

Bernd Janowski

Open Churches in Brandenburg – Suitable varied use as an option for public recognition

Ladies and Gentlemen!

A song by Bob Dylan, whom I hold in high esteem, of course dealing with love, comprises the following lines:

I can hear the church bells ringin' in the yard.
I wonder who they're ringin' for?

Even though I took the quote out of context, it depicts quite appropriately the situation in wide parts of Eastern Germany.

Open Churches in Brandenburg – this means in general churches in rural areas, churches in small country towns, where only a few of the citizens belong to a Church, and churches in villages with sometimes only a hundred or even less inhabitants.

Open Churches in Brandenburg – this means also with increasing frequency churches opened for visitors and tourists, although sometimes only for the weekends or on prior arrangement and churches, which are open for varied use over and above the normal service on Sundays, sometimes only held every four or six weeks.

The state of Brandenburg has more than one thousand five hundred historic church buildings. Usually every village, regardless of the number of inhabitants, has its own church. The national average of Protestants in Germany – after the Reformation Brandenburg itself was already widely Lutheran in character – is now barely 20 percent and is declining. About a third of all parishes have less than a hundred church members. Many of them are unemployed or retired, a fact that leads to declining church taxes. After radical rationalization, an average country priest of the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg and the Silesian Upper Lausitz (EKBO) now looks after some ten to fifteen village communities with mostly the same number of churches.

Moreover, since 1990 grave structural changes have taken place in the rural sector of the new eastern federal states of Germany. Almost ninety percent of the agrarian workforce was made redundant, complete industrial branches disappeared. Compared to the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole, unemployment rates are very high. Looking for apprentice places or jobs the young generation migrates on a large scale (to bigger towns and cities and also western Germany). Furthermore the dramatically falling birth rate contributes to the depletion of the anyhow thinly populated rural areas.

Therewith goes hand in hand an incisive change of the cultural landscape and the appearance of the villages. The closing-down of pubs, schools, shopping possibilities and cultural institutions has taken away important places of meeting and communication. The consequences are the increasing privatization of life and social impoverishment.

Ideas to build a new infrastructure, which takes these changes into account, have yet to be found.

By far the most important and distinctive points of architectural orientation and identification of a rural community are and will be the churches. Due to their position mostly in the middle of the village, they shape decisively the view of the place as well as the landscape.

Village churches were the first and today are in general the last remaining public “cultural spheres” of the communities.

The relatively easy overview of rural structures and the high identification with the church as heart of the village centre offer chances for the survival of village churches. In fact to the major part of the inhabitants they have already lost their established function as places of worship. A now practically in the third generation existing secularization of the population has resulted in a lack of elementary knowledge about Christian practice and the function and structure of a church building. Nevertheless a church building still conveys a very special aura: It is regarded as pertaining to the public domain, in older English one would say “the common weal”, and as a public room or space.

In 1990 the “Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg” (FAK BB) was founded (with the support of the older Förderkreis Alte Kirchen in Marburg, founded 1973) with the aim to develop a lobby for those churches that were not at all or only rarely in use and which had often been left to decay in the decades before 1989. We did and still do consider ourselves not a religious but a charitable organization for the preservation of historic buildings, in this case monument preservation to be seen as an involvement with our own history and the preservation of the sometimes only sparsely existing cultural heritage in the countryside. Our motto was already formulated at the foundation of the association: Save – Maintain – Use.

Already in the first years of our existence we were successful in saving a number of churches, some even destined for demolition, helping to repair them with the support of donations, personal involvement in the labour required and grants. Up to now the FAK BB has been able to provide – exclusively from private donations – more than one million Euros for the restoration of endangered churches and their sacred and artistic furnishings. As our most important duty however we consider capacity building. We are regarded as an umbrella association and important point of reference by more than three hundred local action groups or associations for the preservation of their own churches.

