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FOCUS GERMANY



Newsletter of the Giessen School of Theology

Fall 2023



"Church" is a slippery word in English. It can refer to the entire people of God ("the Church of Jesus Christ"), a local congregation of believers ("my church"), a building ("that church is beautiful"), or even what takes place there ("church is boring"). If you are reading this, you probably use the word regularly in all its nuances, because church plays an important part in your life. That is not the case for most people in Germany. Even before the Covid pandemic only about 5% of the population that identified as Christian attended church services weekly (compared with over 40% in the US), and attendance has dropped off further since then. Germans are leaving their churches in droves. Since 2020 about two million Germans – roughly 2.5% of the population – have ended their membership in the Catholic and Lutheran churches, by far the largest denominations. It is a sad fact that in the Land of the Reformation "church" is a meaningless word to most people. In a post-Christian context, can anything be done to reverse that trend? A new Reformation, perhaps? We can hope and pray.

Dr. Joel White



Dear Friends of the Giessen School of Theology,

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said to Peter, "I will build my church". The church is his idea, it's a great one. God never intended for his children to live out their faith alone, but in community. Every Sunday millions of Christians across the globe gather for worship. Like a car regularly needs a filling station or a cell phone needs a docking station, so believers need a connection to a church. The church renews us, corrects us, grounds us, keeps us on course. The church is the body of Christ, in which various members work together. Sometimes the body is sick or injured and needs medicine or therapy or even surgery. But we can only grow when we're attached to Christ's body.

Here at the Giessen School of Theology we are currently training 200 students for future ministry. They will serve the church as pastors, teachers, youth workers, etc. They are learning to teach, preach, counsel, and lead. They will be catalysts for growth, both in established churches and in new ones. The church is in the center of what we do because it is the center of what God does.

Most of our alumni are pastors of local churches in a variety



Dr. Stephan Holthaus

of denominations, and they have planted almost 50 new churches in recent years. Recently one of them said to me, "I'm so thankful for my education at the GST. It was there that I acquired the

tools I need for my ministry in the church." That simple statement moved me deeply. What a blessing it is to be a blessing for others!

Throughout its history the church has experienced ups and downs, apostasy and renewal. There is no doubt that it faces huge challenges in Europe today. Still, we will continue to prepare young people for service in the church with joyful hearts. You might ask why. We Germans are not naturally so optimistic. We tend to focus on the problem rather than the solution. But Jesus said, "I will build my church." He is the builder, we're simply the workers under his authority. That's why we are confident about the future of Christ's church and why we want to give our best for him.

Thank you for your interest and your prayers,

Stephan Holthaus, President

Passion for Theology

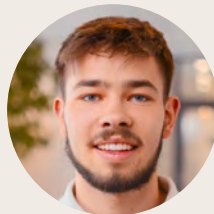
THE CHURCH AND CHURCHES IN GERMANY

Though many still think of Germany as a Christian country, the statistics tell a different story. Roughly half the population is unaffiliated with a church (43%) or Muslim (6%). Only 51% of the population belonged to a Christian church in 2022. Roman Catholics make up 24.8% of the population, Lutherans 22.6%, and adherents of other churches 3.6%. Both the Catholic and the Lutheran churches are supported by the state; the government collects taxes on their behalf. All the others are "free churches": small, largely evangelical denominations that get no state support. Almost all the students at the GST are members of a free church – Baptist, Free Lutheran, Brethren, Evangelical Free, Pentecostal, etc. – and most want to serve in those denominations. We asked a few of them to comment on what they think about the Church in Germany.

"I often hear that the Church in Germany is dying. It's certainly true that

our church buildings are empty, and more and more people are leaving the church. I'm not giving up hope, though. My studies at the GST and my ministry in my church make me eager to share my passion for God's Word to God's people. He is the one who builds his church."

Mirko Ruether



"There's a lot of disunity in the church due to political and sexual-ethical issues. The discussions are often tense. On the other hand, a lot of Christians are opening their lives to the many people who yearn for peace in our clamorous culture. They make me optimistic about the future of the church."

Sabine Fröhling



"Germans, like Goethe's Faust, have 'two souls in their chest'. Their rational soul believes only what it can see, denying all transcendence. Their romantic soul hungers for more. The church needs to speak to both, explaining the Gospel rationally while appealing to the eternal, heart-shaped hole in people's hearts."

Christian Epp



"There is a lot of variety in the church in Germany, but also many divisions, not only between churches, but also within them. Generational conflict, red tape, and grievances prevent the church from reaching its potential. I find that frustrating and hope we can overcome our differences for the sake of the Gospel."

