

# The Evangelical Movement in Austria from 1945 to the Present: A Critical Appraisal

Frank Hinkelmann<sup>1</sup>

Martin Bucer Seminary International, Austria

Frank.Hinkelmann@om.org

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## Summary

*This essay examines the development of the Evangelical Movement in Austria from 1945 to the present. The history of the Evangelical Movement can be divided into four phases: The beginnings (1945-1961), which can be characterized above all by missionary work among ethnic German refugees of the World War II, a second phase from 1961-1981, which can be described as an internationalization of the Evangelical Movement especially through the work of North American missionaries. During this time new ways of evangelism were sought and also church planting projects were started. A third phase is characterized by a growing confessionalization and institutionalization of the Evangelical Movement. While free church congregation were increasingly taking on denominational contours, the evangelical movement as a whole began to increasingly establish its own institutions. The last phase since 1998 is characterized by the Evangelical Movement breaking out of isolation towards social and political acceptance.*

- 1 Frank Hinkelmann is president of Martin Bucer Seminary International and head of church history at the accreditation project Campus Danubia, Privatuniversität für Kirche und Gesellschaft in Vienna, Austria. He also serves as president of the European Evangelical Alliance. His main area of research is the history of evangelicalism in the German speaking world and Europe.

One can speak of an evangelical movement<sup>2</sup> in Austria only since 1945 (Hinkelmann, 2014). Although there existed some pietist groups and free churches connected to the Evangelical Alliance which held theological convictions generally in alignment with evangelicalism, only with the emergence of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in the USA at the beginning of the 1940s one can speak of an evangelical movement as such. This neo-evangelical movement, which was also a key driving force in the founding of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), would quickly gain influence in Europe.

### **The Beginning and the Dawn of the Evangelical Movement in Austria (1945–1961)**

As we examine the Austrian Evangelical Movement in its first phase between 1945 and 1961, we can identify three unique characteristics: a denominational diversity previously unknown, an evangelistic focus and initiative not previously experienced and a cooperation between different evangelical forces never experienced before in such intensity.

#### **An Unprecedented Denominational Diversity**

Who were the big players, the bearers of the Evangelical Movement in this early phase following World War II? Here we need to mention first the same key players who had already been active in the country before 1945, such as the pietistic groups around the “Austrian People’s Mission” (Österreichische Volksmission) and the “Christian Mission Association” (Christlicher Missionsverein) in Carinthia.

The “Volksmissionskreise” (people’s mission groups), which were formed mostly during the inter-war years through the evangelistic activities of the for-

2 I use the term ‘evangelical’ as a theological term for a movement which holds to the following beliefs: (1) the holy Scripture is the inspired word of God and binding for Christian teaching and Christian living; (2) the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the only basis for reconciliation between a holy God and sinful men; (3) conversion and new birth through faith in Jesus Christ form the initial point of a life with God (becoming a Christian), which is necessary for obtaining eternal salvation; (4) each Christian is called to be a follower of Jesus and to preach the Gospel in word and deed while living a life which follows the ethical measures (standards) of holy Scripture; (5) there is a fellowship of all Christian believers which surpasses confessional constraints while at the same time emphasizing the mandatory affiliation with a local congregation (Hinkelmann, 2017).

mer Lutheran pastor Max Monsky, continued to exist in a few cities, but with the exception of Vienna and Mödling, they were becoming increasingly independent and autonomous of their founder. Monsky's influence was soon to be replaced by that of another person who had been called from Germany to Austria by Monsky: Lydia Haman in Salzburg.

Haman had already headed up the People's Mission in Salzburg before World War II and remained there during the war. When the National Socialist dictatorship collapsed in 1945, completely new ministry opportunities opened up for Haman in American-occupied Salzburg. The following years saw the "heyday of the Salzburg People's Mission." Looking back on this time, Haman wrote:

The influx of refugees began, especially of ethnic Germans. Believers and non-believers alike were searching for the Word of Life. Often our hall could not contain the people. We really felt the move of the Spirit—miracles and signs happened, the sick became healthy and desperate people got new courage (1974, 45).

At the same time, the idea of a mission school was born. In October 1947, the first six young women began their two-year training at the new "Salzburg Mission School." The goal was to train young girls as teachers of religion, as church staff and for service in the different "Volksmission" hubs, as well as for cross-cultural mission and youth work. Only ten years later, 44 graduates of the Salzburg Missionary School were already in service, 24 of them as teachers of religion.

It would prove to be strategically important that Haman succeeded in securing the support of the Protestant Lutheran Church. With the successful foundation of the mission school and a sisterhood, Haman created a completely new type of unmarried deaconess. Instead of a focus on nursing, the missionary commitment was the main focus.

