Introduction

At the beginning of the new millennium, the topic of evangelism is 'officially' back on the agenda of German Protestantism.[1] Church membership has been declining for years in most denominations. In this context, Christianity has often been labelled an out-dated model. But increasingly German churches are looking for new ideas and approaches to reach non-churched contemporaries. Already during the past decade, a significant number of church leaders have directed their views to growing churches and evangelistic models in the Anglo-Saxon world, foremost in the North American context.[2] One of the most significant trends born out of these learning relationships in Germany are hundreds of new church services with an evangelistic character. 'They try to approach non-churched people in society by concentrating on specific targets. There is no longer one type of liturgy for everybody, but a multitude of culturally adapted services.'[3]

When we compare Germany and North America, lifestyles are increasingly similar in many respects. At the same time, there are also significant differences, particularly when it comes to religion. While many churches in Germany are losing ground, overall church attendance in North America is not significantly declining. At the same time, however, similar to Germany, there is a steady loss of Christian knowledge and tradition among the U.S. population, and many mainline churches are losing membership. In its place, a new style of Christianity has been emerging during the last decades,

> one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960s. . . The style of Christianity dominated by eighteenth-century hymns, routinized liturgy, and bureaucratized layers of social organizations is gradually dying. In its place are emerging hundreds of new paradigm churches, which are appropriating stylistic and organizational elements from our postmodern culture. This reformation, unlike the one led by Martin

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[1] See Kirchenamt der EKD, ed., *Reden von Gott in der Welt - Der missionarische Auftrag der Kirche: EKD Synode 1999* (Hannover/Frankfurt: EKD, 2000), cf. 1.1. and A4.10.

[2] See Michael Herbst, 'Gemeindeaufbau im 21. Jahrhundert: Kybernetik - Where Learning Leads to Mission', in Georg Lämmlin and Stefan Scholpp, eds., *Praktische Theologie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* (Tübingen, Basel: A. Francke, 2001), 373.

[3] Id., 'Neue Gottesdienste braucht das Land', *BthZ* 17/2 (2000): 176.

Luther, is challenging not doctrine but the medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated.[4]

Willow Creek Community Church

A pioneer of these 'new paradigm churches' - and probably the best known in Germany - is *Willow Creek Community Church* (WCCC) in South Barrington near Chicago. Started in the 1970s as a modern congregation for unchurched baby boomers, the suburban mega church with its senior pastor BILL HYBELS is one of the biggest and fastest growing congregations in the Western world. More than 20,000 people attend its weekly church services. Secular media - from the *New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review, Time,* or *Newsweek* to German publications like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin* or *Die Welt* - have covered extensive reports about its success in reaching non-churched contemporaries. Already a decade ago, GREGORY A. PRITCHARD stated in his sociological study of WCCC that Willow Creek is spearheading a worldwide movement that is revolutionising churches.[5] At the end of 2007, about 13,000 congregations from 45 countries across denominations belong to the international network of the *Willow Creek Association* (WCA). Due to these impressive numbers, one might be tempted just to look at the figures. However, as MARTIN ROBINSON argues, 'the importance of Willow Creek, not just for North America but also for the continent of Europe, lies neither in its rapid growth nor in its size, but rather in its stated aim: to be a church that is consciously attempting to reach those in its community who are unchurched'.[6]

Probably the most striking and famous symbol of WCCC is its regular 'Seeker Service'. Each weekend approximately 18,000 people join one of these multiple evangelistic events which claim to be relevant to the needs, interests, questions and taste of unchurched contemporaries, without compromising the gospel. At the same time, these church services are a place of worship and celebration for believers. JAMES EMERY WHITE defined a Seeker Service as

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[4] Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

[5] Gregory A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 11. This analysis was published on the basis of Pritchard's critical dissertation on WCCC's strategy: Id., 'The Strategy of Willow Creek Community Church: A Study in the Sociology of Religion' (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, Evanston/Ill., 1994).

