



*Window of Remembrance – Berlin Wall Memorial*

## Religion and Peacebuilding Berlin – 30 years after the Nonviolent Revolution

Excursion Report  
Master Specialization “Peace, Trauma, Religion” (PTR)  
31 March to 5 April 2019



***Excursion group of PTR-students at  
Brandenburger Tor, Berlin, Germany***

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## INTRODUCTION

Peace, Trauma, and Religion (PTR) is a master specialization at the Faculty of Religion & Theology of the Vrije Universiteit. This Master includes one excursion per year as part of the program. It tries to combine “theory” and “practice”, exploring topics which have been studied in different courses. This academic year (2018-2019), Berlin was chosen as the study context. Today, Berlin is not a case of a ‘hot conflict’. However, the current society is characterized by the many memories about what happened before, during, and after the Berlin Wall was brought down by a nonviolent revolution. The theme of refugees and the rise of right wing tendencies was another important topic during the excursion, to understand the current social and political reality in Germany. Religion and religious beliefs have played and continue to play a role in all these issues, even in this secular city.

The student excursion took place from March 31 to April 4, 2019 and was hosted by Dr. Marie Anne Subklew, researcher at the Center for Peace Church Theology, University of Hamburg, and her husband Thomas Jeutner, pastor of the Chapel of Reconciliation in Berlin. Since 1999, this chapel is on the grounds of the Berlin Wall Memorial. It has been dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation between peoples. We had valuable meetings in the Gemeindehaus in front of the emblematic Berlin Wall Memorial as well as other key places in Berlin. Our most sincere gratitude to both, Thomas and Marie Anne, both politically active students during the nonviolent revolution, who guided us during this excursion through the past and present of Berlin. In addition, we thank the Berliner Mennonitengemeinde for hosting us in their wonderful Mennoheim.

As a reflection of this powerful experience, some of the students who participated in the excursion provide short pieces of writing here, focusing on learnings during the excursion, to compose this report. Each participant writes from their own perspective, which does not necessarily represent the opinion of the whole group. The reader will get a general overview about what PTR students experienced during their common time of learning in Berlin.

**María León-Olarte, PTR Student and Intern of the Amsterdam Center for Religion and Peace & Justice Studies  
Amsterdam, 15 April 2019**

**Monday 1st of April 2019**

**Remember and do not Repeat: The Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial (Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen)**

***María León-Olarte***

The official program started early Monday morning visiting the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial. This memorial used to be a central detention center in East Berlin during the time of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), when this part of Germany was ruled and occupied by Soviet forces at the end of the Second World War. A guide received us to show us the different spaces in the memorial. He gave us a general overview of things that occurred there when it was a detention center for political prisoners after the late 1950s. The building was used to detain those who wished to leave East Germany.

During that regime, they did not accept that it was a detention center. They wanted to avoid to be seen as a bad regime. The rulers of GDR used to hide what was happening there, including the transportation of the prisoners. In the picture below we see an example of the cars that they were using to transport prisoners. They were “normal cars” in Germany at that time, so people would not know that they were under arrest.



The guide showed us the purpose of every section of the detention center. It used to have rooms for interrogation, detention rooms for groups, individual detention rooms, in which different forms of psychological torture took place. We saw rooms where prisoners were standing up during hours, rooms without light, rooms without windows, among other things.

We could hear different traumatic stories about what happened during that time within the prison. For instance, there was a high risk of committing suicide because of psychological torture. There were people who were missing, but the dictators never admitted it, people left the prison with mental diseases, among other things. But we also heard about the continuous impact of these experiences in the present. The guide shared personal stories about his father in law who nowadays still suffers under the impact of those days. There are some people who are not able to be close to the memorial because of the bad memories.