To justify expensive restoration it is necessary to bring back church buildings into the heart of the communities’ and population’s consciousness To help achieve this the FAK BB initiated in 2000 the project “Offene Kirchen” (Open Churches), based on the already existing model “Wayside Churches” of the Lutheran Church in Sweden, to encourage parishes, communities and local initiatives to open their churches, which were normally locked, to visitors. The stated aim is to show visitors - mostly coming from the German capital Berlin,

but increasingly from other regions - the wealth of sacred, artistic and historic tradition that hides behind the often humble walls of the small Brandenburg churches. At the same time also the continuing threats to this abundance can be presented.

Also in 2000 the brochure "Offene Kirchen" was published for the first time and since then every year in an annual issue of 10 000 copies. Now over 900 open churches are listed in the publication together with opening hours and contact address for opening if necessary. As many villages can't ensure regular opening hours, so we enable them to publish contact details of the voluntary "key holders", who gladly open the churches and inform about the buildings. Small towns in attractive holiday regions are able to offer fixed opening hours to visitors.

On request we supply parishes with free enameled signs to advertize their open church.

Besides the list of open churches the brochure also includes various articles by experts on themes of history, art features and efforts for the protection of historic monuments. Many people use the brochure as a constant companion useful for a weekend trip, or – with the basic information - even to plan a bigger field trip.

At the same time we also pursue quite an educational approach: Within an already widely secularized society we would like to achieve educational work on art, culture and religious history. Without a minimum knowledge of Christian symbols, customs and history a sensible relation to the past, the present and the future of Western civilization is not possible. The question is: Why should people fight for the preservation and maintenance of something, of which they don't have slightest idea concerning its tangible or intangible value?

In the meantime non-religious concerts, exhibitions or theatre plays performed in churches have become completely normal in several parishes. In many cases agreements for use have been concluded between parishes on one hand and the civil communities and supporting associations on the other. Basic to this is a booklet with guidance with the title "Churches – Houses of God for the people. An invitation to a lively use of church buildings", published by the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg and the Silesian Upper Lausitz. This recommendation can be rated very positively and indispensable in many cases regarding the constructional conservation and maintenance of numerous church buildings.

Quite early on the Förderkreis recognized that by cautiously extending the possible use of churches (primarily in cultural sphere) the by far more painful worst case scenario – the abandonment of churches – can be avoided. With several projects we endeavor to attract people to churches, who don't belong to a parish community or attend religious services anymore.

For more than ten years the FAK has cooperated in the project "Theatre in Churches" with a Berlin company, which every year performs a classical play in some twenty village churches in Brandenburg. The donations made after the performances go towards to the restoration of the respective church.

Together with the "State Association of Music Schools in Brandenburg" the Förderkreis also initiated the annually recurring series of events "Music Schools open Churches" with some

50 concerts by young musicians taking place every year place in churches, the donations also going towards their restoration and repair. A hereby wished-for side effect is the bringing of children and youngsters into contact with church interiors, which they probably didn't know before and ideally they bring their parents.

Now exhibitions, readings, lectures, films and much more take place in churches. Through funding by the German Federal Cultural Foundation the FAK was within its project "Art and Culture in Churches" able to support and finance thirty amazingly creative projects. The opening of churches to a use besides the religious service presents a fascinating learning process for us and all participants. In every individual case it has to be verified what is commensurate with the dignity of a sacred building. Every parish community itself has however finally to reach a decision on what is feasible in their church building and what not.

With the outlined events, in general only really made possible by the work of volunteers and without any funding by the public purse, numerous villages of Brandenburg have been and are provided with art and culture, since all cultural institutions of the local communities and districts have fallen victim to various austerity measures. Two to three concerts and some other events in a year beside the increasingly seldom religious services are entirely sufficient to keep the church in the population's mind, and also the problems of its long-term maintenance. If this isn't possible, I plead for at least one service a year in a church possibly also with the churchgoers of neighbouring parishes, to show that this church keeps its original purpose with the hope for better times. If after that someone also makes sure that the roof remains covered and the church is ventilated every now and then, then we can allow more patience and humility in dealing with such cases.