[6] Martin Robinson, *A World Apart. Creating a Church for the Unchurched: Learning from WCCC* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992), 8.

> a service in which a context is created that allows seekers to explore Christianity in a way that moves them 'down the line' toward the event of salvation. It is a tool placed in the hand of believers to support the effort they are making with their friends. . . . In essence, a safe place is created for seekers to hear and explore a very unsafe message . . .[7]

This basic definition is still valid with regard to the nucleus of Willow Creek's approach although the congregation and its Seeker Services have gone through some significant changes during the last years and are still in a phase of reevaluation in 2008. Amongst others, WCCC has tried to adapt to an increasingly 'postmodern' mindset since the end of the 1990s.[8] On WCCC's homepage the following description is used to introduce the Seeker Services:

> Using drama, multi-media, contemporary music, and a message that connects with people's lives, the ageless wisdom of scripture is presented in a creative yet straight-forward way. People who haven't attended church, or for some reason have quit going to church, are often surprised how meaningful these services are. In fact, the services are specifically designed for individuals checking out what it really means to have a personal relationship with Jesus.[9]

Seeker Services as a New Trend in German Protestantism

To a large extent due to WCCC's influence, a whole wave of new church services with an evangelistic focus has developed in Germany since the mid-1990s. MICHAEL HERBST, professor of practical theology in Greifswald, speaks of a renaissance of the 'church service'-issue and a boom of evangelistic 'second and third programmes'.[10] KLAUS DOUGLASS diagnoses a new 'megatrend' in German Protestantism.[11] CHRISTIAN A. SCHWARZ believes that WCCC, with its 'Church for the Unchurched' approach, has started one of the most important movements in

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[7] James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1997), 50-51.

[8] For an explanation of the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' as understood in this study see 4.1.

[9] Willow Creek Community Church, 'Services', http://willowcreek.org/services1.asp, accessed 10 July 2008.

[10] Michael Herbst, 'Neue Gottesdienste', 155 (tba).

[11] Klaus Douglass, 'Gottesdienste für Kirchendistanzierte: Einer der kommenden Megatrends in der Kirche?' *ideadok* 5 (2000): 4.

contemporary German Christianity.[12] Obviously, the Seeker Service, as a technical term of the U.S. Church Growth movement, has become a focus of attention in many German Protestant mainline and Free Churches today.[13] At the same time, there is still a wide spread rejection and scepticism of learning from U.S. church strategies in German Protestantism and the transfer of ideas is not always successful. As well, postmodernity challenges the concept of WCCC's style of evangelism.

With the initiative of German evangelicals, WCCC started to reach out to Germany in the second half of the 1990s. Pastors and lay persons founded a German Willow Creek Association. The main publications and working materials of WCCC are available in a German translation. A significant number of Willow Creek workshops, study trips, seminars, and congresses have taken place in Germany with many thousands of attendees. At these congresses Bill Hybels and his team have introduced their philosophy, values and strategy of a 'Church for the Unchurched' as a model for learning in the German situation on a regular basis.

The Problem: Missing Models and Tools

Experience, already, overwhelmingly seems to prove the possibility of transferring the general idea of a Seeker Service from the U.S. into German contexts. Initial quantitative data is available from two international surveys of the Willow Creek Association. Furthermore, research of the Greifswald *Institut zur Erforschung von Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung* (IEEG) offers some results. So far, however, there is very little *in-depth* research on the complex effects, benefits, and potential problems of such an approach in Germany. Besides the important theological question regarding the generally valid biblical principles within the Seeker Service model, the contextualisation of these principles needs to be

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[12] Christian A. Schwarz, 'Leidenschaftlich Menschen suchen', interview by Rainer Schacke, *Neues Leben* 1/2 (2000): 8.

