

# Hansa Conference

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## HEINZ-EWALD GATTMANN

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After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the Hansa Conference was restructured in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the following have been ranked with the northern region of Germany: Free and Hanseatic cities of Hamburg (1,787,000 inhabitants), Schleswig-Holstein<sup>2</sup> (2,859,000 inhabitants), and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (1,612,000 inhabitants). As of 2015, its population totaled 6,258,000, including 2,617 Seventh-day Adventists in forty-three organized congregations.

Historically, the areas of today's Hansa Conference belonged to various Adventist organizations such as the Northern German, the Oder, and the Pommern Conferences. Geographical and political reorganizations in the north of Germany made these changes of affiliation necessary until 1949 and led to the dissolution of these conferences. In 1949, the territory belonged to two different nations, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). This separation became unnecessary when the GDR was dissolved on October 3, 1990, and thus the Hansa Conference was established in its present form.

Membership development has changed since the beginnings of Seventh-day Adventist work in the north of Germany. While the number of its members rose at the beginning of the 1930s, there was a noticeable decline in members during the era of the Third Reich of National Socialists (1933-1945). After the Second World War membership in the western part of the Hansa Conference rose again due to the political reorganization of Europe. Many Germans were expelled from their homeland while the migration from the communist GDR areas was at its peak. Moreover, there was a newly awakened religious interest among many Germans after the end of the Second World War.

In the mid-1950s, and with the beginning of the economic miracle in the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1960s, a trend began which has continued to this day: the religious interest of Germans in the Federal Republic generally declined. However, in the GDR the Communist state ideology made the churches generally difficult to manage. The result was the same in both the West (Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein) and in the East (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). At first the membership growth stagnated. In the course of time, a slight downward trend took place in both parts of Germany under the Hansa Conference jurisdiction, as well as in the whole of Germany, and has continued to the present day.

## Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory of the Hansa Conference<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the various geographic sections of the Hansa Conference, two developments have had a significant influence on the history of this conference. First, in order to strengthen the proclamation of the Adventist faith in Central Europe, the General Conference sent Ludwig Richard Conradi (a German-speaking pastor) to Basel in 1886. Convinced of the mission of Jesus to carry the gospel to all the world, Conradi looked for a more suitable strategic place and chose Hamburg for carrying out this mission. Conradi recognized the peculiarities of this city:

Although part of the imperial republic, Hamburg was an organized government republic which granted greater freedom of religion than other parts of Germany,

As Germany's largest harbor and trading center, it was cosmopolitan and counterbalanced the usual influence of the great German folk churches (Roman Catholic and Protestant churches). In the remainder of Germany, these two churches had a decisive influence on the religious orientation of the population.

Hamburg was an international-networked port with good transportation connections to major cities in Europe. This brought many travelers to the city.

These factors favored the propagation of Adventist literature and created a conducive environment which gave Conradi an advantage for the missionary concerns of the young church.

For a little more than 100 years, Hamburg became an important center for Adventist missions in Germany and until the beginning of the Third Reich (1933), for large parts of Europe.

In 1893 the "Hamburg Association of Seventh-Day Adventists" was founded. This meant that the young church became a legal entity that could buy land. In the same year, the former Methodist sisters' home at Grindelberg in Hamburg was acquired. After a few months, several buildings were built there for a printing plant and church, and on July 21, 1895, the first Adventist chapel was constructed.

From then on, many Adventist publications, such as the *Zions-Wächter*, began appearing in the church's own publishing house, first named the "International Tract Society."

Conradi's vision paid off quickly: the mission run from Hamburg led to an enormous membership growth in Germany. Within a short time the city became a center of Adventist work. It was here in Hamburg that the headquarters of the "European Division" *der Freikirche* (of the "Free Church"), the printing house, and the International Tract Society (Advent-Verlag from 1922) settled. From this location the Adventist mission spread in Eastern Europe, the Middle East (1902) to Persia, East Africa (1903), and other parts of the world. In his leadership, Conradi was moving in line with Pauline theology (a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, and a Gentile to the Gentiles) for the inculturation of Adventist missionary efforts, to facilitate access into the Adventist faith by people of different nations and cultures.