During these early years, Lydia Haman's sphere of activity soon expanded to include the Upper Austrian and Salzburg regions. The annual holiness conferences were held in Salzburg and a youth conference was started there too, later moving to other towns in Upper Austria. Hundreds of young people attended these conferences year after year and through all these different ministries, Haman became one of the formative leaders of the new evangelical movement.

As we turn to the free church camp, we first encounter those denominations which had already been in existence before the war. The Methodist Church had suffered greatly from the war and its membership had fallen to about 600 in 1945. As with most Protestant denominations, it was mainly ethnic German refugees who brought new life to the Austrian Methodist Church. On one hand, several Methodists among the refugees, including four pastors (such as Pastor Ernst Nausner, who had fled Poland with his eight children), contributed to reviving the Methodist congregations. On the other hand, these refugees

themselves began a holistic ministry in various refugee camps, and from these initiatives, congregations were later formed.

Along with the Methodists, the Baptists were a second denomination that continued the work of the preceding decades. They too experienced a strong growth of congregations in the first post-war years, partly due to the presence of ethnic German Baptist refugees, but also due to an evangelistic orientation in their congregational work. By 1950, some 150 baptisms had taken place in Vienna alone and two congregations had been planted in the Hütteldorf and Essling districts of Vienna, followed by congregations in Salzburg, Bad Ischl, Linz, and Graz.

The Pentecostal Movement profited the most from the influx of ethnic German refugees. Right after the war, the focus of the Pentecostal Movement was not in Vienna, but in Upper Austria and Salzburg where the majority of ethnic German refugees lived in camps. Many members of former German Pentecostal communities from Yugoslavia had fled to Austria. Soon these refugees were evangelizing and at the same time gathering the church members still known from their old homeland. Already on December 14, 1946 the “Federation of Free Christian Churches Philadelphia Austria” (Bund Freier Christengemeinden Philadelphia) was founded in Sattledt (Upper Austria).

The missionary concern for Austria among these young Pentecostal churches is all the more remarkable considering that many of them regarded Austria only as a stopover on their way to North America or Brazil. Contemporary witnesses describe these first post-war years as a time of revival. In summer 1947, 76 baptisms were conducted in Upper Austria and the number of congregation members rose to about 1,800 in the years of 1948–1949. However, the Pentecostals lost eight of their preachers, numerous families and even entire congregations to emigration in the early 1950s through emigration, and the number of church members was only 300 to 400 in 1954.

New in Austria in the early 1950s was the appearance of missionaries from the Wiedenest German Bible School, which had denominational links to the Open Brethren Churches in Germany. These missionaries sought to achieve three goals: “1. to bring the Gospel to the ignorant so that they may be saved. 2. to keep the saved together so that biblically oriented local churches grow. 3. to make local churches always responsible to the whole church” (Österreich 1959, 23). During the 1950s they founded three congregations in the state of Styria: in Graz (1952), Zeltweg (1956) and Knittelfeld (1958).

With the start of missionary work by the “Mennonite Brethren Churches” (see Podobri 2014) in Austria, a phenomenon that would be of great importance for the further development of the Evangelical Movement in Austria began. For the first time, North Americans discovered Austria as a mission field, which they

supported not only through financial aid and guest visits, but by sending church planters. Whereas during the 19th century, Europeans moved to North America to provide pastoral care for immigrants, a paradigm shift took place after World War II. North Americans and especially people in the theological orbit of the new National Association of Evangelicals, discovered Europe as a mission field. In many cases, they were driven by a theologically motivated sense of urgency. Already in 1946, the founder and director of the European Christian Mission, Gans Pertel Raud, wrote:

Let us not be rendered confused or idle because people in Europe have forms of religion. Without salvation through Christ Jesus set forth in the Holy Scriptures, they are unsaved. No provision of civilization, or learning, or religious profession is a substitute for the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (1946, 25).

In the same work, Raud (117) offered a detailed perspective on the spiritual status of Austria:

Turning to Protestantism, we find that the Lutheran Church has the most adherents. Evangelical believers in Christ constitute a scarcely perceptible number; and there is, consequently, little true gospel witness in the country. Austria for centuries has been without the Word of God and without the knowledge of evangelical Christianity, knowing only the religious formality and false hopes of the Roman Catholic system.

Like other denominations, the Mennonite Brethren Churches began their ministry in Austria by combining evangelistic work and social welfare in refugee camps. However, social welfare activity soon receded in favor of evangelism.

In addition to the previously mentioned denominational work, this time period also saw the first appearance of interdenominational foreign mission agencies in Austria (Hinkelmann 2014, 216ff). Their focus remained first and foremost on evangelism. The Mission for South-Eastern Europe (MSOE), later called *Evangeliumsdienst*, started its work in Carinthia in the early 1950s. A Dutch ministry called the International Fellowship of Christians (IGVC), later known simply as the “Dutch Mission,” arrived at Carinthia in 1955. This work was carried out by women, and in its first years it focused mainly on serving in the various refugee camps. Another foreign agency that became involved in Austria was the International Miners’ Mission from Britain, which sent Siegfried Leckebusch as a missionary to Eisenerz during the 1950s. He was followed in 1959 by the young missionary family of Graham and Jane Lange, who began a ministry among the miners in Ampflwang in Upper Austria.

