

Kulturecke

Representing Lutherans in Germany: Bishop Wolfgang Huber | Paul A. Schons

The German *Grundgesetz* (constitution) of 1949 guarantees freedom of religion. In making this guarantee, however, the German system did not choose the route of erecting a "wall between church and state" as in the U.S., but envisioned the state being religiously neutral. At the same time, that neutrality was developed to be supportive of religion rather than indifferent to it. Religions were seen as a significant part of the cultural and value structure of the people. The history and intricacy of the system are complex, but in short, the German system has developed a method of recognizing representative organizations of the churches and thus enabled itself to enter into supportive cooperation with the churches while ensuring that the state remains separate and neutral.

Within the context indicated above, the Evangelical churches of Germany have formed a common organization which represents 26.5 million Protestants in the Federal Republic of Germany. The *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD (Lutheran Church of Germany), is represented by a central council of 15 members, each elected for 6 years. The current chairperson of the council is Bishop Wolfgang Huber of Berlin

Wolfgang Huber was born on August 12, 1942 in Straßburg. Later, his family moved to Freiburg, where he grew up. Huber studied theology at the universities of Heidelberg, Göttingen and Tübingen, completed his doctorate in 1966 and his *Habilitation* (post-doctoral degree) in 1972. He began an academic career as a professor of social ethics at the University of Marburg and later accepted a position as a systematic theology professor at the University of Heidelberg.

During his academic years, Huber was fascinated with the politics of Willy Brandt. Brandt's commitments to peace, global human rights and

attempts to resist the division of the world into rich and poor were well in line with the young theologian's views. Huber joined Brandt's political party, the SPD, and soon after, Huber's his friends began to urge him to become a candidate for the Bundestag. As he was close to a commitment to the political move, Huber considered that he would have to make a choice between a career in politics and a pastoral life in the church. He opted for the church.

Huber continued as a professor at the University of Heidelberg through 1994 with an interlude as guest professor at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga. In 1994, he was appointed Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg. After the German reunification, his bishopric responsibility was expanded to include territories of former East Germany. At that time, Huber was faced with the double problem of attempting to re-evangelize a people who had been discouraged from religious practice for decades while facing the rapid decline of church participation in an increasingly secularized West (and the resultant decline in church revenues).

In 2003, Huber became a member of the central council of the Evangelical Church of Germany and was elected as chair of the council in a narrow victory over Margot Käßmann. Since then, Huber has been the spokesman of the German Lutheran Church.

Huber is well aware of being, in effect, the German successor to Martin Luther as a leader of a Christian church, still divided after 500 years. He is supportive of the ecumenical movement and sees the common elements of Christianity as of much greater moment than the questions dividing the Christian churches. He is respectful of fellow German Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and agrees with Ratzinger's concern about relativism, but tempers his concern with the sense that the churches should

be more accepting of many of the perspectives of the Enlightenment and modernity than Ratzinger would seem to allow.

Huber has been a consultant to the government

on bioethical questions. He is opposed to embryonic research, believing that experimentation with embryos is contrary to respect for human life. On the question of stem cell research, he suggests that research with adult stem cells is a morally superior direction. He also prefers the use of stem cells from the blood of the umbilical cord. He is morally concerned about the production of embryos with the explicit purpose of experimentation or for therapeutic use.

The bishop is a fervent admirer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was exposed to Bonhoeffer's works as a child and continued his admiration throughout his lifetime. Huber is the spokesperson of a group of editors who work with Bonhoeffer's writings.

Huber respects the celibacy of the Catholic clergy, but does not feel that such a commitment is essential to pastoral leadership. Huber is married and has three children, Ansgar, Jesko and Veleska. He feels that his family is more of a support to his ministry than a distraction from it.



Bishop Wolfgang Huber