

# Belong, Believe, Behave:

## Reflections on Church Planting in Germany

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Reflecting on fourteen years of experience planting Mennonite churches in Germany, the influence of Paul Hiebert's centered-set approach cannot be understated. This reflection will focus on how this approach shaped our church planting team's strategy and practices. Additionally, the concept of "belong, believe, behave" and its effect on our relationships will be explored, including both advantages and challenges encountered. Most of this reflection will center on the church plant in Halle, Germany, which we named "Soli Deo" (from the Latin phrase *solus Deo gloria*, or to God alone be the glory, based on our belief that if a church is indeed planted, God alone gets the glory).

"German Mennonites don't plant churches," I heard from time to time during my tenure as a church planter in Germany from 1994 to 2008. Thanks to the vision and determination of German pastors like Herbert Hege, some German Mennonites, however, did plant churches, and invited young adults from the United States to join them. Hege contacted Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) to ask if a YES team<sup>2</sup> could come to southern Germany to help plant a Mennonite church, and my husband Steve and I were the leaders of that first team in 1994.

Soon after arriving and getting to know Hege, his wife, and their eight children, along with other church members, Steve and I were invited to return as missionaries to focus on planting a church in Pfullendorf, a small village of about twelve thousand that was predominantly Catholic, with varied levels of commitment and involvement in the life of the church. In the summer of 1995, we attended EMM's summer training event called World Missions Institute in Philadelphia, as well as a program called "School of Witness," a three-month summer program of EMM's Discipleship Ministries department. It was that

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*2 YES stood for Youth Evangelism Service but now is no longer referred to as an acronym.*

summer when we first were introduced to cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert's description of ecclesial structures by EMM's administrator/missiologist, David Shenk. He explained the terms bounded-set, centered-set and fuzzy-set to us as ways to think about what a church focuses on in its structure.<sup>3</sup> This theory was a major factor shaping our identity as Anabaptist church planters in a post-Christian and postmodern secular society, first in the southwest corner of Germany and later in the eastern part of Germany.

Briefly, the bounded-set focuses on the boundaries, on defining who is in and who is out, and what people must exhibit in their behavior and beliefs in order to belong to any given group. Typically there is an emphasis on holiness and purity. The centered-set defines a few characteristics that are central, and does not focus on the boundaries. People can be any distance from the center and still belong to centered-set group, as long as they are facing the center. We were taught that the center is Jesus and that there are multitudes of ways to experience Jesus, while growing in faith that may look very different, depending on a whole variety of factors, such as upbringing, the surrounding culture and sub-cultures or the religious background of a person. Instead of defining the boundaries, the centered-set focuses on Jesus as the center of our faith and our relationship with him. The fuzzy-set is basically more about belonging to a group without clear definition of boundaries or a clear central focus.

After spending nearly four years in southwest Germany with the church plant there, Steve and I were asked to journey to Halle, an industrial city of about two hundred thirty thousand in the heart of former socialist East Germany, and restart a church plant there. For a variety of reasons, the original church planters had left and it was determined by the German Mennonite Mission Committee and EMM that a second team would go and would be free to use a different strategy than the former team. Again, we attended World Mission Institute in Philadelphia with our new team made up of Jimm and Kaylene Derksen, with their three-year-old daughter, Helena, and Jochen Riehm, a young German man who had found the Mennonites through peace work in Bosnia. Other Americans and Germans joined the team in the following years. Our team was taught the principles of Hiebert's work on bounded-set/centered-set/fuzzy-set and we were encouraged to embrace the centered-set, with Jesus as the center, as we went about planting an Anabaptist church.

Upon arriving in Halle, our team quickly determined that the legacy of a formerly socialist country is quite different than a capitalistic society. Going

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3 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 107–136.

back all the way to the Enlightenment's dismissal of religion as superstition, and the desire for scientific explanations of reality, many people were ready for socialism and were truly heartbroken when the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was dismantled in 1990, and was reunified with former West Germany. Some of the legacy of socialism was atheism and a complete disdain of religion. Churches were turned into museums, concert halls, and, in some places, into forgotten storage buildings for the city. In some more rural areas, genuine Christian faith did indeed continue to exist, but in many of the larger cities, like Halle, only a small minority of the public claimed any Christian religious identity. In fact, in Halle, the registered Christians of all creeds were a little less than 7 percent. We met many people who personally knew of no practicing Christians, or who remembered the odd Christian student who was made fun of in class for their faith. Perhaps there was a distant elderly relative who attended church services and was more or less humored by the family.

Based on these observations, the team decided that we needed to find concrete ways to practice the centered-set structure. But how? We already knew that people generally had no interest in joining a church, or even setting foot inside a church building, so there was no point in starting typical Sunday worship services inside a building with which people had no connection. Doing the slow work of establishing relationships and authentic friendships seemed like the best way to make a start. Members of our team practiced hospitality in our homes, went to the park with our children, joined a book club, taught English, and had many barbecues in our backyard with neighbors and new friends. Eventually, as we practiced sharing our lives, including how our relationship with Jesus affected everything from major life decisions to parenting and finances, some people became curious and wanted to know more. Some people were clearly not interested. Since we were not concerned primarily with how close or far from the center (Jesus) people were, we chose to walk with anyone who showed signs of turning toward Jesus, which took much time and intentionality.

