

# Differences in the Accessibility of Sunday Services in the German Protestant Church

Uta Pohl-Patalong

***Abstract:** Within the Protestant Church in Germany there are great differences in the accessibility of Sunday worship services, the expectations for such services and aversion to the format of the some of them. What does this mean for the structure and the future of the Sunday worship service from a practical-theological perspective? Empirical research is helpful for a practical-theological perspective.*

## **An Overview of the Contemporary Situation**

Attendance at church services of the Protestant Church in Germany has been tracked statistically since the 1950's. On a normal Sunday in 2006, 3.7% of the Church's membership attended worship, which is 941,359 people attending a total of 25,551 Sunday services. Percentage-wise, these numbers have not changed significantly since the 1970s, and they are not a revolutionary change from the 1960s, when the number was about 8%. It is somewhat typical for a member of the German Protestant Church to distinguish between being a Christian and going to church. Nonetheless, this situation ought to give the Church something to think about, especially since people are continuing to go to church less and less often. Considering also that approximately one-quarter of the membership of the Protestant Church has officially withdrawn since the 1970s, the situation appears even more precarious: obviously it is *not* the case, as has long been assumed (and hoped), that everyone who took the Christian faith less seriously would eventually withdraw from the Church, leaving behind a remnant with an intensive, binding commitment to what the Church has to offer.

Even for the majority of the Church's remaining members and—as sociological surveys have shown—for those remaining consciously uncommitted to the Christian faith, regular attendance at Sunday worship is not very attractive and apparently has little relevance for their faith and for their lives. We get a very different picture, however, if we view attendance not only over the course of a week, but also over the course of a year or of a lifetime. Statistics have shown an increasing number of people attending church on religious holidays beginning in the 1980s, and this is an upwards trend. In 2006, for example, 37.8% of the Church membership attended a Christmas Eve service. There is continued demand among Church members for christenings and weddings; more and more non-members desire these as well. Participation in services marking the beginning of children's first year of school has increased enormously in recent years. When events transpire that disturb society, people are requesting and holding Sunday services much more often than even a few years ago, and some of these services have had enormous attendance. It is apparent that people perceive regular Sunday worship in a very different way than services on such special occasions. A monthly rhythm can be discerned as well: increasing

numbers of people go to church neither every Sunday, nor exclusively on special occasions, but rather approximately once a month, depending on what their local church offers (e.g., family, thematic, or specially organized worship). Some people are even going to church on an individualized schedule. There obviously need to be plausible reasons for going to church on Sunday morning, as opposed to the many other ways one could spend that time.

It is long been clear that such reasons for or against going to church are not only a question of faith, but also depend to a high degree on independent factors such as age and gender. The perception of these relationships in practical theology in the German-speaking countries has become more clearly differentiated in the last few years. The so-called "milieu theory" has been helpful, particularly regarding church attendance: it shows us that the accessibility of church services depends significantly on people's identifying themselves with certain "lifestyles," and in turn on aesthetic, socio-cultural factors and on people's individual preferences. One's lifestyle has a significant influence on whether one goes to church; if one does go to church, one's lifestyle influences the rhythm of one's attendance as well as the criteria for attending church. Older people who lead more traditionally oriented lives and who are highly educated attend services most regularly; this is also true to a lesser extent for older people with average educations. The reach of the Church extends least into the youth culture and—what is especially alarming from a theological perspective—into marginalized and disadvantaged social groups. Between these extremes are two social groups comprised of the middle-aged. One group, those mainly living in urban contexts, primarily attends church services on special occasions, while the other group attends church primarily on family occasions. Besides their frequency of church attendance, there are also significant differences in what these groups expect from worship. One notable difference can be discerned between those attendees who have what could be considered high cultural expectations (i.e., an orientation toward organ music, cantatas and a sophisticated sermon) and those who expect a friendly and genial atmosphere (i.e., a non-liturgical greeting and a sermon that reflects every-day life). An especially significant difference separates those who expect the traditional liturgical form versus more experimental elements (e.g., skits, dance, etc.). Even musical tastes vary greatly. Whereas one group cannot imagine worship without traditional hymnody and, whenever possible, some Bach cantatas, for others modern songs and alternative instruments are essential.

