



The Peace Church of Munich

Story and photos by Beryl Goldberg

Creator of the world, eternal God, we have come from many places for a little while. Redeemer of humanity, God-with-us, we have come with all our differences, seeking common ground. Spirit of unity, go-between God, we have come on journeys of our own to a place where journeys meet. So here in this shelter house, let us take time together.

This was a recent call to worship by the Rev. Christine Erb-Kanzleiter, pastor of the Peace Church United Methodist in Munich, Germany. "We have a risk-taking mission of radical hospitality," says Pastor Christine. "We have to constantly overstep boundaries to network between cultures. We encourage people to open themselves up and share. Many do things they never thought they would do when they were back home in their local churches."

Experiencing new traditions, helping asylum seekers, and visiting people in prison are just a few of the regular activities at Peace Church. Members of the church come from 25 countries and include international business people—many from the United States and Europe—Germans, and asylum seekers from West Africa. Sometimes those seeking asylum arrive with little more than the clothing on their backs.

GOD HAD ANOTHER PURPOSE

Looking back, the original goal in 1987 was to start an English-speaking Methodist church in Germany that could meet the needs of US military personnel stationed there. According to the Rev. Jim Dwyer, who was pastor with his wife Helen Dwyer from 1992 to 2003, the military didn't really connect with the church. When Pastor Dwyer arrived



Photo: Reiner Kanzleiter

Clockwise: Caroline Voss, a lay pastor-in-training, at entrance of Peace Church in Munich; Josephine Adekunle presents Tobi, her baby, for baptism; Children of church members with presents for baby Tobi at his baptism; Participant in the traditional October African Harvest festival at Peace Church.

in Munich, the congregation consisted of only 12 people: a mix of Americans and British. A few months later, there was a huge influx of English-speaking West Africans seeking asylum from the destructive civil war and atrocities in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Pastor Dwyer recalls putting up posters inviting people to the church. Then, he said, "A young man from Liberia came the following Sunday, followed the next week by two more. The congregation was growing. By December, there were 50! But some were deported so quickly that we didn't have a chance to say goodbye. About 20 became involved in the church. During Fellowship after the Sunday services, we learned of some of their problems. We visited them where they were housed by the government. Their housing was either converted shipping containers or prefab buildings.

"After a few visits, we arranged a meeting, in which we said: 'We are an international congregation. What do you expect from us?' They answered: 'You have fulfilled our expectation. We were looking for someone to welcome us without judging us.'"

But Pastor Dwyer and the Peace Church congregants also helped them as needs arose. They assisted those seeking asylum to navigate through the German bureaucracy. They aided them in securing the necessary documents for resettlement: birth certificates and valid passports. Since many had come from countries with corrupt governments, they had to learn how to deal with a rigid and demanding system in the German language, which they didn't speak. The church helped two men attain further education. Finally, a number of these asylum seekers did secure permission to live in Germany.



A CONSCIOUS PEACE

Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter, having been the assistant pastor to the Dwyers, took over when they left in 2003. Though the members all speak English, they don't all share the same traditions. According to Pastor Christine, they learn to cross boundaries and work together. Alice Borges, originally from Ghana, explained that church members have differences over how to do things, but they have learned how to work matters out. For example, how should a newborn be presented to the church?

Americans thought there should be a baby shower. Alice recalled that they decided every child needed a proper welcome. "We agreed to a baby welcoming on Sunday. The baby is called to the front during worship with his or her parents. We sing and offer presents, just as it happened with Jesus and the three wise men."

Thanksgiving, according to Alice, is another chance to share traditions. Africans have a harvest festival, a concept similar to the American Thanksgiving. "We decided to organize a harvest festival service and bring African food. The last one earned close to 1,700 Euros."