While I was walking within the memorial, I was thinking about two things. First, that it seems so unreal how human beings can use their creativity to develop tools for suffering, to damage brains, bodies; while that creativity could be used in favor of good projects for the humanity. The precision and care for details of the psychological torture within the prison are unbelievable. Second, I thought why after 30 years of that situation it is important for us to remember these things. I understood, that remembering is not done with the purpose to live in the past. Remembering is an action that allows us to think about what we should do to avoid the repetition of cruelty among human beings. Remember and do not repeat.



## Counter Voices from Within: die Antifaschistischen Kirchen

***Kirsten van der Ham***

At the chapel of Reconciliation in Berlin, we had a meeting with Lukas Pellio, a left-wing activist who is trained to be a minister in this church. He provided an overview of recent developments in the right-wing movement in Germany as well as within the church, and what the church's reaction has been so far.

Lukas told us that the right-wing movement has been active in Germany for decades, usually represented by neo-nazis, but also noticeable in movements of 'normal concerned citizens' and upper-class right-wing movements. The difference with recent developments is, however, that these groups have joined forces and have gained more visibility in the public sphere. This joined movement claims to protect the 'German identity' from influences that are not perceived as German, such as the so-called elitist people (left-wing, green, rich etc.), the European Union and people who 'do not belong to the German people' (Volk). The movement against the latter is characterised by Islamophobic attitudes towards incoming refugees, which has resulted in over a thousand violent attacks on refugee camps in 2015 and 2016. The agenda of this movement is clearly made visible in several protests in the streets of cities all over Germany, the Pegida-movement, and the political party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland).



This right-wing movement makes a claim to Christian culture and symbols, over against Islamic culture. Christian refugees are often framed as persecuted by Islam, which enlarges islamophobia even more. Furthermore, this movement claims that it is a God-given thing to have one ethnicity per nation state. Although this right-wing movement acts predominantly in the public sphere, it is also present within the churches in

Germany. This is mainly visible in the 'Christian family movement', which supports the 'natural order' of things, which does not include non-Germans, but also excludes LGBTQ and condemns abortion in general.

Lukas stressed that he seeks to protest against this movement within the church by strengthening the emancipating movements, instead of fighting the right-wing movements. This is why the "Antifaschistische Kirche" initiative was called into life. This movement speaks out against heteronormativity and racism within and outside the church. One of the initiatives of this movement is to put banners on church buildings that speak up against racism and right-wing populism.

Our meeting with Lukas, one of our first meetings, provided us with an overview of developments within the current German society and thereby prepared us for our next meetings. Furthermore, it taught us that expressions of right-wing extremism are also present within religious bodies, such as the Christian church, but that there is also room for counter voices within these spaces.





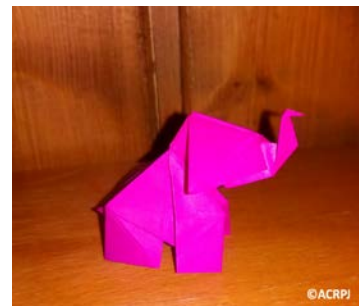
## Surviving Imprisonment: Juggling workshops and leftover canapés

**Freija Derks**

On the first day of the PTR study trip to Berlin we met Peter Steudtner, a human rights activist who has recently been detained in Turkey. Being charged of cooperation with terrorist organisations, Peter was arrested and captured for 113 days by the Turkish government. In the meeting Peter shared his story of imprisonment, which has made several front pages of newspapers over the last years. He spoke of his arrest, his time in several Turkish jails, his family's experience, the privileges he – as a white German male – was granted, the tension between widening and shrinking spaces, and tips on how to prepare for prison.

Within Peter's story I noticed two interesting focus points, namely the theoretical framework of the widening and shrinking of public and private spaces, and secondly, tips on how to prepare for imprisonment. From the meeting with Peter I gained some food for thought on how human rights activists, but also others, can play around with the concept of shrinking and expanding spaces. An interesting question which came to mind, is: How can we widen the human rights space most effectively?