[13] By using the original term 'Seeker Service' in this thesis, we are aware of the fact that, although there is a certain consensus on the meaning of the expression, no uniform German translation exists. In the relevant literature and in the current discussion, several German expressions are applied: *Gottesdienst für Suchende, Gottesdienst für Distanzierte, Offener Gottesdienst, Besucherfreundlicher Gottesdienst, Gästegottesdienst, evangelistischer Gottesdienst* etc. The term 'Seeker Service', however, will be used only for WCCC's model and closely related approaches. With regard to church services with an evangelistic focus in general, in the following, we will speak of 'church services for seekers' or 'evangelistic church services'.

critically and concretely explored.[14] While WCCC may offer many significant impulses for German congregations, methods effective in the very specific context of a North American mega church are not necessarily appropriate in the diverse local churches and their societal contexts in Germany.[15] Church Growth researcher GEORGE BARNA notes:

> In short, every church is faced with an absolutely unique set of circumstances to which it is called to minister. You cannot simply locate a growing church, identify the characteristics of that ministry and implement a carbon copy with the expectation of success. . . . [E]very church that wishes to impact lives has to be sensitive enough to those lives to mold a new customized ministry dedicated to meeting the undublicated needs of the target audience.[16]

Likewise, WCCC itself is in a phase of transition and reevaluation of its societal context and Hybels and the Willow Creek Association frequently emphasise that WCCC's methods and style should not simply be copied but that the gospel must be contextualised anew in every local situation. Nonetheless, WCCC's strategy has been presented with such enthusiasm and professionalism on a pragmatic level in the past that it sometimes seems to have its own dynamic as a prefabricated model.

Besides an analysis of existing theory and data, thorough case studies are therefore needed with regard to a transfer of WCCC's ideas to Germany. The interaction of local churches with their specific societal contexts should be explored and described with respect to WCCC's approach. Furthermore, there is a need of tools for research and practice which help to understand the continuously changing cultural surroundings of local churches.[17] As research indicates, many congregations are only insufficiently aware of their potential target audiences.[18]

[14] '. . . [B]iblical principles are transferable from one culture to another, and it is here that the studies of large, growing U.S. churches will prove most fruitful to those looking in from the outside.' Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2001), 168.

[15] See e.g. Ulrich Parzany, 'Zur Nachahmung empfohlen? Die Willow Creek-Gemeinde in Chicago', *Schritte* 4 (1996): 18.

[16] George Barna, *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1991), 20.

[17] Cf. e.g. Cla Retos Famos, 'Auftragsbestimmte Bedürfnisorientierung', *Pth* 12 (2003): 402.

[18] See e.g. Klaus Engelhardt, Hermann von Loewenich, and Peter Steinacker, eds., *Fremde Heimat Kirche: Die dritte EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft,* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

Even congregations more sensitive for the needs of non-churched people frequently seem to struggle to understand and describe their potential attenders.

Simultaneously, there are clearly many commonalities between Germany and the U.S. which, from a cultural perspective, do suggest an adaptation of WCCC's basic ideas in many contexts. PRITCHARD proposed that the idea of a Seeker Service is most valuable 'in cultures that are secularized, modern, and urbanized'.[19] From a German perspective, REINHARD HEMPELMANN agreed that 'conception, practice, and experience' of WCCC 'may offer important impulses for church work, predominantly in the context of big cities where the processes of de-churching and de-Christianising have progressed most extensively'.[20]

Research Objectives

Going on from here, this study examines *the potential of learning from WCCC's Seeker Service approach in Germany with a special focus on typical urban milieu and church contexts.* From a sociological point of view, big cities are an 'open social laboratory' of lifestyles and trends which influence society as a whole.[21] As PAUL G. HIEBERT writes: 'In many ways, we can understand the world better if we focus on cities and their hinterland rather than on nation states.'[22] Results of our research will therefore allow a number of conclusions for the rest of society as well. Besides desk research and theoretical analysis, expert interviews and a sample of ten long term case studies of exemplary church service projects for seekers (or similar events) - most of them situated in Berlin - are the basis for generating our conclusions. Due to the fact that we used *expert interviews* as the central method within these case studies, we had the opportunity to gain important additional data far beyond the actual cases as well.

