

German Protestants renounce efforts to convert Jews

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue

Germany's main Protestant church mostly gave up efforts to convert Jews in the decades following the Holocaust, and closing that chapter should have been a formality.

But the Evangelical Church in Germany, or EKD, made up of 20 regional Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, did not officially abandon the Judenmission, or mission to the Jews. And small groups of evangelicals in a few member churches have long opposed an official statement against conversion, despite calls from Jewish groups to issue one.

Now the 23-million-member EKD has officially renounced its mission to convert Jews to Christianity. At its annual meeting in November in Magdeburg, a resolution passed unanimously saying that Christians "are not called to show Israel the path to God and his salvation."

Since God never renounced the covenant with the Jewish people, they do not need to embrace the new Christian covenant to be saved, the resolution said.

"All efforts to convert Jews contradict our commitment to the faithfulness of God and the election of Israel," the resolution read. That Christians see Jesus as their savior and Jews don't is "a fact we leave up to God," it said.

Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, welcomed the resolution, which his group had been urging the EKD to pass for several years: "This clear renunciation of the Mission to the Jews means very much for the Jewish community. With it, the EKD recognizes the suffering that the forced conversion of many Jews over the centuries has caused."

The EKD has worked for the past decade preparing for events to commemorate the Reformation's 500th anniversary.

Although Martin Luther initially expressed concern for the plight of Jews in medieval Europe and hoped to bring them into the Christian fold, Luther changed tack later in

life and in a treatise titled “On the Jews and Their Lies” urged his followers to burn down Jews’ homes and synagogues and confiscate their money.

The move to renounce the Judenmission was part of the EKD’s drive to deal with this strain of anti-Semitism in its history so that the Reformation anniversary events could focus on Luther’s other legacies.

The EKD last year denounced the “undisguised hatred of Jews” in Luther’s writings and acknowledged that his anti-Semitism had inspired the Nazis centuries later.

In fact, the EKD broke with traditional theological anti-Semitism in 1950 by declaring that God’s covenant with the Jews was still valid. But it wasn’t until the 1990s that most member churches came out clearly against evangelization efforts.

The EKD wasn’t alone in changing its approach slowly. The Roman Catholic Church renounced its theological anti-Semitism in 1965 with the pioneering document *Nostra aetate* at the Second Vatican Council. It took another 50 years before the Vatican issued a clear statement last December that it “neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews.”

In Germany, internal debates leading up to the recent resolution focused on how clear the renunciation of the Judenmission should be. The final text denounced efforts to convert Jews but did not specifically mention Messianic Jews, who accept Jesus as savior but who are not regarded as Jews by mainstream Judaism.

“The secret of God’s revelation includes both the expectation of the return of Christ in splendor and the confidence that God will save his first-called people,” the resolution said.

Some participants felt the declaration should have renounced the Messianic Jews and worried that the failure to mention them meant the EKD was keeping a door open to encourage Jews to convert.

Schuster, the Jewish leader, said he understood the renunciation of evangelization “also applies to the so-called Messianic Jews, who are not Jews.”

Detlef Klahr, a senior church official, told journalists that evangelization of Jews was clearly ruled out by the resolution. —Religion News Service

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