Secondly, Peter provided several strategies on how to endure this type of imprisonment. He also wrote a book on this topic named *Preparing For Prison*, in which he shares strategies for activists and their families. Most of all, Peter stretches the importance of taking care of your body and soul; make contact with other inmates, exercise, meditate and practise relaxing exercises. He thereby explained how being creative – making juggling instruments out of water bottles and canapés out of leftovers – can lighten the experience.



**Tuesday 2nd of April 2019**

**Wall Stories: From a Death-Zone to a Place where People are Remembered with Human Dignity.**

***Margarithe Veen***

The cold weather of Tuesday morning 2<sup>nd</sup> April let us feel the cold and gruesome atmosphere of the wall stories, when the protestant minister Thomas Jeutner started to talk about the time of the wall in Berlin and the victims who died due to the communist dictatorship during the GDR-time. The wall divided Berlin and her people from 13<sup>rd</sup> August 1961 till 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989.



From left to right: actual site of the former death-zone. The former death-zone. Berlin Wall Memorial

This time of the Wall was a time of fear, a time of oppression and dictatorship for the citizens of Eastern Berlin. That's why it was special to start this morning next to the *Nordbahnhof* station. It showed us the unbelievable situation how trains were passing by, although the station was definitely closed for the citizens of East Berlin. They could hear the trains and feel the warmth of this transport through the ventilators. Though, it became a possibility to flee from East to West. And some of them succeeded to flee by this railway station. Another 115 men and women were killed or died near the Wall. All the faces of these stories were looking at us. The pictures of all these men and women were visible at the monument. Rev. Thomas Jeutner seems to know every story. He knew the story of the first woman who wanted to flee the first day that she was not allowed to leave her house by the front door, West Berlin, as from the little boy, 5 years old. This boy, playing in West Berlin jumped into the Spree river to get his birthday ball, not knowing that the river belonged to East Berlin. The soldiers of the GDR-regime killed him in front of his family and friends. Most of these men and women were young ones, with hope for a better life in freedom and friendship with their loved ones.



From left to right: The group standing at the space of the former Wall and death-zone. Kapelle der Versöhnung/Chapel of Reconciliation. Inside the Chapel of Reconciliation at the daily service

Every day, one of the stories of the victims are remembered in the *Kapelle der Versöhnung* at the former death-zone near the former Wall. A zone that was and is already for a long time 'church-ground'. Firstly, used as cemetery, also for mass graves due to WWII. Somehow the churches of former East and West Berlin are still discussing how this ground must be part of Berlin anno 2019. For now, it is a place for commemoration. When we were part of the church service that Tuesday with Thomas Jeutner as pastor, we commemorated ... who was shot 25<sup>th</sup> December 1963. He died after many hours lying on the ground near the Wall. Christmas 1963.

Jeutner explained through many stories the atmosphere of dictatorship during the GDR-time. A time of oppression, dehumanizing, destruction, fear, etc.. And for me, I would ask, wasn't it a miracle that the Wall 'collapsed' without any violence, thanks to a non-violent movement that was already going on as well. Also, thanks to some churches and their prayers and candles. For me it was very special to stand in the former death-zone, that cold day, and to hear about men and women mentioning their names, mentioning their lives, as this place became a heart-warming place thanks to touching human dignity with so much respect and warmth.

A real process of transformation that is still going on in Berlin. Visible at this area and invisible for that moment in peoples' lives who were '*Mauerkinder*'. It is Thomas Jeutner himself who lived in East Berlin during the dictatorship and who may be called a victim as well of this system. But he refused to be a victim, during the GDR-time and now. In both times he felt the same faith and the same courage to find his spiritual way.



From left to right: Garden behind the new Chapel of Reconciliation, the former Wall, called *Niemandsland*. Now flourishing in the sun. BBQ in *Niemandsland*.

At the same time, it was for me an experience of transformation, sitting in the flourishing garden of the chapel, built on the grounds of a former church, at the former death-zone, in *Niemandsland*, having a BBQ in freedom and with friends. This sign of transformation may be a sign of hope and resurrection, first of all for the people in Germany, still looking for overcoming division and their common identity, and secondly for all of us, people who don't expect hope, transformation or a new life. It is possible!