As people grew in their commitment to walking with Jesus, we encouraged them to deepen their commitment to the community of faith as well, to serve with their gifts and invite others to join them on the journey. We began introducing our new friends to each other and at different times were able to organize groups that focused on certain topics or life-stages, many of which took place in people's homes. At some point there were enough people that it seemed like a weekly gathering for corporate worship, teaching, and fellowship would be beneficial. Again, our focus was not on defining who was allowed to come to this gathering, but on making sure everyone felt welcomed, no matter

how far or close to the center they were, or even if they were facing toward or away from Jesus. We chose a format that affirmed a German cultural form of hospitality, Kaffee und Kuchen (coffee and cake) on Sunday afternoons. It felt a lot less intimidating to people to be invited to coffee and cake than to be invited to church.

One person who joined us on the journey with Jesus was Anett. She described her childhood as one of neglect and had been turned out at age sixteen to fend for herself, only given the most rudimentary set of household supplies mandated by the government for parents to supply when “emancipating” their sixteen-year-old children. She married young and had a daughter while living in an abusive marriage relationship. After surviving a knife attack by her husband, she left him and raised her daughter on her own. She was unemployed for many years and her daughter was a teenager when we came to know them through her daughter’s friends. Anett had a hard shell and was very skeptical of anything to do with God and religion. Over time, however, she started showing up for cake and coffee more often and got to know this strange mix of people who laughed, sang, prayed, and ate a lot of good food. As she shared her life story with us piece by piece, she was able to see how God was in her life even when she did not know it was God. She learned to pray and to forgive, and that hard shell was penetrated by the love of God and God’s people. She remains a loyal and faithful member of the church to this day.

The space we met in also was important. As a way of demonstrating Christian community and relationships, the team began living in an abandoned business building along a busy road not far from the city center. There were several apartments and rooms for a meeting place, a kitchen, and a children’s room. As a bonus, there was a courtyard large enough for our barbeques to continue! We did not want the space to look “churchy” because of the negative view of churches and church buildings, so it was helpful to be able to focus on Jesus and relationships and not have to overcome the unnecessary burden of having a building that reminded people of their negative perceptions.

One year at our annual EMM Europe retreat, a missionary couple from the Netherlands shared a concept they had heard about: “belong, believe, behave.” This paradigm, first coined in writing by Mennonite missiologist and church historian, Alan Kreider, was another way of thinking about the process of conversion and inclusion in the body of Christ. It fit well with the concept of the centered-set, where the primary focus at the beginning is on creating a space

for belonging.<sup>4</sup> Genuine relationships must be established and new people must know they are valued and cared for, as they are, with all of their issues, bad habits and messy lives; then one can expect that in this context of love and acceptance, they will be more open to responding to the love of Jesus and will begin to believe. Over time as they grow in faith and relationship with Jesus and other Jesus-followers, some of those bad habits will be transformed. Areas of sin and temptation will be overcome as they see other people overcoming the same. Eventually their behavior will look more like an imitation of Christ. Again, the focus was not on defining clear boundaries concerning belief and behavior, but on the journey of conversion.

As an Anabaptist, embracing the centered-set and “belong, believe, behave” paradigms felt very natural, in large part because of the emphasis Anabaptists put on the centrality of Jesus. How simplifying it was to focus on the Gospel stories of Jesus and introduce this Jesus to people who had never heard, which refreshed long-standing Christians’ connection with Jesus as well. How freeing to stop judging people and doing boundary maintenance, and instead letting the Holy Spirit be the one to convict people of their sins! But it was not without challenges.

It was messy to live with the outworkings that a centered-set approach brings. Sometimes it is comforting or appears easier to have a group identity based on people behaving properly as a group. Clear definitions of what is right and wrong also can be comforting to some people. Letting go of religious forms and traditions that could not be directly related to the person and ministry of Jesus was at times a struggle. Some people who had been Christians for years felt like we were far too loose in our theology and allowed far too much bad behavior in our church. It took determination not to revert back to a bounded-set approach and to offer repeated explanations to people who did not understand.

It was not uncommon for couples in Halle to be unwed, but cohabitate and have children together. We were faced with a dilemma of couples in this situation who were becoming interested in following Jesus and yet had many negative stereotypes of marriage. As church leaders, we struggled knowing when to ask these couples to get married. Should we tell them to get separate apartments or to sleep separately if they were not ready to get married? How much pressure should we put on them to marry, and what consequences would we set if they chose not to marry? Instead of focusing on setting policies or thinking up consequences, we kept loving them and talking with them about

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4 Alan Kreider, *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

God's intentions for marriage. Eventually they came to realize that it was a next step in their faith journey to marry and those weddings were always a highlight in the life of the church. But in the meantime, it was messy explaining to other Christians that we had unmarried couples living together in our church for significant lengths of time.

While we rejoiced with Anett and learned to love and worship with unwed couples, we learned that people who had been Christians for many years as an adult had the most problem with the messiness of our church since that is not what they were used to. The people most happy with our approach were those who had no church background and were positively surprised by "church" not looking like the negative propaganda they had been exposed to in the days of the GDR.

In a setting where the vast majority of the population had little to no experience with churches or Christians, the centered-set approach and the "belong, believe, behave" paradigm worked very well. They facilitated a focus on relationships over rules. They gave room for the gospel to be contextualized in that setting. They were conducive to an environment of curiosity and learning and for conversion to be about a journey over time with people and a God who loves you.