## Unprecedented Evangelistic Focus and Initiatives

Evangelism is going back and forth in Austria. The Lord is breaking new ground. But there is too little evangelization, too aimlessly. And above all, there is still too little supporting or victorious certainty of faith behind it, too little authority based on His undisputed Word and the blood of the Redeemer, and too little sustained, determined, comprehensive prayer of the faithful (Meier-Schomburg 1950, 2).

An Austrian Lutheran pastor, Steffen Meier-Schomburg, spoke these words in a report at a conference on evangelism in Carinthia in 1950. In addition, eschatological and political convictions reinforced a widespread sense of missionary urgency: the doors were still open for the gospel but nobody knew how long they would remain open, especially as the Cold War and fears of communism cast their shadow over Europe (Krabbendam 2019, 9-16). One mission advocate wrote:

The doors in Austria are still wide open. The last elections have shown, however, that they can quickly close again. Whoever does nothing for Austria today, when the time of grace of this country will have expired, will think of the word of God in 1 Peter 4:17. But let us make use of the day of salvation! (Lorenz 1956, 18).

The language used in reports to supporters and prayer partners often had a military tone, such as “Austria is before us to be conquered for the Lord” (de Wilde 1952, 1). Missionaries saw themselves as part of a spiritual warfare being fought not only in the visible world but also in the invisible world (Lorenz 1954, 14; Renuš Czeskleba and Fritz Krause 1955, 18). Accordingly, it is not surprising that reports during this time repeatedly referred to a sense of spiritual darkness affecting Austria (Lorenz 1957, 23).

The evangelical movement of the 1950s was typified less by theological reflection on evangelism than by the actual carrying out of evangelism. Street evangelism, Bible corporations, a tent truck mission, large-scale tract distribution campaigns, and evangelistic crusades were high on the agenda during this first phase of the evangelical movement in Austria, with a special emphasis on war refugees.

## Unprecedented Cooperation in Evangelical Circles

In addition to denominational diversity and an evangelistic penetration of the country, the aspect of cooperation beyond denominational boundaries was becoming increasingly important. The Evangelical Alliance gained prominence as a platform for evangelical agencies, churches and denominations. Its statement of faith provided a sustainable denominator which enabled cooperation between Christians of different confessional backgrounds. Increasingly, it also provided

a platform for joint evangelistic activities. Missionaries coming from countries such as Germany and the UK often knew the Evangelical Alliance from their home countries and liked to tie in with such interdenominational cooperation.

In the mid-1950s, the Evangelical Alliance was joined by a new initiative, which aimed at placing full-time Christian staff in Austria across denominations: the Reichsgottes-Arbeiter-Tagung (RAT), launched by Lydia Haman in 1955. As this effort became established, it gave evangelicals serving in independent ministries, churches, and agencies a place for getting to know each other, networking, and mutual encouragement. The RAT would function for more than 50 years (Hinkelmann 2014, 247ff.).

The growth of the evangelical movement in Austria, however, was not purely a success story. The beginning of the 1950s saw a split between Pentecostals, on one hand, and pietists and other evangelical denominations that had a traditional antipathy towards the Pentecostal movement (Hinkelmann 2014, 240ff). Conditions in Germany and the so-called “Berlin Declaration” leading to a split between Pentecostals and other evangelical groups, also had unfortunate impacts on Austria.

### **Internationalization of the Evangelical Movement in Austria (1961–1981)**

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Evangelical Movement developed further, with multiple areas of focus. Both established and new means of evangelism were applied, and many new mission agencies and ministries coming alongside existing ones. In particular, new interdenominational North American agencies began to send church planters to Austria, playing a key role in the formation of independent evangelical congregations during this period.

#### **Proven and New Ways of Evangelism**

Mission and evangelism continued to play a strategic role in Austrian evangelicalism. During the first 15 years after World War II, the emphasis was on a comprehensive evangelistic penetration of the country, but a change of strategy took place at the beginning of the 1960s. Helmut Funck explained in 1975:

The years 1960–1970 are years in which evangelism on a larger scale was possible. There was no lack of detailed work, and evangelism continued to be a struggle for the individual. But now the opportunities for large-scale evangelism are opening up (Funk [sic!] 1975).