## Knowing and Changing Narratives from an Aesthetic Experience

**Daniel Serrano-Bernal**

What is that building? Is that a theater? Are we going to watch a movie? Why are we going to see a wall in an enclosed space named '*Die Mauer*'? Questions that are invading our minds seeking what that could be. We were in a crucial place of Berlin's wall, and maybe some of us were expecting to listen to more narratives to revive that historical moment; yet, we were in front of a 20 meters height steel rotunda covered with a gigantic banner – fitting the outside of the structure perfectly.



The wall's narrative transformed into *Die Mauer's* experience. It moved from words to aesthetics enlightening our imagination with sounds, images, lights, and smells. There was a movement from a narrative shared through words to an immersive aesthetic experience, placing the individual into the middle of the narrative. The narrative was happening. The impression of Checkpoint Charlie was, more than the historical place, a resurrection of the specific timeless moment through Yadegar Asisi's panorama installation *Die Mauer*. From Asisi's biography, the art installation is an effort to solve the question of "how to depict a three-dimensional space within a two-dimensional painting"<sup>1</sup> of Berlin's wall, and many other of his works; providing a moving and an almost three-dimensional image to the spectator named panorama.

The panorama reflected a grey November atmosphere of the daily life of the 1980ies' Berlin from the west side of the wall in the Kreuzberg area. As a visitor, the immersion was shocking due to the sound documents from different political voices, the moving lights changing the colors of each corner of the panorama installation, and the multiple

<sup>1</sup> Yadegar Asisi: <https://www.asisi.de/en/yadegar-asisi/biography/>

contrasts in one image. Nonetheless, the experience was perpetuating the conventional narrative of the ‘good side’ of the wall, the West, and the ‘bad side’ of the wall, the East. None of us will deny that the people assassinated fleeing from the East to the West side of the wall were reproachable; though, the image of the East was distant, holding the evil behind the wall; the East was grey and steamy as an extra hell in Dante’s Divine Comedy. However, reading between lines the West side of the panorama depicted evil parts of the West: poverty in the trailer settlements and the occupied house; a fetishized image of liberty portrayed in the viewing platform with tourists looking at the East; a clear hierarchy of the ruling allied powers in the West side imprinted on the warning sign: “You Are Leaving the American Sector.” First English, second Russian, third French, and the last in German in a considerable small font.

The mainstream narrative against the injustices of the East is still alive boosting the goodness in the West. Still, it is a limited narrative because of the vilify image to communism and socialism in favor of one economic and political developed truth exported by the allies to the rest of the world. The injustices of the East communist side of Germany have to be placed in the focus of the public discussion; those actions against humanity have to be rejected. On the other hand, the silent and slow dehumanization of the West has to be emphasized as well. *Die Mauer* gave a panoramic overview of the conundrum image of Berlin’s wall with a high risk to bolster the Manichean dominant narrative of the *upright West* and the *evil East*. Although, after everything said above, it is an experience that widens the narrative of Berlin’s wall and actual injustices.



## Let's Dialogue about our Experiences with God:

### Café Abraham-Ibrahim Neukölln

***María León-Olarte***

To finish the second day of the excursion we went to Café Abraham-Ibrahim. We were welcomed for a group of people from different faith traditions. This Café is a project of the Mennonite Peace Center Berlin where people from different Christian and Muslim traditions meet to talk and dialogue with each other, to share not only food but their faith. This opportunity to dialogue is considered for the group as a specific action to build peace on a grass roots level.

We had the opportunity to participate in one of its meetings that night. We were sitting around a big table. First of all, we were sharing food and talking, then we had a moment to pray and read. After that, the group shared the history and importance that this initiative has for them. After that we had a fluent conversation about what peace means for them and us.