From Hamburg, church members and book evangelists were supplied with literature for nearly 100 years, which in turn led to worldwide distribution. For example, in 1895 H. Graf and B. Hedrich began work as book

evangelists in Brazil among German immigrants using literature printed in Hamburg. Numerous church papers/journals for different target groups were printed in the Hamburg publishing house, some of them in more than twenty languages. In addition to church papers for members and young people, regular mission and health magazines were published.

Equally broad is the publication of books that appealed not only to church members, but also to the public. However, the publishing house in Hamburg had difficult times. Under pressure from the National Socialist government of the Third Reich, the Advent-Verlag was forced to operate in private hands as "Vollmer & Bentlin KG." After the collapse of the Third Reich, the publisher returned the ownership to the SDA Church. The publishing house operated in Hamburg until 1994 when it was moved to Lüneburg.

In 1900, a branch of DE-VAU-GE (an Adventist-run health food company) was established in Hamburg. Later, a large production site was built there. This site was destroyed in the Second World War and then rebuilt. In 1976, DE-VAU-GE was moved to Lüneburg.

During the Second World War, Hamburg, like other major cities of the Hansa Conference, was a victim of allied aircraft attacks which led to the destruction of numerous church buildings. Numerous chapels were lost, publishing house buildings, the DE-VAU-GE, and the church headquarters were destroyed. The reconstruction after the Second World War was successful because of the financial support of the world-wide Adventist community. Hence the Adventist institutions based in the Hansa Conference continued their work as a Free Church (*Freikirche*).

However, in the mid-1970s, the Hansa Conference saw a noticeable change in its communities, which continued into the 1990s and noticeably changed the conference. A second problematic phase began here in the development of the Conference. Parallel to the declining interest of the population in the Christian faith, missionary enterprises in Germany became increasingly unsuccessful; for example, the Hamburg publishing house and the book evangelists it supplied with literature were particularly affected. In addition, the Hansa Conference had to cope with additional decisions of other Adventist bodies:

With the departure of the DE-VAU-GE (1976) and the Advent-Verlag (1994) from the area of the Hansa Conference and finally the privatization of the hitherto church-owned Grindeldruck (Grindel printing press), Hamburg lost its central importance for the SDA Church in Germany. This development can be felt to this day in Hansa, insofar as it concerns the metropolitan area of Hamburg. While many church members were previously able to work there in different capacities, the only institution currently in Hamburg is the Hansa Conference. The Hamburg and Hansa Conferences lost their attraction for church members who wanted to work in an Adventist institution. This can be observed in the composition and size of the Adventist communities in that area.

In addition, with the reorganization of the Hansa Conference in 1992, difficulties arose:

The former Mecklenburg Conference retained a large part of its revenue due to the non-convertible GDR currency. As a result, the Mecklenburg Conference, like all other conferences in the former GDR, could finance considerably more pastors than Hansa in the West. Therefore, in the merger of the two unions in 1992, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern had statistically nearly twice as high staffing levels as the West area. In the following years, the new Hansa Conference started making great efforts to bring the number of employees to a uniform level without allowing the missionary, pastoral, and theological competence of church work, including the area of children and young people, to suffer. For the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Conference, this meant a significant reduction in its number of pastors, which was borne by Adventist communities without great tension. Around the turn of the millennium the goal of the Hansa Conference was almost reached. In 2015, it employed twenty-one pastors for forty-five churches.

Due to the departure of active church members, several church communities had to be merged or disbanded after the fall of the Wall in the former Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Conference. At the same time, the conference succeeded in all three regions of its territory in founding new missionary-oriented communities and reaching more areas and population groups with the proclamation of the gospel.

Many chapels in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern were in a poor state as a result of communist rule in the 1990s. Within fifteen years, the Hansa Conference succeeded in creating a worthy place of worship for all Adventist communities. For this purpose, the churches in the west of Germany made a great sacrifice for years, because new buildings were constructed only in the former GDR area.

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern became one of the most economically weak areas in Germany. The per capita income was well below the statistical average of Germany. Despite the faithful tithes of its church members, the Hansa Conference became economically worse off than other conferences.

Theological issues led to tensions between 1992 and 1996. During a session meeting, churches in the conference took a position to strengthen the relationship between the conference and the unions and the division. It succeeded in clarifying theological questions and preserving the unity of the churches without great loss of members.