The first large gospel campaign took place in Vienna in 1961; it was a “Crusade of Faith” run by the German evangelist, Anton Schulte, founder and director of Neues Leben (New Life). At the invitation of the Vienna Evangelical Alliance, Schulte conducted an evangelistic crusade from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September to the 15<sup>th</sup> of October in Vienna’s main City Hall with three objectives (Hinkelmann 2014, 292ff.): “(1) to win people who are far away to believe in Christ; (2) the revival and deepening of local communities; (3) an impressive testimony in the whole city” (Zedlacher 1961, 6).

Denominational and evangelical magazines at home and abroad reported in advance and afterwards about this event, which in many respects exceeded everything that had been done so far. The advertising budget alone amounted to at least Deutsche Mark (DM) 54,000, plus some DM 25,000 for the rental of Vienna City Hall. Invitations were sent to all 760,000 Viennese households, and each one “contained a clear Christ testimony” (Feldzug des Glaubens 1961, 6). Also, a tram ran through Vienna with advertising during the crusade. The total number of visitors was around 50,000, with the closing event attracting the highest attendance at around 4,000. Several hundred people sought pastoral help and about 250 attended a follow-up meeting with Anton Schulte on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. In addition, 14,455 Bibles were distributed and sold during these weeks.

The Vienna “Crusade of Faith” was the starting signal for numerous further crusades during the following years in Salzburg, Graz and Linz. Other well-known German evangelists were also beginning to hold evangelistic meetings in Austria. In October 1962, Rev. Wilhelm Busch spoke on three evenings to a total of 1,700 visitors in the St. Pölten town hall, followed by meetings in Linz. Rev. Kurt Heimbucher from Nuremberg, later president of the Gnadauer Verband für Gemeinschaftspflege und Evangelisation (Gnadauer Association for Fellowship and Evangelism), regularly came to Austria for evangelistic meetings during the 1960s and 1970s. Beginning in the late 1960s, the German tent evangelist Dr. Gerhard Bergmann spoke at large-scale evangelistic meetings in Austria, including Linz and Salzburg in 1969, Vöcklabruck in 1971, Steyr in 1972 and Salzburg again in 1976. Klaus Eickhoff, later founder and director of the Lutheran Agency for Evangelism and Church Development also came to Graz for the first time in the 1960s.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the emergence of numerous new approaches, forms and strategies of evangelism. For example, music was introduced in new ways. In 1967, concerts were conducted in Judenburg and Knittelfeld, at which the tenor baritone Franz Knee performed arias, chorales and ‘gospel songs’ while giving testimony to his personal faith in between. Films also found favour as a new form of evangelistic work, especially with the Billy Graham Evangelistic



Association now producing films. For example, in 1973 there were 268 screenings, which were attended by about 11,500 people, mostly youth. One year later, this number grew to almost 15,000 spectators.

In 1965, the Missionswerk Neues Leben carried out a literature campaign in Vienna, which was amongst the “most difficult and laborious work” (*Literaturfeldzug in Wien* 1961, 6) the agency had ever done. One hundred fifty people distributed an evangelistic magazine under the title *Neues Leben* (New Life) to all 570,000 households in the city.

New impulses in the area of literature evangelism were started, especially with the founding of the Austrian branch of Every Home for Christ in 1973 under the German name *Evangelium in Jedes Haus* (EIJH) (Hinkelmann 2014, 305-308 & 321-323). As its first major campaign, with the help of 100 to 120 Christians from Linz, an evangelistic distribution tract accompanied by an invitation to evangelistic meetings held by the German mission agency Janz team was distributed to all 104,000 households in Linz, Traun and Freistadt in November 1974. Between April and November 1975, 270,800 households were reached, and 541,600 printed messages were distributed across Austria. Three more large projects were carried out in 1976 and 1977: *Carinthia 76*, *Kefas* and *Project People in Responsibility*.

Overall, the evangelistic work performed by EIJH in the 1970s was remarkable. Within three years of the ministry’s founding, more than 50% of all Austrian households received an evangelistic tract. By 1980, this figure had risen to 68.5%. In the year 1980 alone, 159,402 households received a tract, up from 106,411 in 1979. The total number of tracts distributed by the end of 1980 was 3,530,272.

## **Proven and New Church Planting Initiatives**

The 1960s saw the beginning of increased missionary efforts through numerous new agencies starting ministry in Austria. Above all, the North American agencies such as Greater Europe Mission and The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM) began to send missionaries to Austria, thereby fostering an internationalization of the Austrian evangelical movement. TEAM reached its peak in 1977 with 26 missionaries and church planters in the greater Vienna area.

William L. Wagner, former pastor of the Baptist congregation in Salzburg and himself a missionary of the Mission Board of the US Southern Baptist Convention, estimated that over 300 foreign missionaries affiliated with 43 different ministries were active in Austria in 1977, most of whom working and independently of any denominational attachment (Wagner 1978, 103-105).