About their history; they started as a group of interfaith dialogue ten years ago with the question of what dialogue actually means. And they realized that it is about listening to the others, not only to one voice. After that, they started to talk about a point in their common history – of Abraham – because the agreement was to talk between people of faith, not between religions. They realized that they could share despite their

differences, while in other parts of the world people are killing each other for those differences in religion. That is why they consider the Café as a form to build peace in a simple but not less important way –and it is not always an easy path.

In our conversation about peace some of the thoughts were, that peace means to know how to live with the differences; to learn to listen, that everyone can have welfare, integral justice; creating healthy relationships. Others identified peace with the highest commitment of love, love to others, even the enemy – “Do not fight evil with evil”. In this short conversation, for me it was possible to see how for this group peace is more than a simple discourse, it is a practice that can be lived in daily life with others, even when the beliefs of its faith are different from each other.





## Wednesday 3th of April 2019

Think big but start with small Steps:  
The Mennonite Peace Center Berlin

***María León-Olarte***

We started Wednesday morning talking with Martina Basso, who is currently in charge of the Mennonite Peace Center Berlin. She shared with us in a small meeting how the center was founded in 2005 and its different projects –one of them is the Café Abraham Ibrahim that we visited a day before.

She explained different actions and projects that they have developed as a peace center. From practical steps within neighborhoods, to write letters to politicians. The theoretical work about the moral imagination of John Paul Lederach was key to start. The center was interested in defining what it means to be a peace church. That is why they collected thoughts in the declaration, “Guide our feet into the way of peace”. Martina shared that when you think to start something like the peace center you never know where it will arrive, however it is important to start dreaming but also it is important to take small practical steps.

From this experience, the main learning was that practical and theoretical ways are both important in the work for peace. The practical aspect has different levels that are necessary to take into account. Work for peace is not only doing big things, it is also about taking into account actions that in a future could bring the fulfillment of big dreams.



## Church of Refugees – *Flüchtlingskirche*: Less is More

***Kirsten van der Ham***

A warm welcome with coffee and tea was waiting for us at the *Flüchtlingskirche* (Refugees' church) on a sunny morning in Berlin. Although we had to wait a bit for our meeting with Cecilia Juretzka, the refugees who were present in the church made us feel welcome in a warm and welcoming environment. When Cecilia was ready for us, she gave us an overview of how this project for refugees came into being and what its activities include.

The founders of the *Flüchtlingskirche* have a long tradition of working with refugees, before this particular project came into being in 2015. The motivation to found this project is linked back to refugee protests against poor conditions in a refugee camp nearby the church and the obligation of the refugees to stay in that camp. The founders managed to find a church that was willing to share its space with the *Flüchtlingskirche* project and they have been making use of this church building ever since. The *Flüchtlingskirche* has developed itself as a centre for refugees to get (legal) counselling, to follow classes and to work for. Its focus is on integration into the German society, which is why the staff members of the *Flüchtlingskirche* help refugees to fight for their own rights, provide several courses, and assist refugees in finding a job and home.



Cecilia stressed that the support for refugees is decreasing within the German society and German politics, which complicates the position of refugees and the *Flüchtlingskirche*. However, the project is still determined to empower refugees and to help them in what they need the most. Throughout Cecilia's inspiring story, the phrase "we cannot do everything, we have to focus on the part in which we can make a difference" was extremely important. Her aim is not to be another project for refugees that does the same thing as other projects in Berlin, but to specialise in things that are lacking in the rest of Berlin in order to make a difference in the lives of refugees.

For me, the meeting with the Refugees' church was the perfect illustration of a saying we stumbled upon several times during our stay in Berlin: "Viele kleine Leute die an vielen kleinen Orten viele kleine Dinge tun, können das Gesicht der Welt verändern" (many small people who in many small places do many small things can alter the face of the world). Other meetings we had provided a broader overview of issues in the German society and politics, but this project showed us what we can do to help to combat those in a very practical way.