Miriam Klein





“ECHT UND EHRlich” – GST’S YOUTUBE VIDEO SERIES

“Echt und Ehrlich” means “genuine and honest”. It is the title of a series of YouTube videos produced by the GST. The talk show format allows for in-depth discussion of issues that the viewers – lots of them, to go by the clicks – find compelling. Kim Diehl, a graduate of the GST, hosts this series. She is a natural in front of the camera. Whether the topic is friendship or abortion or personal suffering, her warm screen presence draws her guests out of their shells and her viewers into the discussion.

In a recent episode, Wolfgang Baake, GST’s donor relations adviser, talked openly about the despair he felt trying to cope with the death of his three-year-old grandson during the Covid crisis, when he was completely isolated for months due to a pre-existing medical condition.

Of course, the videos are in German, but if you want to have a look you can use the QR-code below or go to <https://www.fthgiessen.de/hochschule/videos/#fthtalk>. Please pray for this vital ministry of the GST.



“Echt und Ehrlich” addresses some of the most difficult issues facing Christians in our day and age. If our faith is going to continue to be relevant in our post-Christian world, we can’t shy away from hard questions, and we need to avoid pat answers. Our talk show helps believers map out a course that’s well thought through and applicable to their lives.”

Kim Diehl



FRIENDS’ CORNER

Save the Date – New Reformation Tour 2024

Please make plans to join the Friends of the Giessen School of Theology for the New Reformation Tour Saturday, September 14th – Sunday, September 22nd, 2024. The focus of this trip is to learn about Germany’s Reformation heritage, its present spiritual need, and the role that the GST can play in meeting it. We’ll spend two days at the GST, meeting students, faculty, and alumni, and helping them celebrate the school’s 50th anniversary. We’ll also visit the ministries of GST graduates and tour important Luther sites in Eisenach, Erfurt, Eisleben, and Wittenberg. You’ll get to know other believers with a heart for Germany. Let us know if you’re interested.

Encourage a GST Student

Would you like to get to know and pray for a student at the GST? Can you imagine what an encouragement that would be to them? We’d be happy to provide you with some information about a student who has indicated a desire for that kind of support. Just tell us if you have any preferences (gender, family status, ministry goals etc.). It could be the start of a special relationship for both of you.

Giving Tuesday is on November 28

After eating too much on Thanksgiving and binging on bargains on Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday serves as a great reminder to give to charitable institutions. As you plan your giving this year you might want to add a gift for the Giessen School of Theology. Use the QR-code to the right or go to <https://mailchi.mp/1b65a889286c/friends-of-giessen-school-of-theology>. While you’re there, you can also sign up for email communiques, if you wish.



Contact us at
friends@fthgiessen.de



STUDENT IN FOCUS

Johannes Hoffmann

Hello! My name is Johannes Hoffmann. After studying mechatronics, I became an engineer. But my small church was searching for new leaders, and my wife and I were asked if we would like to join the leadership team. I feel

very strongly about the church and the community of the believers, so I was interested, but I didn't feel that I was equipped for the task. Since I like to think deeply, I decided to pursue academic studies in theology and started at the Giessen School of Theology two years ago. Unfortunately, our church folded, but my motivation to care for the believers has only grown!

I like the GST because rigorous theology and love for God are closely connected here. Sometimes the workload is quite heavy, but the professors are sympathetic to our lot! The fact that they all have such different personalities and come from different theological backgrounds enriches my studies on a personal level. What impresses me most is that they really want to students grow in their faith and character. I also really benefit from discussions with other students. All this makes for a great education.

My focus for the future is service in the church as a pastor. I would love to be part of a pastoral team that will help me work on my leadership skills and complement my passion: helping weak Christians become strong ones.

Thanks for your interest in the GST,

Johannes



ALUMNI IN FOCUS

Rainer Scheunemann

My name is Rainer Scheunemann. I grew up as a missionary kid in Indonesia. I studied at the GST from 1984 to 1988 and in 1995 I earned my Th.D. degree in Leuven, Belgium. Since then I have been teaching at a seminary in In-

donesia. I am also active in preaching, evangelism campaigns, seminars in congregations and in writing biblical study books. In 1999, together with two Papuan friends, I founded an Evening Bible School Program for lay people in order to improve their biblical knowledge and practical skills in ministries.

My wife Heidi, who has a MBA degree, is helping locals through small scale business development assistance, coaches women's soccer, and counsels girls who come from difficult family backgrounds. Our three children Julia (b. 1993), Jan (b. 1995) and Benjamin (b. 1999) grew up in Indonesia but now they all live in Germany.

Our hearts beat for a holistic mission in a part of the world where poverty, abuse, and a host of other problems keep many people in bondage. When they receive Jesus, they are released from bondage and begin to use their gifts, they begin to have an impact on the church and society. We are thankful to have a part in that.

(Contact: rhscheunemann@vdm.org)



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