At the same time, national Austrian ministries such as *Evangeliumsroundfunk* (ERF-TWR) or the *Österreichische Studentenmission* (ÖSM-IFES) were founded.

In place of the Salzburg Mission Agency, which slipped into insignificance

due to the death of its founder Lydia Haman in 1977 and her idiosyncratic succession arrangements, another more recent arrival gained strength, focusing on the Lutheran pietistic congregations: the Missionsgemeinschaft der Fackelträger—Schloss Klaus’ (Torchbearers). This organization would focus on holding retreats and courses for teenagers around the time of their confirmation classes.

In summary, the 1960s and 1970s featured a church planting movement of Independent Evangelical Free churches, initiated mainly by foreign mission agencies, while within the Lutheran pietistic congregations the question of church growth came more and more to the fore. As a result, new evangelical congregations were emerging in larger cities as well as in some district towns. Especially in urban areas, an increasing secularization took place which helped these evangelical church planting efforts as they met with a thoroughly positive response. Whereas most of the few churches planted between 1945 and 1960 served refugees of World War II, now for the first-time congregations were being planted amongst Austrian nationals.

## **Growing Confessionalism and the Institutionalization of the Evangelical Movement in Austria (1981–1998)**

Three keywords describe the development of the evangelical movement during the 1980s and 1990s: consolidation, confessionalism and institutionalization.

### **A Growing Confessionalism**

In the autumn of 1981, a Committee of Evangelical Congregations in Austria (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Evangelikaler Gemeinden Österreichs or ARGEGÖ) was founded (Hinkelmann 2014, 431ff). Although the ARGEGÖ saw itself neither as a federation of Evangelical churches nor as an association representing evangelical Christians, but only as a working group of free churches, the foundation of this organization contributed to a narrowing of the term “evangelical.” The name (which intentionally left out the descriptive attribute “free church”), along with the organization’s statement of faith, implied that only free-church congregations with a similar view of Scripture were to be regarded as “evangelical.”

In the following years the ARGEGÖ grew rapidly, and its growth was reflected in its steadily increasing number of activities. Besides an annual training week with up to 200 participants, other conferences, such as an annual youth conference at Pentecost, became permanent activities with attendance of between 300 and 900 participants.

There are several reasons why the evangelical free church movement moved towards greater confessionalism during this period. First, by this time—in contrast to 1960 or 1970—there were independent evangelical congregations scattered across the whole country. Meanwhile, the evangelical-pietistic wing within the Lutheran Church lacked, at least from the mid-1970s onwards, the leading figures of the preceding decades.

Statistics indicate the extremely rapid growth of independent evangelical churches during the 1980s “The total number of members increased by 230%, the number of congregations by 210% and the number of clergy by 120%” (Lawson 1991, 8). Whereas existing denominations such as the Pentecostals, Baptists, and Mennonites experienced only slow growth, the independent evangelical congregations recently founded by foreign missionaries doubled in number within a decade, from about 70 in 1980 to more than 150 by 1990, including those describing themselves as charismatic or Pentecostal. In the same period, the number of people attending church services in these congregations rose from just under 1,900 in 1980 to just under 4,300. While the average Sunday church attendance per congregation remained less than 30 throughout the decade, it was the number of new congregations which led to growth.

During the 1980s, most church planting projects involved groups somehow linked to the ARGEGÖ (conservative evangelicals), but this situation changed fundamentally in the next decade. The 1990s saw churches of neo-charismatic character emerging throughout the country, including several Vineyard churches, churches of the Foursquare movement, churches of the South African His People Movement<sup>7</sup> and house churches. Five of these newly established charismatic congregations later joined together to form a new denomination called Elaia Christengemeinden (Elaia Christian Churches). In addition, both the Baptist Union and the Pentecostal movement experienced particular strong growth during the 1990s due to an influx of Romanian migrants who had settled in Austria since the mid-1980s and formed their own Romanian-speaking congregations within the confederations. In addition, with the arrival of the Pentecostal Church of God (affiliated with a denomination based in Cleveland, Tennessee, USA), additional Romanian-speaking congregations formed another denomination.

The second half of the 1980s witnessed the first of several conflicts between the leadership of the Lutheran Church in Austria and parts of the evangelical movement. The resulting sharp confrontations strengthened and accelerated the evangelical free churches’ tendency towards confessionalism. The Protestant Lutheran church leadership began to threaten legal action against evangelical congregations that were using the term “evangelisch” (Protestant) in their self-designation, since the Lutheran Church claimed to hold the legal right to this term (Hinkelmann 2014, 453ff.). Beginning in autumn 1987, several evangelical

congregations were forced to refrain from using “evangelisch” as part of their name.<sup>3</sup> The fact that this dispute was more polemical than fact-based can be seen in a letter from the Lutheran Church’s chancellor to the pastor of the evangelical congregation in Kitzbühel, in which the chancellor referred to a “legally non-existent ‘Protestant-free church congregation,’ which is obviously a product of your imagination” (Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat, unpublished letter of E.O. 1988). He also described the evangelical church in Baden as an “evangelical sect” (Letter of E.O. 1987). (Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat, unpublished letter 1987)