Despite these problems, the bringing together of churches and their members from east and west into a unified church family was successful. The political and economic differences in the years from 1945 to 1990 did not obscure the common vision for the proclamation of the gospel and the mutual acceptance as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Thus, a few years after the merging of the two conferences, it was no longer a problem to transfer pastors from the former western areas to the eastern ones and vice versa. Hence, the consequences of the German division were overcome in the Hansa Conference area over a period of about twenty years.

Beyond the borders of the Church, a missionary challenge has become particularly evident: a growing secular population in society as well as a growing Muslim population. While the history of the conference boasts of decades of Adventist insights that go beyond the general Christian faith, in the face of mission today, these insights must be redesigned to address the specific needs of diverse populations.

## Organizational History of the Conference<sup>4</sup>

The geographical layout of today's Hansa Conference is changing due to initial membership growth and political changes in Germany (Kaiserreich – 1918; Weimar Republic, 1918-1933; Third Reich, 1933-1945; allied occupation zones, 1945-1949; GDR, 1949-1990; Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-) at various times. The first organizational unit was founded in 1898 with the West German Conference. From 1905 Hamburg belonged to the German Union District. Other areas of today's Hansa Conference, such as Mecklenburg, Schleswig-Holstein, and Lübeck, were run from 1906 by the North German Conference. In 1909, another organizational change took place: Hamburg was assigned to the West German Union District. This administrative unit remained assigned to Hamburg until 1919. From 1920 the area was renamed for the first time under the name Hansa-Vereinigung (Hansa Conference) which now also includes the areas of Schleswig-Holstein, Lübeck, and Schwerin. In 1928 the area of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was incorporated.

With the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, only the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg and the state of Schleswig-Holstein belonged to the Hansa Conference. The last geographical change took place after the reunification of Germany: the merger of the Hansa Conference (from the Federal Republic of Germany) with the Mecklenburg Association (from the former GDR created in 1992), the new Hansa Association, to the three northernmost states of Germany (Free and Hanseatic City Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Schleswig-Holstein). In each of them, the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to be recognized as a public corporation.

## List of Presidents

J. Pieper, 1904-1906; L. R. Conradi, 1906-1909; H. F. Schubert, 1909-1910; J. H. Schilling, 1910-1912; J. G. Obländer, 1912-1917; no president for the years 1918-1920; H. Seefried, 1921-1922; O. Schwenecke, 1922-1924; O. Gable, 1924-1928; F. A. Prieser, 1928-1933; C. A. Motzer, 1933-1938; W. John, 1938-1950; R. Dettmar, 1950-1954; H. H. Schmitz, 1954-1959; Fritz Raecker, 1959-1964; Ewald Bartz 1964-1972; Arno Patzke, 1972-1979; Hugo Imhof, 1979-1989; Jan Hinrichs, 1989 - 1994; Heinz E. Gattmann, 1994-2013; Dennis Meier, 2013-

Parts of today's Hansa Conference earlier belonged in part or in whole to the following associations. The responsible directors were as follows:

- North German Conference: L. Mathe, 1907-1910; C. Sinz, 1910-1913
- Oder Association: J. Seefried, 1913-1919

- Pommern Conference: F. Götting, 1921-1925; H. Glass, 1925-1929; O. Janert, 1929-1933; A. Rebenburg, 1933-1948

- Mecklenburg Conference: O. Haase, 1950-1955; J. Schor, 1955-1959; B. Schulz, 1959-1967; Felix Schoenfeld, 1967-1969; Georg Richter, 1969-1976; Johannes Koehler, 1976-1979; Manfred Gelke, 1979-1985; Hermann Beier, 1982-1992

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## NOTES

1. "Hansa Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993), 87.
2. Part of the former Federal Republic
3. Daniel Heinz, Lange W. *Adventhoffnung für Deutschland, Die Mission der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten von Conradi bis Heute* (Lüneburg: Saatkorn-Advent-Verlag, 2014).
4. Johannes Hartlapp, *Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten, Chronik, Vom Beginn in Deutschland bis zur Gegenwart 1875–2004* ([Hamburg:] Gemeinschaft der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Deutschland, 2004).

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