## A Meeting with a current Asylum Seeker

**Sibel Ozen**

The third PTR meeting on Wednesday took place at the already familiar Bernauer Straße. At the *Gemeindehaus*, the group met with Mohamad Enezz. Mohamad flew from Syria and is now under church asylum in Berlin. Around the table were Rev. Thomas Jeutner, Liza Strieman and Parvani Karimi. Parvani has been in Germany for three years and she was presented as a Farzi translator. First, Liza gave us an introduction on how the process of a church asylum goes. She told us that it is plausible that after a person who seeks for refuge is rejected by the state, lawyers contact the church. The lawyers or organizations like Xenion then present cases in which it is not safe for the person to go back to where they flew from. It is up to the church to decide to take this person under its wings and protect them. Acceptance of someone means full responsibility: the church pays for everything and is responsible when something happens.

After Liza painted a picture of the process that happens prior to church asylum Mohamad started sharing his experience, fleeing Syria with his three friends. Without waiting for their certificates, Mohamad and his friends left right after graduation. His story was full of determination: he told us about the times he got send back, but he kept on trying. When he was rejected in Germany he conducted five months of research and with help of his uncle, who lives in Berlin, he found out about church asylum. With the help of the organization Xenion he reached Rev. Thomas Jeutner. Mohamad shared that his main reason for fleeing the country was because he was forced to go into the military. His one goal when leaving was to study and that is what he did. Mohamad's course in German is already at level B2 and he is starting a course to become a civil engineer on 8 April.



To me, Mohamad was a major part of the PTR excursion in Berlin. It felt refreshing to personally connect with someone who flew from his country, in contrast to just learning

and reading about refugees. Mohamad made connecting really easy: he was open and curious, eager to learn and we even did a headstand in front of the *Gemeindehaus*. Which he, of course, mastered immediately. Thomas Jeutner shared how Mohamad is always ready to help and often asks “What can I do?”. It felt good to “zoom in” and hear a personal story. Besides this, it also made me feel somewhat heavy. In some way, Mohamad’s story was one of ‘success’, and it made me stand still and think of others who might not have been lucky enough to find refuge. The concept of a church asylum is powerful, but it is a shame that there are still so many who are stuck in some sort of way or sent back to the dangerous situations they come from.



## A Meeting with a former Hate-Preacher

***Pieter van der Toorn***

In Western society faith is on its return. New expressions of faith are flourishing, and immigrants from all over the world bring their faith with them. With this rising we often hear two voices; spirituality is something positive which helps people in their personal life, and religion is something negative which bounds people and undermines society. A meeting with Imam Abdul Adhim Kamouss tells me that these two cannot so easily be separated. At our third day in Berlin we have as PTR students the opportunity to meet Imam Abdul Adhim Kamouss. Abdul, originally from Morocco, was considered the most influencing so called 'hatred-Imam' in Germany. He became very popular after he started as the first Imam to do the preaching at the Friday prayers in German instead of Arabic. But after a deep personal crisis he changed his path.

Abdul explains that in society you see two camps who are both afraid; Europeans who are afraid for the 'Islamization' of Europe, and Muslims who are afraid of the secularisation of their children. Interesting enough his story tells me that he did not leave Islam and embraced a secular worldview, but deepened his understanding of Islam, inspired by his own Islamic sources.

Although he was considered as a hate-preacher, he never actually was so. Looking back on that time he explains that his teachings were focused on how to connect people with heaven and on sustaining Muslim identity. But by this, unconsciously he became a bridge for Muslims to become extremists, and some of them became even ISIS-fighters. Now his teachings are more focussed on the relation between faith and society, about the intentions behind rules and addressing controversial topics. He tells us about his personal learning; about self-purification, letting go of the ego, and letting go of fears. His story tells me first of all the importance of well thought-out religion. The distinction when religion is either a positive or a negative source is not so easily made. Religion and spirituality are interwoven and the influence can be enriching or harmful for society.