Despite international protests and mediation efforts, no compromise could be reached. The evangelical independent congregations concerned decided against legal action, giving up the term “evangelisch” (Protestant) and instead identifying a new term—“evangelical” (evangelical)—as a self-designation. Adopting this name had actually been a suggestion of the Lutheran chancellor, and also of the Lutheran Bishop Dieter Knall, who had written in June 1989, “Already the term evangelical is unchallenged” (Letter of E.O. 1989). (Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat, unpublished letter 1989) However, the Lutheran Church soon turned against this word as well. When in 1991 the Free Church in Wörgl wanted to officially register as “Evangelikale freikirchliche Gemeinde Wörgl” (Evangelical Free Church of Wörgl), the Security Directorate of the Federal Province of Tyrol, through the Federal Ministry for Education and the Arts, asked the Lutheran Church for an assessment. The Lutheran High Church Council responded with a remarkable line of argumentation:

American conditions in the church sector are to be prevented and not encouraged. ... The term ‘evangelical’ covers a certain direction of piety in the Protestant Church and corresponds in a certain form to new Pietism, a church grouping which has been present in the Protestant Church since its existence. The term ‘evangelical’ is just as misleading as is the term ‘free church’ (Letter of E.O. 1991). (Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat, unpublished letter 1991)

Parallel to the local registration of an evangelical congregation in Tyrol, several Evangelical Free churches endeavored in spring 1991 to constitute the Bund Evangelikaler Gemeinden in Österreich (Federation of Evangelical Churches in Austria or BEGÖ). On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1991, a ten-member committee of proponents submitted an application for approval of an association under the name “Federation of Evangelical Churches in Austria” to the Department for Association and Assembly Affairs of the Security Directorate in Vienna. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, however, the Federal Police Directorate of Vienna prohibited the founding

3 In Germany and Switzerland there is no copyright on the term “evangelisch”, therefore it is used e.g. by both Baptist and Evangelical Free Churches as part of their name as they don’t want to use the term “evangelical”.

of the association—in Austria the registration of an NGO had to be done through the police directorate. A lengthy dispute followed, but just under a year later, thanks to a favorable decision by the Ministry of the Interior on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1992, the foundation of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Austria finally received its registration. For the first time, the word “evangelical” appeared in the official name of an Austrian association, and this event also contributed to a denominational remodeling of the term “evangelical” in Austria. By reviewing *A Handbook for Missionaries in Austria*, published by this denomination in 1998, one can easily observe that evangelical members of the Lutheran church as well as charismatic and Pentecostal believers were no longer being counted as evangelicals. The term “evangelical”—or—so the manual seemed to indicate—meant that one was a member of an evangelical congregation of certain theological coinage, namely those connected with ARGEGÖ and BEGÖ. (Eichinger 1998b, 7 & Eichinger 1998a, 98).

At the same time, tensions within the Lutheran Church became apparent. In 1988 and 1990 respectively, pastors Ralf Miro of Gloggnitz and Helmuth Eiwen of Neunkirchen left the Lutheran Church. Both resignations must be placed in the context of the resignation of the German minister Wolfram Kopfermann from the pastorate of the Lutheran Church in Hamburg in September of 1988. The two Austrian pastors were key leaders of the charismatic renewal movement within the Lutheran Church until their time of resignation; Eiwen even presided over it until 1989. While Miro moved to the Anskarkirche Hamburg, newly founded by Kopfermann, Eiwen remained in Lower Austria and founded his own independent charismatic congregation, the Ichthys Gemeinde, which settled in Wiener Neustadt a few years later.

Not surprisingly, the statements by the Lutheran Church on these departures were extremely critical, especially regarding Eiwen as he continued to minister in the country. Further internal disputes broke out in the early 1990s concerning the director of the Werk für Evangelisation und Gemeindeaufbau (Agency for Evangelism and Church Growth), Rev. Klaus Eickhoff, showing that evangelicals within the Lutheran Church were increasingly under attack during those years.

## **Consolidation**

Along with sharp conflicts, we can also ascertain a growing consolidation in the evangelical movement since the early 1980s. This again has been especially true among the independent evangelical groups. The consolidation can be observed in three areas: theological education and training, leadership development, and a trend towards owning one's church premises.

During this time, two training institutions were established: Biblische Ausbil-

dung vor Ort (Theological Education by Extension; BAO), later with the Evangelikale Akademie as its academic branch, and the Ampflwang/Wallsee Bible School, which later developed into the Institut für Theologie and Gemeindebau (Institute for Theology and Church Development; ITG). In addition, special emphasis was placed on the training of lay leaders.

