

Evangelical churches boom in Switzerland

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Sale of Swiss churches

Selling unwanted church buildings to other religious communities or individuals is no longer a taboo in much of Europe. In Switzerland the practice is spreading, too.

"Welcome to my new house," says Philippe Saltarski, with a big smile, as he shows off his home in Le Locle, near Neuchâtel. Traces of its past are still much in evidence. In between a perilously leaning stereo system and a huge church candle, are stacked rows of wooden benches, which are destined for the rubbish tip. An old organ silently stands in the corner. Light shines through the stained glass windows, adding to the eerie atmosphere. Until a few months ago this building was a church belonging to the local New Apostolic community. Saltarski bought it for SFr280,000 after the New Apostolic church decided to sell, as its congregation dwindled. The Protestant St Leonhard Church in St Gallen experienced the same fate in 2005 when it was sold to an architect for SFr400,000. Renovations would have run into several millions of francs, which was deemed too expensive, especially as the church was no longer being used for services.

This trend is becoming more and more common in countries including Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, where former churches have been converted into museums, libraries, cinemas, discos and even mosques. But it still remains relatively rare in Switzerland, where the recognised denominations – Catholic, Protestant and Old Catholic – are all supported by church tax levied on a cantonal or parish basis.

However, over the past three decades congregation sizes in the two main denominations have been declining. The Catholic church has to cope with a shortage of priests, too. It has established guidelines for the sale of churches. Priority has been given to communities with similar pastoral missions – as in the case of the Capuchin monastery in Arth, central Switzerland, which was sold to the Syrian Orthodox Church. If this is not possible, secular societies may also buy, but only if the cultural and social aims conform to Christian values. This means no churches will be transformed into discos. Mosques are also ruled out as the guidelines do not allow the sale of churches to other religions.

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*Nicht bis ins Tiefste, dass dich nicht graut,
Darfst du in Herzen und Himbeeren gucken.
Im süßen Safte ungeschaut
Sollst Falschheit und Würmer hinunterschlucken.*

Arthur Schnitzler

Evangelical churches boom in Switzerland

In Switzerland, evangelical churches attract twice as many worshippers every Sunday as traditional Protestant churches. Olivier Favre, pastor in a charismatic church and sociologist of religion at Lausanne University, says the evangelicals are successful because they understand people's needs. He sees no contradiction between his role as a detached observer and a committed man of faith.

According to Favre, the key strength of the Pentecostal movement is the idea that God intervenes in people's everyday lives. In our very individualised society, where many are alone, the idea of a personal relationship with God, belief that he answers prayers, that he can heal the sick and effect miracles meets a spiritual need. In addition, the very modern style of worship attracts young people.

This development also owes a lot to migration and the growth of so-called "ethnic" churches, mainly in cities. These churches operate as an entry point for African and South American migrants. They are places that offer essential support as well as the language and music of their home countries.

Evangelical language is evolving and adapting to actual needs. It places less emphasis on sin and repentance and more on personal growth and development. The evangelicals place strong emphasis on personal and spiritual gifts. The individual can express himself through his talents and abilities and speak out in meetings. In this sense they have adapted to modern times.

The evangelicals are often accused of simplifying their message or reality. This is true as far as understanding of the gospel is concerned. The approach is simple, the message clear and direct: to be saved you have to believe in Jesus Christ. Yet, in the socio-cultural make-up of the evangelicals you also find intellectuals and highly qualified people.

Surveys in Switzerland have shown that evangelicals lean to the right. One vote in two goes to one of two evangelical parties, the rightwing Federal Democratic Union and the moderate Swiss Evangelical People's Party. From an individual moral standpoint, the evangelicals are conservative, but very progressive on social issues such as ecology, with a simple respect for creation.

According to a recent study conducted as part of the National Research Programme, "Religions, the State and Society", 9 per cent attend religious ceremonies each week. Of these, 38 per cent attend Catholic churches, 29 per cent attend evangelical churches, 14 per cent attend Protestant churches and 11 per cent attend Muslim services. Researchers highlighted the fact that evangelical religious services attracted twice as many people each weekend than Protestant churches. Just two per cent of Swiss people are members of an evangelical church.