This variety of preferences regarding church services reflects the fact that the worship landscape in Germany has become highly pluralized in the last few years. Since the 1990s there have been so-called "alternative" forms of worship in more and more parishes, sometimes known as "free-form services" or "Channel Two." These do not seek to replace the traditional, liturgical Sunday morning service, but instead to complement it. They ordinarily take place on Sunday evening. They appeal predominately to people who do not find the traditional forms of worship inviting—either in its

aesthetics or content—and they are especially appealing to those who have distanced themselves from the Church or feel little connection to it. These services are mostly designed around the search for orientation and meaning, around the experiencing of religion and of more open forms of community. They try to show the relevance of the Christian faith in the individual's life. Accordingly, they make a particular effort to remain comprehensible and do not assume that people will slowly grow into the worship. These services are usually prepared by a team, and they provide a range of opportunities for participation. Creative elements such as short skits, dance and one-on-one dialogue are typical, as is modern music, often performed by professionals performing contemporary songs. Such services try to appeal to the senses and to the emotions, standing in opposition to what could be considered a culture of more intellectually oriented services. In this way they are suited to today's experience-oriented society. These worship services are challenging the still dominant parochial logic of the German Church, according to which the local parish feels responsible for all the Church members within a specific geographic location. Instead such services presuppose an aesthetic choice made on the basis of a subjective conviction that says: "I'm going to the Church service whose structure appeals to me" instead of "I'm going to Sunday worship at my local parish."

### **Theological Considerations**

From the perspective of theological reflection, the current situation is ambivalent. On the one hand, the diversification of services confronts one problem of traditional worship services, namely that they are so strongly oriented toward a certain social group that they are made inaccessible to the majority of the membership. At least since the advent of these alternative forms of worship, it has become clear that the traditional service is really aimed at a certain target group that does not, in fact, live up to its ideal of being open to all Christians. In light of the Church's mission of communicating the Gospel to all the world and of supporting people in their faith and in their lives regardless of their social status, this is eminently important theologically. From this standpoint, the diversification of forms of worship ought to be redoubled, because the alternative forms still reach the youth only in a limited way, and they fail completely to reach disadvantaged social groups.

On the other hand, the diversification of services creates a situation that contributes to various social groups closing themselves off from one another, and it makes the experience of a community of Christians founded in Jesus Christ more elusive than ever. The idea of Sunday worship being the focal point of the congregation is farther beyond reach than ever. The pluralization of society and its thorough orientation toward the subject and toward his or her individual preferences puts church services in a precarious situation. Apparently there is now no form of worship that appeals to all Church members (or even to non-members) across social classes and across the spectrum of members' needs. Can practical theology not only recognize this, but can

it instead contribute something positive to the situation as well? Intensive empirical research seems the most sensible way to do this.

### **Intensified Empirical Research**

In recent years, a few sociological studies and a few practical-theological studies of participation in Church services have been carried out in the German-speaking countries. Their methods were either quantitatively oriented, or they surveyed Church members qualitatively about their preferences toward Church services and placed them into various "types," e.g., persons who participated in worship only at Christmas, persons who participated in worship only sporadically, and persons who participated in worship regularly (Roßner 2005, 264ff). Other studies focused on those who rejected worship, who thought positively about worship but personally preferred other activities and associations, and those who thought worship important (Martin 2007). These studies revealed that the preferences differed significantly between the groups.

As I delved deeper into this topic, I was astounded to find that no one has yet questioned churchgoers in detail about how they experience religious services, what elements are especially important to them and why, and what aspects are critical for people's attendance. I made this the goal of an empirical study currently in progress. My co-workers and I carried out 22 interviews with people from across social groups, age, sex, urban and rural settings, and East and West Germany, who regularly or occasionally attend Protestant Church services. I was explicitly not interested in classifying them or in discerning types, but wanted instead to listen closely and to understand the subjects' experiences, longings, and desires. We asked them about their subjective experience of the various elements of the worship services such as the sermon, readings, prayer, the blessing and music. We also asked them about such things as the importance of the others participating in the services, the role of habit, the importance of being greeted at the door and about what they expected of the minister. Currently I am evaluating the interviews and can only report some preliminary results. Already, we are gaining very interesting insights that could be helpful in addressing the problem I sketched previously.

1. The people we have interviewed have diverse aesthetic preferences. This becomes especially clear regarding music styles: for some the centuries-old, familiar songs in the hymnal are essential, while for others cheerful and contemporary songs are important ("...I especially like modern religious songs...with guitar, piano, [and] drums, because they hold so much vitality," *twenty-five year old male*). Some appreciate the traditional liturgy ("it has its routine, I'm familiar with it, I can own it and ... somehow that gives me security and orientation and clarity," *sixty-six year old male*). Other appreciate new elements ("I also like it when they try new things," *thirty-nine year old female*). However, approximately half of those questioned do not draw clear conclusions on these questions and cannot explicitly comment on the

various styles of worship ("they can go ahead and vary things up," *seventy year old female*). It is interesting that precisely those individuals who express flexibility with regard to the *kind* of church service demand that the service be "real" and "authentic," and that it provide an atmosphere corresponding to the content expressed ("for me style doesn't count as much as the fact that it is done with care. If I can hear the soul coming through, it's all good," *forty-seven year-old male*).

