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# Turn Out the Lights as You Leave? Germany's Church Crisis

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The secularization of Europe is one of the most important developments of our times. Secularization is, to some extent, a phenomenon of modernity and a reality in most industrialized nations. Even in the United States, long described as the exception to the European pattern, secularization is a growing reality. Much of what is called Christianity in America is, on closer inspection, seen to be a very thin commitment indeed.

*The Los Angeles Times* reports that Germany, cradle of the Lutheran Reformation and once at the heart of European Christianity, is now experiencing the precipitous loss of churches. As the paper reports:

*The village church is struggling for relevance in modern Europe. The continent is rooted in Christianity, but devotion is ebbing and church attendance has dropped steadily for years. In Germany and other nations, Protestant and Roman Catholic churches are selling properties or leasing them to other religious groups, especially in cities and villages where structures are left vacant as shrinking congregations merge.*

More:

*Churches have been reinvented as restaurants, coffee houses, clubs, apartments and music halls. Some have kept their frescoes and stained glass; others have been de-sanctified, yet their unmistakable facades and architecture leave an imprint of the holy on even the most capitalist of endeavors. The churches of Europe have endured wars, plagues and much else, and although the current crisis is likely to pass, the image of the church is being significantly altered.*

Observers have offered any number of explanations for the precipitous decline in church membership and the closing of so many churches. Some blame the secularization pattern, while others point to Germany's church tax and disillusionment over what has happened (or failed to happen) since the fall of Communism.

In any event, the situation looks bleak:

*Congregations slip away with each church funeral. Germany, a nation of 82 million people, has a low fertility rate that is unable to balance its rapidly aging population; government estimates suggest the working-age population will shrink by 21 million over the next two decades. . . .*

*Meeting this year in Wittenberg, the home of the Reformation, an organization of mainline Protestant churches predicted that by 2030 membership would drop to 17 million from 25.6 million, and that annual income from the church tax, which helps support institutions, would be halved from about \$5.4 billion to \$2.7 billion.*

The article avoids any reference to a theological explanation to Germany's crisis. People do not remain loyal to institutions when they no longer believe in their importance. The importance of the church is essentially tied to the reality of the Gospel. When people no longer believe that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, the church becomes a time-consuming irrelevance.

The main problem behind the crisis of the church in Germany is theological, not financial or demographic. American Christians should observe Germany's closing churches with this haunting awareness — it could happen here too.

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Church pictured is Hanover, Germany's *Marktkirche* (Market Church).

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