Alice described why Peace Church is so important to her: "Being far way from home, I was searching for a place I could call home. I have raised three children here and we come because we find our weekly strength from the Sunday worship. We join all those international people praying together." Alice has not forgotten her home village in Ghana either. Rev. Dwyer related how impressed he was that she was able to procure and then send an ambulance to her village. She received donations for this project from people who heard her story on the radio.

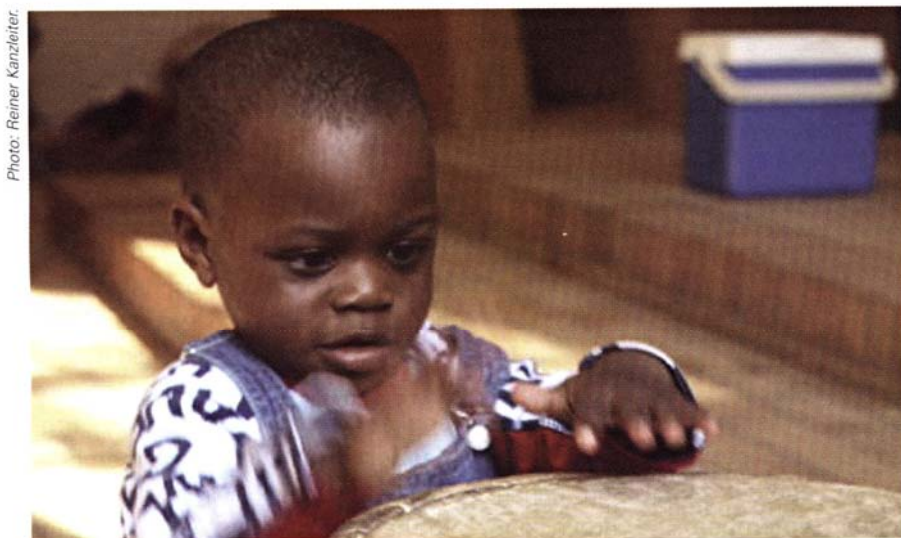


Photo: Reiner Kanzleiter.

Top: Sunday morning worship with toddler exploring church. **Above:** Learning to play the African drums at Peace Church.

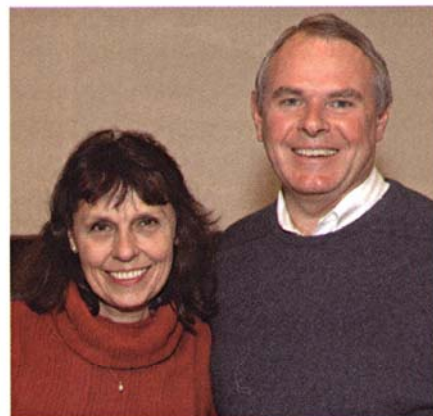
A UNIQUE AND GROWING CONSTITUENCY

The church Sunday school is an integral part of the church. Given the small membership and limited space, Ruth Michalski, who teaches the younger children, noted the challenge of maintaining two classes, one for the three- to six-year-olds and one for seven- to thirteen-year-olds, in their limited space. When she works with the young children she may see that a child needs some additional help. So Ruth will speak informally to the child's mother during the coffee hour.

Ruth became a member originally because of the worship in English and became very committed to the church. As she explained: "I come to this church because of the language. In order for me to worship God, I need to communicate with him in a language I can understand." Her husband, Frank, is also an active member who occasionally plays the guitar for the church-school classes. Since he speaks German, he also helps those with German-language problems, which almost always involve the government. Furthermore, Frank explained, "We were immigrants for eight-and-a-half years in the United States, so we understand what it means to be 'a foreigner.'"

Another wave of asylum seekers, many of them women, has been arriving at the Peace Church over the past two years. Many were inspired to come after a social worker at one of the homes approached Pastor Christine and asked if he could send women to the church who were seeking a place of Christian worship. The word has since spread.

These individuals lead difficult lives. The asylum homes where they live are sometimes dirty, often poorly maintained, and not in easily accessible locations. Women can be



Top: Ruth and Frank Michalski at Fellowship after Sunday worship. She's originally from Bolivia. He's German.