2. We found a similar situation regarding the sermon. For most of those questioned this is a very important part of their church experience. However, we find differences as well. For some the sermon must above all be comprehensible and not too long, while others want a solidly grounded presentation of biblical text ("a sermon is no pre-packaged event, with pretzels and cola. The meal served should be a challenging one," *sixty-six year-old male*). Almost unanimously, subjects say that the sermon must speak to them about their faith and about their lives, and they demand that it be relevant ("that I get something out of it that I can use in my day-to-day life," *twenty-five year-old male*). The great majority explicitly expect the sermon to offer critical reflection on how they lead their lives and not so much be a source of comfort, as is often assumed ("that [the sermon] gives inspiration on how it's possible to become a better person," *twenty-six year-old female*).

3. People reported various expectations as to the role of the minister, but here there is also surprising consensus. One example concerns the authenticity of the minister's presence and of their preaching which, for almost everyone, should exhibit "a really natural charisma. Nothing put on or forced" (*sixty-nine year-old female*). The lack of authenticity is also a point of criticism for some ("...I also have the impression, that they don't even know what they're saying. Because they've developed it from a theory, but aren't living it," *forty-seven year old male*).

4. Almost all those surveyed see the service as a way to connect to the essence of life, to God and to themselves. They seek a departure from the day-to-day and, at the same time, would like to gain strength and orientation for daily living ("somehow, you know, I get really torn away from it all and just get another perspective on my life, ... to be thankful again and again, you forget a lot, you know, how beautiful it all really is," *thirty-nine year old female*; "...that you leave every-day life outside and go into an environment that appeals to what's inside me," *thirty-five year-old female*).

5. Almost all those questioned highlighted the importance of the blessing at the end of the service. Interestingly, people interpret it in very different ways ("People who receive a blessing can pass it on to others," *eighty-two year old female*; "When the minister gives the blessing, you feel yourself to be a member of a community, of Christ's community," *twenty-five year-old male*; "It's such a nice way to round out the whole thing and ... that's what you take with you, you know, for the days to come," *forty year-old female*; "so that you can just come out feeling stronger,"

*twenty-seven year-old male*). The same element can be understood in very different ways, and yet be very meaningful for everyone.

6. Likewise there is a desire among all social groups and all age groups to find one's own self during the service and to receive something for one's own life ("...I like to be spoken to or touched, *fifty-nine year-old female*). There are many ways in which this can happen: through the welcome feeling that arises upon being greeted, through contents of the sermon that are relevant to one's life, through the familiarity of the others present, and especially through the music.

### **What Can Be Learned from This Study**

With all due caution, one important result that emerges from this study is that the variety of preferences and orientations toward Church worship services, while certainly present, is in fact quite relative. It is not surprising that Church-goers follow aesthetic criteria similar to those of their every-day lives. It is more surprising that, for many, these are *less important* than other factors that include: 1) an authentic atmosphere and an authentic organization of the service, 2) relevance to their own lives, 3) an experience of being spoken to in a way that touches and respects their authentic self, and 4) being inspired in their own lives and in their own faith. Many Church members apparently can find such content in various forms of worship. As to the reasons why people participate in so-called "alternative services," it is not uncommon to hear them say that the traditional liturgical services often do not meet these criteria. In the practical-theological debate about the Protestant Church in Germany right now, it is possible that the discussion of content of the contemporary worship is revolving too much around questions of formal diversification and plurality of aesthetic preferences. The new forms of church service do not only see themselves as "alternatives" with regard to form, but also claim to provide content that in general is not being offered in traditional Sunday morning services, e.g., they speak to people on a personal level, support them in their faith and in their lives, and be relevant. My study reveals a similar demand, but one expressed especially with reference to the traditional form of worship.

At the same time, the plurality of new styles and forms of worship is in no way meaningless, but can be interpreted as an indication of a movement toward worship that speaks to people beyond traditional worship forms and that shows them the value and provides motivation for going to church. Practical theology in Germany would be well served to support this movement by carefully attending to the participating subjects and their experience and by considering worship services more through the lens of what is important to people rather through a focus on the aesthetic form. Perhaps the whole of a worship service can be informed by the way(s) people have spoken in our interviews about the blessing, i.e., how one element is perceived and interpreted differently, but it is equally important to all.

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