestroika, the opening up of soviet society.

But East Germany which was also a communist country was holding firm with Erich Honecker as president. The Berlin wall separating the western Berlin from communist Berlin stood as firm as ever. People trying to escape from the east to the west were killed or caught. That was the context.

In 1982, St Nicholas Church in the middle of Leipzig in Eastern Communist Germany began holding prayers for peace, eventually every Monday night.

Some nights the number was very small, about 12 people. But the church persisted, despite government opposition, every Monday night, without fail.

In 1985 the minister put an 'open to all' sign outside the church.

The church provided the only space in East Germany where people could talk about things that could not be discussed in public.

Young people, Christians and atheists all sought refuge there. Attendances soared as word of the peace prayers spread.

This is what the minister said:

"On 8 May 1989, the authorities barricaded the streets leading to the church, hoping to put people off, but it had the opposite effect, and our congregation grew. There were beatings and arrests of demonstrators at protest rallies in Leipzig, Berlin and Dresden," he said.

By this time the prayer meetings had led to a series of peaceful protests in Leipzig and other cities which became known as the Monday Demonstrations.

For years the prayer meetings had largely been ignored by the East German authorities, due to the lack of numbers. As the scale of the gatherings grew, the minister and the congregation were threatened and pressure was put on them to stop the meetings, but they remained resolute.

Things came to a head on 7 October 1989, the 40th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic.

This is what the minister of the church said.

"There were hundreds of arrests made among the crowds in front of the Nikolai Church. Erich Honecker [the Communist leader of East Germany] had declared that the church should be closed. The police used brute force against the demonstrators and lots of people were beaten,"

An article appeared in a local newspaper announcing that the counter-revolution would be put down on Monday 9 October "with whatever means necessary".

"The church was visited by doctors who told us that hospital rooms had been made available for patients with bullet wounds. So we were absolutely terrified of what might happen," the minister said.

On 9 October 1989, as Leipzigers returned home from work, they saw the city fill with soldiers and police, increasing the sense of foreboding.

One of the people praying said "The over-riding feeling on the day was fear."

"I had lost custody of my children for a while and they even threatened to put my youngest daughter into a children's home. The official documents said I was unfit as a mother because I was involved in extremist groups."

Up to 8,000 people crowded into St Nicholas Church, including members of the feared Stasi (secret police) who had been sent to occupy it.

Other Leipzig churches opened to accommodate additional protesters. About 70,000 people had now gathered in the city.

After an hour-long service, the minister led worshippers outside.

People clutched lit candles. Slowly, the crowd began walking around the city, past the Stasi headquarters, chanting "we are the people" and "no violence", and accompanied by thousands of helmeted riot police ready to intervene.

But at the decisive moment the police stood aside and let the protesters march by.

The minister said: "They didn't attack. They had nothing to attack for. East German officials would later say they were ready for anything, except for candles and prayer."

"It took great personal courage to confront a government notorious for its ruthlessness," he said.

The fact they had been met with no violence meant the protest movement began to lose its fear. The dam had burst.

Footage of the march was widely broadcast, which inspired Monday Demonstrations throughout East Germany in the following weeks.

About 120,000 people took to the streets the following Monday. The President resigned two days later. The crowds grew.

Exactly a month after the events of 9 October the Berlin Wall came down amid scenes of jubilation witnessed around the world.

A BBC journalist said this:

"What moved me the most was that people who had grown up in two atheist dictatorships - first the Nazis then the communist regimes - were able to distil the message of Jesus into two words: no violence.

"Without the church it would have been like all other revolutions before - bloody and unsuccessful."

The weekly prayers for peace continue at St Nicholas.

A sower went out to sow.

Second conversation

A young German woman. Educated, had been to a church school, but not to church since. Had been attending worship for two months, and we talked about why.

Well, she said, I am educated and I am working but it is not where I see myself for long, and I am lost. I am not sure what my future is and I am for. So I started coming to church. It provides me with a story and a place. It is old and it has ritual. I take the tram every Sunday for about half an hour and here I find a place that gives meaning and direction to

my life. I am not religious though, she said. I have talked with others at my work and they feel as lost as I do. What are we here for? There are many like me, she said.

A sower went out to sow.

And the last ... from a country I will not name because of the danger to people who speak of it.

It is a country which is overwhelmingly Muslim and where there is a struggle going on between hardline and moderate Muslims in power.

He told the story of how as Moderator of his denomination, he was regularly questioned by government authorities.

One day he was again in an office of a government agency, and a moderate Muslim leader took him aside and said ... you cannot leave by the front door because you will be arrested and imprisoned. I can help you leave and you need to leave the country because they are after you. And so he did, with his family.

And he talked of how, in these circumstances, with the church operating under terrible conditions, in a context of constant scrutiny and harassment, many hundreds of people, indeed he said thousands, were joining their denomination. He said, we do not know why. We sense that people want more freedom and they find in our faith, liberation.

A sower went out to sow.

In contexts of oppression, of harassment, of emptiness, God keeps tilling the soil, preparing it for seed, and sowing seed.

In all kinds of conditions, in all kinds of soil.

Thanks be to God!

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**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)