Also, churches that had been planted during the 1970s and 1980s and had previously either rented church premises or met for Sunday services in public halls began to seek their own buildings as they moved beyond their pioneering phase.

A legislative change in the late 1990s was of great socio-political importance for the development of the evangelical movement in Austria. The Office of Culture in the Ministry of Education, responsible for all questions of culture and thus religion, introduced a new legal registry for denominations, under which for the first time, new religious groups could gain a legal status between that of a mere association (Verein) and a recognized religious confession (Hinkelmann 2016, 177-179). When independent evangelical churches and denominations had tried to obtain recognition as a church or religious confession in the past, they had always failed. Now they could register as a religious denomination.

This new law faced strong opposition, mainly because many felt that it established a two-class system of religious organizations. However, the Austrian Parliament passed the Federal Law on the Legal Personality of Religious Denominations on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1997 (Börner 1998, I). On the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1998, the Federation of Baptist Churches in Austria, the Pentecostal Movement (Freie Christengemeinden) and the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Austria (BEGÖ) were granted the status of state-registered religious denominations. Though the criticisms of the law were well grounded, nevertheless the somewhat second-tier recognition granted to evangelical denominations was better than anything they had received previously. In addition, the public perception of these denominations became more positive in conjunction with their enhanced legal status.

## **Institutionalization**

An increasing institutionalization of the Evangelical Movement during the 1980s and 1990s can be seen in the growing number of independent, evangelical, and interdenominational agencies focusing on special target groups (to some extent, competing with traditional church institutions). For example, three ministries committed to the promotion of marriage and family were founded: Family Life Mission, Team F—New Life for Families, and Christian Family Work. In the area of children and youth work, in addition to Scripture Union and Child Evangelism

Fellowship, which had been active in Austria for many years while only registering themselves as associations during the 1980s, the 1990s saw the formation of new ministries like Arbeitsgemeinschaft Bibelorientierter Jungscharen (an Austrian ministry focusing on children and teenagers, closely linked to the ARGEGÖ). In addition, the various evangelical denominations and the ARGEGÖ had their own ministries for children and youth.

Similar developments occurred in the health sector. Pentecostals initiated drug rehabilitation work, a group of Christian medical doctors in Austria (ARCHA-E) was formed, and ISODOS offered a Christian network in the field of health and life counselling.

In the media sector, Christian Media Production (CMP) was established alongside the Evangeliumsrundfunk (TWR). In addition, the *Allianzspiegel*, first published by the Austrian Evangelical Alliance in 1986, became the main source of information about evangelical life in Austria.

In the field of theological education and training, BAO and the Ampflwang/Wallsee Bible School have already been discussed above. Additionally in 1984, the Leonhard Kaiser Seminary in Linz was established by Lutheran evangelicals, while the Pentecostal movement created both the International Correspondence Institute (ICI) and a Bible institute.

### **Breaking Out of Isolation: The Evangelical Movement Becomes a Relevant Interdenominational Power (1998 to the Present)**

During the 1990s, a slow but continuous breaking up of the confessional camps within the Austrian Evangelical Movement took place, due to several causes. On one hand, the role and significance of ARGEGÖ declined, mainly because of the growth of the Federation of Evangelical Churches (BEGÖ), which had expanded slowly but steadily by admitting new churches as members while also building up its own denominational structure. Many member churches of the BEGÖ had been key players in the development of the ARGEGÖ but now decided to make the BEGÖ a higher priority. As a result, the number of fully independent congregations within the ARGEGÖ decreased. As the number of member congregations from Baptist and Mennonite denominations remained low, the ARGEGÖ was notably weakened.

Parallel to this development, the Austrian Evangelical Alliance overcame its crisis of the 1980s (Hinkelmann 2012, 167-205). In the 1990s the Alliance's board finally took on a long-running conflict: the question of evangelical attitudes towards Pentecostals and the charismatic movement. For the first time in the history of the evangelical movement in Austria, the Evangelical Alliance, as an



umbrella organization of evangelicals, expressed an openness towards Pentecostals. At the Council Meeting of the ÖEA in spring 1996, two pastors from the Pentecostal movement were admitted for the first time as members of the Alliance Council, and in 1998 the first Pentecostal pastor was elected to the ÖEA's board of directors. At the same time, a theological handbook was developed that defined disputed questions with regard to cooperation with Charismatics and Pentecostals.

At the same time, Lutherans once again became increasingly involved in the governing bodies of the Evangelical Alliance, so that it was clearly no longer appropriate to classify the Evangelical Alliance as a free church movement (as it had been previously). With well over 100 partner organizations, some of which are under Roman Catholic leadership while at the same time close to evangelicals, along with various denominations and a number of individual congregations from still other denominations as members, the Evangelical Alliance now claims to be a broadly representative body of evangelicals in Austria.