The research goal required an interdisciplinary approach combining theology with theory and data of the social sciences. In addition to our own empirical results, data of sociology of religion and milieu theory will be applied in particular. Milieu theory is built on interdisciplinary research itself. It offers comprehensive

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[19] Pritchard, *Seeker*, 189.

[20] Reinhard Hempelmann, 'Vision für ein entkirchlichtes Deutschland - Nürnberger Gemeindekongress 1999', *Materialdienst der EZW*, 12 (1993): 360 (tba).

[21] Peter Noller, *Globalisierung, Stadträume und Lebensstile* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1999), 101 (tba).

[22] Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 266.

models and tools for the description of the different lifestyles of contemporary societies. As EDGAR J. ELLISTON writes with regard to cross-cultural missiological research:

> Data collection and analysis methods often require multiple perspectives to see clearly across cultural boundaries. Like looking into a house, it is helpful to look through several windows in order to gain an understanding of what is inside. The view from a single window may help with one room, but will not provide access to other parts of the room. Similarily, when seeking to do cross-cultural research, the use of more than one perspective may not just be helpful, it may be essential.[23]

With reference to the *missio Dei* and Paul's example in 1 Cor 9:19-23, the focus of our study is heavier on the perspective of the potential non-churched receptors of the gospel and on the question of contextualisation than on denomination dependent structural questions and inner-church processes. Nonetheless, the inner-church perspective must not be neglected. We will pay attention to what we consider basic ecclesiological issues in our theological critique of WCCC's approach.

Three Guiding Questions

Three main questions guided the research process:

(1) To what extent are evangelistic church services an effective and necessary bridge to the diverse societal lifestyle clusters in Germany? On the theoretical level, this question includes the necessity of both a theological and a sociological analysis; existing theories and data relevant for the research topic had to be evaluated and taken into account.

(2) To what extent, in particular, is the need-orientated Seeker Service approach of WCCC transferable into German contexts? On the theoretical level, this question includes a description of WCCC's model with an update of its current practice as well as a theological critique and a working out of immanent biblical principles in WCCC's approach. Likewise, a comparison of selected aspects of the

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[23] Edgar J. Elliston, 'Cross-Cultural Research', in EDWM.

religious and cultural situation in the U.S. and Germany was necessary in view of the topic of contextualisation.

(3) Is the sociological milieu model applied in this investigation an appropriate tool for contextualisation in the local churches? On the theoretical level, this question included an introduction and description of the relevant model as well as a critical evaluation.

Ten Long Term Case Studies

To gain reliable results in the empirical section, our study triangulates several qualitative and quantitative data sources.[24] The basic method is a triple-series of semi-structured *expert interviews* with leaders of ten urban church service projects for seekers (or similar evangelistic events), most of them situated in the city of Berlin (conducted in the years 2001, 2002, and 2007). The findings gained by these interviews have been expanded with the results of participant observation and triangulated with (1) data of milieu research and (2) further results introduced in the theoretical section.

An additional case study conducted during the research period focussed on the situation of a selected target group in Berlin's inner city. The goal, here, was to test the Seeker Service approach as a possible strategy for a specific group of people from an even stronger secular perspective. If appropriate, proposals for an adequate Seeker Service strategy should be developed as a starting point for a practical project. Due to the space restriction, however, the results of this additional (ethnographic) case study cannot be presented in detail in the framework of this dissertation. We will, nonetheless, introduce the method and the data sources in an excursus in the methodological section and refer to some of the results in our final analysis.

Methodological Annotations

Besides the expert interviews in the empirical section of this study (see the methodical description in chapter 5) and a number of field disclosing interviews, additional interviews have been conducted to gain information otherwise not available. This data collection was not a part of the empirical research design in a narrower sense but necessary for understanding Willow Creek's current practice

[24] For the method of *triangulation* see chapter 5.

and cultural context in the U.S. as well as its activities and perception in Germany. Likewise, participant observation at WCCC's campus in South Barrington as well as at German Willow Creek conferences and workshops was used to gain a more comprehensive picture of WCCC's approach. We took part in a number of Willow Creek conferences in Germany and the U.S. and first observed WCCC and its Seeker Services in South Barrington at the beginning of this research project during a one month period in 1999 when a new Seeker Service format was introduced. Another field research period at WCCC followed in February/March 2005.