Middle: Joe and Chris Czyszewski, an American couple from Colorado at Fellowship after Sunday worship. **Above:** Liz and John Smith from Great Britain at Fellowship after worship Sunday morning.

transferred far away to another home on short notice—even in advanced stages of pregnancy. Liz Smith, another committed parishioner, remembers: "I drove one Congolese girl to a new place. She was eight months pregnant. The

room to which she was assigned was dirty and the bed was in pieces. With the help of a man from the next building, we were able to clean up the room and assemble the bed.

"Another time, a Nigerian girl with a young infant was three days from getting her papers when she was ordered to move to another center. I drove her there and it looked like a prison camp. She said, 'I can't stay here.' Pastor Christine said she could stay temporarily in one of the Sunday school rooms. She stayed there for a week—by which time she had received her papers and could join her baby's father.

"A young woman whom we looked after had to go by herself to the hospital at four in the morning to deliver her baby. Although she was in the final stages of labor, she said: 'I wasn't alone. God was with me.' Who of us could say that?" Smith asked. She feels she gains so much from the time she spends at the church. "It's caring and uplifting. Everybody's welcome. The asylum seekers with nothing, really nothing, praise God all the time. We're all made to feel part of this extended family."

WHERE I FIND LOVE

Pastor Erb-Kanzleiter recounted other examples of the challenges they face in helping these women. "We got a call that a woman was being released immediately from the hospital. She needed a baby carriage. We asked the hospital to postpone her release so we could buy the carriage on eBay. We did it."

Empress Egbe, also an asylum seeker, told how Pastor Erb-Kanzleiter and the church members had helped her. "A Nigerian took me to the church when I was pregnant. I had nothing, no money. The church sponsored me. They helped me get



Sunday morning worship at Peace Church United Methodist in Munich, Germany.

my residence permit for Germany. Pastor Christine talked to the foreign office because I can't speak German. When I gave birth, Christine was there. She helped me get clothing, diapers, and baby cream for my child. I had never met a good person like that." Another asylum seeker, Josephine Adekunle, explained her experience: "I fell in love with the church and Pastor Christine, who is now the godmother of my baby. I stick my foot where I find love."

Pastor Erb-Kanzleiter said, "The Peace Church is famous among the poorest of the poor. We are sowing a seed that grows. We have received offerings of money, baby clothing, and toys from other churches and people in Germany as well as the Women's Network of South Germany. We recently received a grant from one of the Rotary Clubs in Munich." Pastor Christine emphasized that they couldn't do this work without these outside contributions.

A HEART FOR MISSION

The church's mission also includes ministering to English-speaking prisoners. Pastor Christine told of how delighted she was that a Somali man, whom she had first met when he was in prison, later came to worship on Sunday when he was released. Ben Yabuah, a lay leader from Ghana, described the prison visits. "We conduct a normal church service for those who speak English. We talk to the prisoners and sing."

Ben Yabuah, originally from Ghana, joined the church when his daughter was baptized there. He wasn't sure at first, but he soon overcame his doubts. He has also worked to help organize the Harvest Festival and the African Choir. "This church is of great value to me spiritually," Yabuah said. "It is more important to me than my workplace. I value its tolerance and the way it accepts every person."

The congregation numbers

about 70 members and swells to about 100 on Sunday, with more than 50 children. People come and go fairly often. A US parishioner, Joe Czyszewski, explained, "Most people talk about the diversity of the church when we are standing around the communion table. But the relationships are so intense. You might meet someone and never see them again. This is our Methodist home here."

The wonder of the Peace Church is that it does so much with so few people. It provides regular Sunday service and fellowship, Sunday school, festivals, and the mission outreach of working with asylum seekers and prisoners. For many, the church has become a family that takes the place of their birth families, so many thousands of miles away.

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