## Thursday 4th of April 2019

### Representative of the Free Churches in Germany: Cinderella in the Ballroom

***Geke van Vliet***

On the final day of the excursion to Berlin, we had a meeting with Rev. Peter Jörgensen. We are welcomed in a nice-looking, diplomatic room with a view on the *Brandenburger Tor*. Jörgensen is representative of the Union of Free Churches in Germany to the German government. Next to this, he is a pastor in the Union of Evangelical Free Church Congregations (Baptists) in Germany. As a representative, Jörgensen is the link between the Free Churches of Germany and the federal government of Germany. He is the voice of a dozen of small church denominations. In practice, this means he gets to talk with political parties, foundations and parliamentary groups (*fracties* in Dutch). During meetings with these different political groups, Jörgensen discusses hot topics within society with his Christian perspective as guidance. Several recent examples of topics that were brought up are church asylum, the new-right and right-extremism and sustainable development.

As a representative of the Union of Free Churches Jörgensen is the voice of many different denominations, such as the Baptist church, the Mennonite church and the Church of the Nazarene. Therefore, it is sometimes impossible to get all the churches on the same page. When asked how he makes this work, Jörgensen answers that he sometimes has to choose one voice out of many. The diversity in churches makes it sometimes impossible to represent every voice. If one of the member churches disagrees with the perspective, this church does not have to sign the statement that is presented. Jörgensen chooses the voice that suits him best and does not have to disown himself.

This has been one of the main learnings of this meeting. Jörgensen is a spill in the political heart of Germany but manages to stay close to himself. As a representative of the churches, he does not have to play a political game. On the contrary! As Jörgensen states during the meeting, being a representative is only a half-time job. He therefore does not have the time to do everything that churches ask of him. As a result, he only

chooses topics that are dear to him. “Preaching in a small congregation keeps me in society as a normal person. Being a pastor is my profile.”

In the Netherlands, I have never heard of such a position: a religious leader that represents the voice of many yet is able to stay close to his own voice. Free Churches have long been on the margins of German society, afraid of the larger society or too proud of their own vision to feel at ease in society. As Jörgensen describes: “Small churches in society were like Cinderella. They can come in and dance, but their normal life is not in the ballroom.” Jörgensen taught us how Cinderella tried the little glass slipper on and started living in the ballroom.





## Foreign Affairs: How does Religion and Peace integrate in this Ministry of the German Government?

**Margarithe Veen**

On our way from the *Brandenburger Tor* to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a lot of tourists from Asia and other countries crossed our path. The busses were standing next to the Brandenburg Gate and Berlin was ready for a new touristic day. At the same time a lot of men and women of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were working at their offices with peoples and ministries of Foreign Affairs in other countries, all over the world. We went to this Ministry to hear how they integrate religion and peace in their policy of the German government.



It is for 2,5 years that the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs integrated a new department at Foreign Affairs; the department on religion and peacebuilding. It was initiated by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, today's German's president.

The two staff members explained the reasons to do so. Firstly, it became clear that without knowledge of the role of religion in a society, it will not be easy to understand the societies and the systems that play a role in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is not only a question of politics and policies; it is also a matter of religion. Secondly, Barack Obama, the president of the US from 2009 till 2017, addressed the topic of religion and peace during his presidency. This meant that also other governments implemented peacebuilding and religion in their departments to address these topics at multilateral meetings. Thirdly, to share knowledge on religion in various countries with the Ministry in Germany and the German embassies abroad. For example: at the agenda of that Thursday afternoon, the department of peacebuilding and religion would have a meeting on the situation in Ukraine. This meant that both representatives of Eastern

Orthodox Churches and staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will discuss the current situation. For some staff it will be new to understand politics in Ukraine in combination with the understanding of the presence of the Orthodox Church as well. This is what the two staff member told us. They were happy to have these meetings, to share a lot of expertise at various levels of politics and religions. Such a meeting is also prepared and will be evaluated with the German ambassador in Ukraine.

