

GERMAN ECUMENIST BISHOP JOHANNES HEMPEL

The May edition of The Window was complete when, on 23rd April 2020, the death was announced of a man who has played a significant role in the world-wide Church.

Since the next issue is not due until October our editor, Dick Lewis, with the assistance of several of our members, has put together this tribute.



Photo: epd/Bernd Bohm

Bishop Johannes Hempel of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, a former President of the World Council of Churches (WCC), died on 23rd April, aged 91.

He was born on 23rd March, 1929, in the Saxon town of Zittau, and became Bishop of the Church of Saxony from 1972 until he retired in 1994. He was elected to the Central and Executive Committees of the World Council of Churches in 1975 and, at the Sixth Assembly in Vancouver in 1983, was elected one of the WCC's seven Presidents, a post he held until 1991.

Bishop Hempel was involved in ecumenical work throughout his career. David Tustin, former Bishop of Grimsby and also a former Anglican President of the Anglican-Lutheran Society, served with Bishop Hempel on the Anglican-Lutheran European Regional Commission, 1980-82. He writes, 'The *'Helsinki Report'* (1982) of ALERC added substantially to the doctrinal consensus begun by the *'Pullach Report'* (1972). 'He was my fellow Co-Chairman of the tripartite Conversations in 1987-1988 which led to the Meissen Report, *'On the Way to Visible Unity'* (1988). It was he who, on behalf of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic, hosted our final meeting at Meissen in March 1988, though he was prevented by illness from attending on the last morning.'

In 1981 Bishop Hempel invited the WCC to hold its Central Committee meeting in Dresden, where his Saxony Church had its headquarters. Dresden is a city known for its efforts in promoting reconciliation after the massive destruction wrought on it in the closing months of the Second World War. Bishop Hempel and Bishop John Gibbs had become very close friends and had worked together to strengthen the link between Dresden and Coventry which had been established in 1959, and Bishop Hempel continued to work hard over many years to further Anglo-German reconciliation.

On the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983, Bishop Hempel, then the Presiding Bishop of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic, invited representatives of the main Christian world communions to East Germany to mark the occasion. Among those present were the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, and Christopher Hill who at that time was the Archbishop's Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs, and who later became Bishop of Stafford and then of Guildford.

Christopher Hill writes, 'In preparation for that visit I went to the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and stayed with Bishop Hempel for a couple of days in Dresden in his home with his family. He told me one evening of the agonies of conscience

he had because, unlike his fellow pastors, he himself was able to travel as a privileged person. During that visit he not only invited Robert Runcie to preach on the German Remembrance Sunday in Dresden's Holy Cross Church but also to co-preside. The liturgy was very similar indeed to our 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the music included some by Heinrich Schütz, Master of Music in Dresden from 1615-72. In addition Bishop Hempel asked me to assist in the administration of the chalice. The church was packed and in receiving the sacrament, as well as saying "Amen", many said "Danke" for our visit.'

Dame Mary Tanner, who was also present on that occasion, says, 'I remember Archbishop Robert administering the cup in that service in Dresden with tears in his eyes as the young people wearing peace badges held his hand and thanked him for coming to be with them. He remembered that these were the people who he had faced in the tanks during the war. On the walk back from the service the Archbishop said that we must do something to bring our Churches closer together. Soon after returning to England he wrote to the Presiding Bishops of the Churches in East and West Germany suggesting that formal conversations be set up to explore the way of reconciliation.'

Christopher Hill adds, 'During that visit, in Leipzig, Bishop Hempel introduced me to a young student who had just been prevented from taking a university course because he had said the wrong things in his school magazine.'

'I last saw Bishop Johannes when in a Council of European Churches capacity I attended the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in Dresden some five years ago. Sadly his wife had Alzheimer's but they were both there for the Festival Eucharist in the newly restored *Frauenkirche*. He was frail but mentally very much there and we enjoyed some reminiscence.'



STOP PRESS (continued)



Robert Runcie and Johannes Hempel in deep conversation during the Nikaeen Dinner in Lambeth Palace on 12th February, 1987.
Photo: David Tustin

Back in 1983 Bishop Hempel had given strong support to the WCC's Vancouver Assembly's call for a conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Back home in the German Democratic Republic the initiative culminated in an ecumenical assembly in Dresden in 1989 that made unprecedented demands for political change, just months before the communist-ruled republic was gripped by mass protests largely resulting from a church-based peace movement focused around the Biblical motto "Swords into Ploughshares".

John Arnold, former Dean of Durham and our present A-LS Anglican President, was in 1983 a member of Archbishop Runcie's team. He says, 'The moment in 1989 when the Mayor of Dresden sent for Bishop Hempel to discuss the situation in the city was one of the key events, which led up to the fall of the Berlin Wall slightly later. What happened in Berlin was more spectacular, but the turning points had already occurred in Dresden and Leipzig.'

'In the dramatic times before and after 1989 Bishop Hempel acted with great spiritual authority,' says Bishop Volker Kress, who succeeded him as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony.

The end of communism in the German Democratic Republic was followed by German unification in 1990, and the following year the Protestant Churches from East and West Germany were reunited under the umbrella of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). In 1991 Johannes Hempel became the first East German bishop to become Deputy Chair of the first Council of the reunited EKD.

On hearing of his death, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, the present Chair of the EKD, praised Bishop Hempel's commitment to the WCC and his efforts 'to make visible that we are the one Church of Jesus Christ, whatever our confession or national or cultural background.'

May Johannes Hempel rest in peace, and rise in glory.

PANDEMICS AND EVANGELISM: THE MARTYRS OF THE PLAGUE OF ALEXANDRIA

This article, by the Most Rev Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, appears in the May edition of Anglican Journal.

"Many who had healed others fell victims themselves. The best of our brethren have been taken from us in this manner: some were priests, some were deacons and some laity of great worth. This death, with the faith that accompanied it, appeared to be little inferior to martyrdom itself."

—St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria

In his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker, 2016), Alan Kreider tries to understand why Christianity grew so much in a period when there was no public evangelism and the liturgies were completely off-limits to outsiders - no seeker services here.

Kreider, a brilliant scholar and a holy man who died in 2017, says that a significant part of the answer has to do with pandemics. The martyrs of the Plague of Alexandria (AD 261) are an example of what Kreider was talk-

ing about. In a time of vicious and deadly persecution, Christians came out of hiding to tend the sick, care for the dying and bury the dead. As all others fled, they were seen, at great risk from persecution and infection, going in the opposite direction.

It was this that was the compelling argument for the faith. The witness was twofold: on the one hand, it showed extraordinary compassion, even for those who were persecuting them; on the other it demonstrated a fearless attitude towards death, even in the face of an horrific and excruciating fatal illness.

This kind of faith and practice was something people wanted to have; something people wanted to be.

As we face a pandemic, we rightly work to protect our members and the larger society, especially the vulnerable. Many, from what I can see, are

doing all that they can to connect with people in ways that are safe. We fall into line, as we should, with all the safe practices. I am not arguing for us to march in and become points of spreading infection.

What I am arguing for is a way to connect this to the heart of faith, what we say we believe, and who we are, in Christ. Do we meet these events with a compassion and fearlessness schooled by our daily encounter with God?

We are to be a people of Spirit; a people of faith, hope and love. Our imagination is to be overwhelmed with the life, death, resurrection and second coming of Christ. This story is to shape us in ways that unveil its meaning when we encounter fear, isolation and suffering.

That, more than anything else we could say or show, is a real contribution to our faith, our world and the path that Jesus is leading us on to the World to Come.