

## Church and State Heads meet in the GDR

An official report on the meeting between Erich Honecker and Bishop Johannes Hempel on 11 February 1985 appeared in the East German official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* on 12 February. The following is a summary of the contributions of both leaders, as they appeared in the report.

Erich Honecker began by stressing the theme of peace; disarmament and the restriction of new weapons were of overriding significance. In this situation great determination and energy were essential. All peace-loving forces must throw in their lot with the GDR, the Soviet Union and the socialist world in order to build up a "coalition of reason". Warm thanks were due to the Church for its past work; he commended its social services, its witness for peace (both at home and in an international ecumenical context) and its attitude to the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the liberation from fascism. His previous meeting on 6 March 1978 (with Bishop Schönherr) had proved valuable, and church-state cooperation during Luther Year had been important.

Bishop Hempel declared that the peace policies of state and church were linked by the principle that further escalation of armaments could only make the preservation of peace less likely. For the church, 13 March 1985 (the fortieth anniversary of the destruction of Dresden) represented both liberation and the grace of a new beginning. Church and state alike recognised the gravity of the international situation. The Synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches had declared its view that all outstanding difficulties between church and state were subsidiary to the main aim of preserving peace. Concerning church-state relations, Bishop Hempel said that Christian citizens recognised their obligation to play their part responsibly in socialist society. Relations between church and state had indeed developed constructively since 6 March 1978. Church-state problems that were still unresolved could be worked out on the basis of the principles of that meeting. "We trust that the same spirit will continue to be shown towards the churches. Trust between us will grow only to the extent that such trust is felt by ordinary believers."

Bishop Hempel also handed over the report of a church conference on human rights, which had been held shortly before in Eisenach (GDR).

At a press conference held on 12 March in the Church of St Anne, Dresden, Bishop Hempel was asked to clarify some of the statements made in the communiqué. One journalist was surprised by the declaration that "all outstanding difficulties were subsidiary to the main aim of preserving peace". Would this principle not encourage the state to refuse to discuss awkward problems? Bishop Hempel admitted that although his prepared manuscript did not include the word "all", he could not remember whether in fact he had used the word. The difference was not significant: in the event of war conversations would in any case come to a sudden end. He insisted that the *Neues Deutschland* report rightly reflected the spirit of the conversation; after all, his final words in the text (which were indeed the final words he spoke) expressed views which are not often published in the state-controlled media. It was also worth pointing out that a further conversation is desired by both sides and has been agreed to by Herr Honecker. Discussions are needed at all levels; patience, tenacity, fairness and courage are likewise essential.

Bishop Hempel added that he was impressed by Herr Honecker's relaxed attitude, his readiness to listen rather than to speak, and his clear understanding of the views put to him.

Another journalist asked if the vexed question of the possibility of organised social service as an alternative to conscription had been discussed. It had not, replied the bishop. There were, however, various meetings at different levels where such matters were raised; on these occasions both sides arrived with brief-cases bulging formidably with documents. It should not be forgotten that Herr Honecker had signified his willingness to meet with the whole leadership of the Protestant Church; this would be the right time to deal with remaining problems.

The meeting on 11 February was the first of its kind since Erich Honecker's meeting with Bishop Schönherr in 1978.

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