Although ministers and presidents are rotating a lot, this is also true for the staff at the departments within the ministry of Foreign Affairs. This doesn't make the work always that easy, the staff members told us. A lot of the work done by the staff at this department is also based on network. That makes it important not to change too much. The department organised for example two conferences. In 2017, 53 countries and more than 100 religious leaders participated in this conference with North West Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Topics were: Mediation, Peace Education and Media. The second conference focused on Asia. A third conference will not be there this 3<sup>rd</sup> year. This is due to a large meeting of "Religions for Peace" that will take place in Germany, in Landau, in August 2019. A lot of work for this global meeting will be done by this department. Both staff members emphasized the wish of the Ministry, not to let this meeting be like a one-time event. The aim is to invest as much as possible to work on peacebuilding with religious leaders. That's why Germany is hosting and financing this meeting.



*Entrance Hall of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sight from inside to outside at the entrance hall of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

For us as group it was interesting to know that in current politics attention for religion is growing. Maybe we did not have that much time to share the problematic examples where religion is seen by politicians as a problem. And secondly, we didn't had the time to hear about inspiring examples where peace was growing thanks to the cooperation of politicians and religious leaders.

At the same time, it will be a challenge for religions and for me personally, for churches, to know about this invitation of various governments all over the world to participate in peacebuilding. I would like to know how churches in Europe are experiencing this. Of course they are participating in various meetings, but which 'projects' are really going on for peacebuilding thanks to the cooperation of religious leaders and politicians? And how do they see the role of Pope Francis, for example?

I had to think about a formal discussion in the European Union. In 1992, Jacques Delors asked the churches to participate in the work on the spiritual unity in the European Union, otherwise the Union would be too much of an economic union. Maybe the answer of the churches was not the answer Delors was looking for. The answer of the churches was, more or less, their wish to strengthen their own (church) network first. Then Edy Korthals Altes wrote, as a member of "Religions for Peace", a clear statement; that churches and religion have to give an answer on unity and peacebuilding. I had to think about this discussion again. Hopefully new steps can be done by politics and also by churches and religions to work on unity, justice and peace.



## Bread for the World: NGO's Peace Activities

***Emmanuel Hagai***

I would like to start my short report by quoting this verse from Christian Scriptures:

Then Jesus said (John 6:35), I am the Bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." This was my first inspiration when I started to listen to the representative of peace activities as a new unit under the Bread for the World organization. This organization aims to give life to the hopeless World.

The unit of peace is integrated in other projects. The unit focuses on democracy, peace, and reconciliation work. The goal is to reach the local communities with a clear sustainable development around the world. For example, in Colombia the unit is supporting 17 projects that have a focus on the promotion of peace and civil conflict resolution.

In my point of view, this organization is one of God's hands to express love to many. It has a vision that meets the needs of the suffering communities. Every sustainable development needs an element of peacebuilding.



## Some General Comments:

- I found the study trip, in all its variety, an enriching experience. I especially enjoyed the meetings related to my field of work.
- The excursion of PTR to Berlin was a good and enriching experience to me. Exploring the history of the Berlin Wall, getting to know the reason for church asylum and the talks we had about war and non-violence were three experiences where I started to see our world and the system we live in differently. Maybe our world is not as trustworthy and just as I thought it was. I have become more critical, but also more motivated to work on a just and peaceful world.
- As I said during the evaluation session, this is an inspiring and practical excursion that speaks to our commitment to the way of Jesus' peace. I recommend the program to continue. Many notes of thanks to the organizing team.
- Berlin surprised me. As it is a Western-European city, I was not sure how this would be a new experience. Yet, exactly because it is an environment as my own, it has been very inspiring to see how concepts as church asylum and religious representatives in politics work. It made me curious to find out how these might work in The Netherlands.





***Excursion group of PTR-students at  
Menno-Heim, Berlin, Germany***