The 1990s also saw a new unity movement coming alongside the Evangelical Alliance: "Der Weg der Versöhnung—Runder Tisch Österreich" (The Way of Reconciliation—Austrian Round Table (WdV) (Wieland 2005). The WdV arose out of the desire of some leaders, especially those of charismatic affiliation, for more unity and a stronger common witness, as they had experienced in the Jesus in the Marches of 1992 and 1994 in Vienna. About 4,000 Christians participated in each of these marches, but only a few from groups connected with the ARGEGÖ were involved; therefore, the leaders saw the need for a broader foundation for evangelical cooperation. The WdV was founded in December 1993, with the Roman Catholic deacon Johannes Fichtenbauer playing a key role. Fichtenbauer had been appointed by the Archbishop of Vienna, Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, as official liaison to the free churches and the evangelical movement.

Subsequently, a roundtable was set up and it was decided that one person from each denominational grouping represented should be elected to the WdV's executive committee. The following five groupings were identified: free church/charismatic, Lutheran, Evangelical/free church, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal. In addition, one person was placed on the executive committee to represent independent ministries. The WdV held annual conferences, but for years it encountered great reservations amongst more conservative evangelicals, who struggled with the inclusion of both charismatic groups and Roman Catholic believers. This situation would change only in recent years.

In 2009, leaders of the BEGÖ and the Pentecostal movement met for the first time, to get to know each other better and discuss collaboration in their quest for full legal recognition as religious communities. In the same year, the WdV invited representatives of several evangelical free church denominations, the Austrian

branch of Iustitia et Pax, and the Evangelical Alliance to join them in considering possible ways to seek full legal recognition (Hinkelmann 2016, 149). In a four-year process, and with major support from the chairman of the Roman Catholic Austrian Bishops' Conference, Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, mutual trust between the different denominations was built and a way was found for the 'Free Churches in Austria' (FKÖ) to finally be fully recognized by the Austrian government in August 2013 (Jung 2018, 101-109 & Schwarz 2016, 215-234). The FKÖ was formed of five denominations: the Baptist Union, the Association of Evangelical Free Churches, the Pentecostal movement, the Mennonite Free Church and Elaia Christengemeinde, a charismatic denomination. Although not all members and congregations of FKÖ would call themselves evangelical—especially within the Baptist Union—the vast majority of FKÖ participants can be identified as such.

The full legal recognition of the FKÖ has also helped evangelicals in Austria to gain a public voice and recognition alongside the Evangelical Alliance. In addition, today evangelicals are recognized across the country as a theologically defined movement that crosses denominational borders. Considering that 75 years ago, in the Evangelical Movement's early days after World War II, it was perceived as foreign and often as a cult, this is quite an impressive development.

## Conclusion

Within a short period of 70 years, the Austrian Evangelical Movement has grown from a few free church congregations plus some few pietistic groups to a movement representing most of the free churches in Austria, which in the last decade received full legal recognition by the government. In addition, some pietistic and evangelical groups remained within the Evangelische Kirche. This growth is mainly due to the committed missionary work of foreign missionaries from other European countries and North America, which at the beginning put their main focus on ministry among refugees of World War II, but during the 1960s to the 1980s put an emphasis on evangelism and mission among nominal Christians in Austria. This led to some significant growth in the numbers of free church congregations during the 1980s and 1990s while in recent years the focus was put on establishing their own structures. And on became evangelical cooperation beyond denominational boundaries.

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### Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz untersucht die Entwicklung der Evangelikalen Bewegung in Österreich von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart. Dabei lässt sich die Geschichte der Evangelikalen

Bewegung in vier Phasen einteilen: Die Zeit der Anfänge (1945-1961), die sich vor allem durch eine missionarische Arbeit unter volksdeutschen Flüchtlingen des Zweiten Weltkriegs charakterisieren lässt, einer zweiten Phase von 1961-1981, die sich durch eine Internationalisierung der Evangelikalen Bewegung vor allem durch nordamerikanische Missionare beschreiben lässt, in der neue Wege der Evangelisation gesucht und Gemeindegründungsprojekte begonnen werden. Die dritte Phase zeichnet sich durch eine wachsende Konfessionalisierung und Institutionalisierung der Evangelikalen Bewegung aus. Während die freikirchliche Gruppen zunehmend denominationelle Konturen annehmen, bilden sich innerhalb der Evangelikalen Bewegung in ihrer Gesamtheit zunehmend eigene Institutionen heraus. Die letzte Phase seit 1998 ist durch ein Auf- und Ausbrechen der Evangelikalen Bewegung aus einer Isolation hin zu einer gesellschaftlichen und politischen Akzeptanz charakterisiert.