The double role of the Protestant Church in the GDR

The Protestant Church used its special status in two ways: on the one hand, it provided a “roof for the opposition”, gathering together various groups and strengthening their resistance; on the other hand, it mediated between the government and the populace and helped to defuse critical situations.

The Church as the “roof for the opposition”

In East Germany, the Protestant Church was the only institution not brought into line, preserving its own capacity for decision-making and enjoying various privileges, e.g. democratic structures, its own buildings, its own media etc. With its advocacy of individual and social liberty and protection for minorities, it served as a sanctuary and “roof” for the opposition. Many opposition groups in the 1980’s were primarily politically oriented, but they made their own the Christian values represented by the Church (peace, justice, environmental protection). Moreover, representatives of the Church sometimes assumed leadership roles within opposition groups. Particularly during the Monday demonstrations, the Church helped to insure strict non-violence with its prayers for peace and other actions. Because of their engagement in the opposition movement, many church leaders took up political functions after the “Wende” (between 15 and 42% depending on the region). The parliament elected in March 1990 contained 19 ordained pastors and the cabinet of Minister President Lothar de Maizière included four pastors.

The Church as mediator between the government, the populace and the opposition

The Church used its contacts to public figures in culture and politics for political mediation. Thus in October 1989 during the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, a pastor, a cabaret artist and a symphony conductor joined with three secretaries from the SED district administration in a joint appeal to the demonstrators to remain peaceful, promising in return a non-violent reaction on the part of the police. In the transition period from November 1989 till October 1990, the Protestant Church organized round-table discussions between representatives of the Church, of the government and of the opposition, in which day-to-day political decisions were made and questions for the political future were discussed.