Interviews have been conducted with Willow Creek officials BILL HYBELS (founding and senior pastor), NANCY BEACH (co-founder, teaching pastor and long-standing programme director of the Seeker Service), NANCY ORTBERG (teaching pastor and leader of the Axis ministry at the time of the interview); JOHN ORTBERG (teaching pastor at the time of the interview); GILBERT BILEZIKIAN (professor emeritus of biblical studies, founding elder of WCCC, theological mentor of Bill Hybels), JON VESELY (executive director of programme and production for WCCC's weekend and midweek services), GARY SCHWAMMLEIN (international director of the Willow Creek Association) and LOU HUENEKE (chairman of WCA Germany at the time of the interview) along with external experts in the U.S. (LARRY ESKRIDGE, associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals; DAVID NEFF, editor of Christianity Today magazine; ERWIN MCMANUS, speaker at WCA conferences, author on church development issues and postmodernity, pastor of Mosaic church in Los Angeles). Interview partners in Germany were CHRISTIAN A. SCHWARZ (church growth expert), WILFRIED BOHLEN (main initiator and long-standing secretary of WCA Germany), HARTMUT STEEB (general secretary of the German Evangelical Alliance), HARTMUT BÄREND (director of the Association of Missionary Services [AMD] in the Protestant Church at the time of the interview and board member of WCA Germany) and MICHAEL HERBST (professor of practical theology in Greifswald).[25]

[25] References to these interviews will be given in short form, e.g.: ' IntBH1' for interview 1 with Bill Hybels (audio tape).

Outline

Part one of our study deals with the state of research and a theoretical analysis. *Part two* is the empirical section.

In the *first chapter*, main currents and historical developments in the field of missionary church development will be outlined. Due to space reasons, our literature review is presented in the appendix (A4-A5). Research with regard to relevant sub-topics will be pointed out at the beginning of the respective paragraphs. We will then introduce selected results of the international Willow Creek surveys and further data with regard to a transfer of WCCC's impulses to Germany. Finally, WCCC's Seeker Service approach will be described.

In the *second chapter*, a theological critique of WCCC concepts will be given and key biblical principles of the model will be worked out.

In the *third chapter*, the situation of the German churches will be outlined and we will put a special emphasis on the example of Berlin. Selected aspects of the religious situation in the U.S. will be compared with the German context. We will take a look at the secularisation debate and deal with the problem of declining church membership. Attitudes and statistics of church members and non-churched people will be analysed with a view to missiological implications and a characterisation of 'the unchurched' in Germany.

In the *fourth chapter*, we take a look at basic cultural commonalities and differences between Germany and the U.S. The main marks of (post)modernity as the cultural meta-framework of Western societies will be summarised. Milieu theory and lifestyle research will be introduced to help understand the different segments of German society and the big city culture(s) of Berlin. We will outline the relevant state of research with view to the interaction of sociology of religion and theology with milieu theory. A special emphasis will be put on the description and critique of the milieu approach of the Heidelberg Sinus Sociovision Institute. This data will be connected with further studies in desk research. The Sinus milieus for the U.S. will be described including a positioning of WCCC's milieu context. We will then compare U.S. milieus with German clusters in an international meta-model.

Part two, then, describes the empirical research:

C*hapter five* deals with the research design and introduces the methodology. The outlines of the questionnaires for the interviews with the leaders of the urban church service projects are presented in the appendix.

Chapter six presents the summarised results. A detailed description of the results is given in the appendix.

In *Chapter seven* the data is triangulated with further data introduced in the theoretical part and conclusions are drawn with view to the wider church. This analysis includes an evaluation of the usage of the tested milieu model for contextualisation and cybernetics in the local church.