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CHRISTIANITY IN EASTERN EUROPE

I have just returned from a visit to Berlin, organised by the Industrial Chaplain of Manchester, under the auspices of Christianity in Industry. In West Berlin we attended a reception given by the Evangelische Kirche der Union at the H.Q. of the Lutheran Church, where a Lutheran Pastor spoke to us about the Church in communist dominated Eastern Europe.

In 1945 the Communists, in order to gain as much goodwill as possible, allowed the church to continue without interference. Slowly, however, they began to apply pressure to weaken the church and, they hope, eventually to destroy the church. At present five pastors are in gaol, but the communists are too clever to resort to open persecution. The methods they use are more subtle; they reason logically that open persecution would make martyrs out of the Christians. They hope that by propagating atheism and pouring contempt on Christianity they will strangulate it.

They believe that all religion is based on fear, and reason that if all children are taught atheism throughout their schooldays they will grow up to have no time for religion. Indoctrination of all children for the ten years or more whilst they are at school, and a general propaganda campaign which is relentlessly waged against the church is a very powerful weapon. In addition to the indoctrination at school, the youth groups of which all children are expected to be members, also teach atheism.

These methods are brought into relief by the following story. A pastor in the East has a daughter, aged eight; her parents will not let her join the Pathfinders (communist youth) because of its atheistic creed. As a result, every morning when she goes to school, her teacher says, "Good morning Pathfinders and Christena." On principle Christians are not members of the communist youth groups and because of this they are barred from all higher education.

In school pressure is increased against the Christians during "HATE" weeks, when the children are taught to hate. During such weeks they hear talks and write essays on hating the West. Christians who refuse to do this are denounced before the school assemblies as unpatriotic. Other methods used to try to stamp out Christianity are secular baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funeral services. These resemble the Christian ones very closely, having communist hymns and preachers.

Despite all these difficulties, the church still continues its witness. It is interesting to note that although missions are not banned it is impossible to hold them. The Government will not permit tracts and posters or good Christian literature to be published.

As may be expected there is a shortage of pastors; on the other hand I was surprised to learn that six hundred young men are at present in training for the ministry in East Germany. There are three preachers' schools, and to become a Pastor a three year course must be taken. Under the circumstances this is very good and most encouraging. The shortage of Pastors is bringing with it an increased emphasis on the laity, in many churches for example laymen take the services.

When we think about the Church in East Germany it is worth remembering that no one under 35 can remember a time when the Church was not persecuted. Yet the thing which hurts them most is that the Government will not allow them to send missionaries abroad.

I was impressed by all I heard about the Christians in the East, and when I was able to meet some of these Christians a few days later, all that I had heard proved to be true. I can only agree with one of them when he said: "We think we have a great task . . . and a lot to teach the Western Churches."

IRVING HEXHAM.