With all these positive examples of opening churches to visitors, it must not however be forgotten that there are church buildings, which cannot be used due to the bad state of their preservation. Also demographic change will present us with big problems as a result of the decreasing population in rural areas and in particular the decreasing number of church members. In the near future we will be confronted increasingly with the question: What are we going to do with churches nobody needs anymore? And – considering the subject of our conference – I would like to widen the question: What is going to happen with all the liturgical and artistic features of redundant churches?

It is amazing and gratifying, that in spite of the demographic and financial difficulties referred to, the number of completely abandoned churches is very low in Brandenburg. Two applications for the demolition of historic church buildings in Brandenburg during the nineteen nineties were – also as a result of the efforts of the Förderkreis Alte Kirchen Berlin-Brandenburg – successfully averted.

A few village churches are used by local supporting associations, who have acquired possession of them or on the basis of long-term lease agreements, a few have been sold to private owners or communal authorities. Indeed demolition of churches is more widely reported in the wealthier western part of Germany, where the percentage of Church members is significant higher than in the new eastern federal states. However I doubt

whether this will remain the case in the long term. It is now already necessary that society as a whole must consider and develop a strategy how to deal with redundant churches.

We should not lightly abandon our aim to retain all of our village churches as far as possible. Without them not only our cultural landscape would be impoverished but also by surrendering these centuries-old witnesses to religious history and indeed the history of life the Church runs the risk of becoming itself increasingly secularized.

Currently an inventory of the artworks of churches in Brandenburg is being carried out, as has already been in progress for some time in the area covered by the Lutheran Church in the former Prussian Province Saxony. It took quite a long time until the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg and Silesian Upper Lausitz EKBO undertook the task, resulting from the fact, that it is not only the owner of hundreds of churches but also of countless artworks ranging from the Middle Ages to the present time. Still I would wish more financial and personnel support of this important inventory project, now being carried out by the only very recently established Foundation of the EKBO for Religious Cultural Heritage, but at least it is a start.

Regarding works of art which are removed from unused churches, the question occurs where can they be safely stored, is it theft-proof, but also safe against humidity and vermin? Nevertheless, the furnishings of a church, should they be altarpieces, medieval sculptures, candlesticks, baptismal fonts or organs, are solid components of the monument as a whole. As the case arises new decisions must be taken, what to safeguard in the church and what is to be removed to a secure place.

Also the extended cultural uses which I have referred to beg questions concerning the churches as rooms and their furnishings: Where is it possible to incorporate functional requirements like tea kitchens or toilets and where is it out of the question because of the spatial structure? In case of a decision to incorporate such installations – how are they to be designed? Is it possible to remove some of the fixed pews in favor of flexible seats? How can new stained-glass windows with modern designs or pieces of modern art be integrated in the church building without disturbing the historical ensemble? These questions and many others occur constantly and require patience and sure instinct in finding solutions. There can be no general answers; in any event every individual case requires detailed and careful examination.

The future of our village churches in Brandenburg and in eastern Germany as a whole is uncertain.

In recent years it has now been widely realized in the meantime, that there can be no “market-based” utilization of church buildings, especially of village churches. These buildings don’t allow cost-covering or even profitable use and marketing. Not only because of their spiritual, social and cultural relevance, but also because of the room structure of the usually heritage-protected buildings, the possibilities of use are in any case limited. Precisely because of this it is necessary to consider the appropriate opening of church buildings to extended use.

Not in every village church is it possible to perform a concert or a theatre play. Not every village church can benefit from visits of generously donating tourists. But good progress has been made, which can be further developed. It is necessary to save an important cultural asset. To ensure this for the long term a strong responsible common community of Church, State and citizens' involvement is imperative.

Thank you for your kind attention!

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