

Interviewee: Bernd Wangerin  
Interviewer: Mark Bowman  
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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

**[Begin Track One.]**

Mark B: This is Mark Bowman. And I'm doing an interview with Bernd Wangerin at the European Forum of Lesbian and Gay Christians, Christian Groups. This is on May 2, 2008. And we're in St. Albans in the UK. So I ask you, Bernd, if you would say your name and spell it?

Bernd W. Yes. My name is Bernd Wangerin. And my second first name is Herman. Bernd Herman Wangerin. And the Bernd is a short form from Bernard, B-e-r-n-d. And Herman's, of course, known. And Wangerin is W-a-n-g-e-r-i-n.

Mark B: Thank you very much. Thank you for your willingness to have some conversation. As I said, we're doing interviews with a few of the long-time leaders of LGBT Christian groups in Europe, like you. And I just invite you to begin talking about your life and kind of early years. Where you were born, your family, and your early years. so I look forward to listening to you.

Bernd W: Everything starts with being born.

Mark B: It does.

Bernd W: So my place of birth was in Hamburg. That's a famous harbor city in the north of Germany. And it happened on the fifth of August in 1940. So I have quite a long journey since then. And hopefully it will last some time longer. My background is: My family from father's side is coming from East Germany. So my family name is the name of a place which is today situated in Poland and was a former German territory. And mother's side is from Hamburg, where her mother's from. Yeah. So I was born in Hamburg and brought up in northern Germany. Later on, I had a sister and another sister, six and eight years later. So we were a family of five. And we had to face lifetimes after war when life was not so easy in Germany, as you might know. And so this was one reason for my mother to keep very strong to the religion, and to look out where she could get strengths from. She had had some contact in her youth, but over the years it was not so developed, but when she got into trouble, there were a lot of things she had to face, then she moved very strictly to the—

Mark B: What religious tradition—

Bernd W: Yeah, it was the Protestant tradition. And it's a kind of an evangelical fellowship, yeah. In Germany they say "Gemeinschaft", which means

those Christians, who go to service on Sunday, but they really want to be in a community, so they meet on Wednesday for Bible class and then Monday for prayer sessions.

Mark B: So did you do that growing up with your mother?

Bernd W: Yeah. I grew up, yes, I was part of it. So one thing on Sunday afternoon was the Bible lesson in an orphans' home. When there was the Bible lesson, I still remember **me** saying, "Mum, have I really to join you for this afternoon?" "Please do! The preacher's coming far from Hamburg somewhere, and we cannot let him be on his own." Actually, I did not let him be by his own, but all the others did, as that two o'clock PM was really PM time and when he started his sermon, you could see the heads bowing, and a lot of eyes closed. But anyway, this group, these people, so-called refugees from Eastern Germany when these parts became forced under Polish administration; and even some have lived in other countries, as the German population was spread in Eastern Europe to various countries before... So I was very much influenced by all these stories about having lost your home and all these serious things. And the joy of having a new start and "Thank God we are living this time now, we could have some animal at home!" Yeah, you feed the pig, and then you can kill it and eat it. [laughter]

Mark B: How do you think those years formed you and your beliefs? What did you bring from that? What did you take from those early years?

Bernd W: So I learned that religion is an important thing, not just for decoration but for every day we need to face life, with that I grow, or grew into these matters. When I was confirmed, I started to review lessons in the Sunday School and also the youth club and my own Bible studies with others. So, and in this juvenile days, my most ideal was to become a missionary somewhere abroad. Yeah. So other boys may have collected some posters from the pop stars around their bed. At my bedside, there were some photos from, missionaries. He is in Cameroon, in Africa. And this one in Surinam, and so on and so on. So my mind was really open to the Christians in these countries. But then there must have happened-- something which I cannot really remember--I was too young when I finished my first apprenticeship as a tradesman in import/export trading. And then I decided, well, would better to stay in the country and to learn to care for weak people. But becoming a preacher, this was put aside somehow. And I started becoming a deacon, which meant you took care for mentally sick people and so, handicapped people, handicapped by birth or...

Mark B: Was there particular training involved in becoming a deacon?

Bernd W: Yeah. At that time, in 1960, when you started this training, you were first sent directly to the front without having any training before. You learn by doing. But nowadays, now these things have developed a lot, and you have a lot more training before you get started your work. But this was a training for four years, and you had a big examination. And then you were entitled to work in the church as a youth worker or even if you like to work with these ill people or weak people and you stay in the place where these people are cared for. So my way led me to a short time of caring for mentally handicapped people. And then one day I was called, to the office and they say, "Now we thought we should offer you a new place. What do you think if we would like to send you to London?" "Ooh, London." I stumbled. "Yes, there's a job in the German YMCA in London." - Since the nineteenth century and still, there is some association's work to do, and they want to extend their work. And in the '60s there were lots of young people are coming to London to learn English, and they have a big hostel system and summer school and that sort of thing. So they thought they could need a third person. And so I, in November, yes, I did a six hours trip on the ferry boat from the Netherlands to Britain. And I can still remember it. [laughs]

Mark B: You were how old then?

Bernd W: I was twenty-four, yeah. The exam was in spring, in '64, in October I

received the blessing as a deacon and became member of the fellowship – which I still belong to - yeah. And in November 2<sup>nd</sup> I left Germany.

Mark B: Did you know English then?

Bernd W: Yeah. My original English was from school time, grammar school, and from my time when I was trained for export and import. So it looked like some business English. So this was a good basis. But later I regretted I never at that time made an attempt to have an official paper, the Lower Cambridge Certificate, for instance, which was...everybody came there to get this. Okay.

Mark B: So [both talking]

Bernd W: I lived in the swinging London at that time, but my mind was not so open to the things which were going on. Yeah, so I realized what was there, but it didn't touch me too much. Of course I had the record of The Stones, yes.

Mark B: So what kind of work were you doing?

Bernd W: It was partly this association work, they have an Anglo-German-Circle, they needed people with both languages. And the hostel service needed my attention sometimes, or in the summer time there was a school which

was packed with beds to become a youth hostel for six weeks. And so it was... I was the editor of the monthly news sheet. So this was, at that time, very complicated. Yeah. Nowadays you copy it and everything's fine.

[laughs] Yeah, the things in the association didn't go so well as the general secretary thought, development was not going as quick as they had planned. They didn't get the permission to pull down another building, and the financing was not sure, so after one and a half years, they said, okay, it's better you go back home. And then my "people" - I should have mentioned that becoming a deacon meant also becoming a member of the community of deacons. So the leaders of this, they sent me to London and now they were asked to find another place for me - just brought me to Wiesbaden in Hessen, and there I worked for three years as a deacon in the parish with young people, with elderly people. And after three years we had a little arguing about finding some work for me in the adult community. And the lay president of the board said, "Oh, we've got two ministers here already. We don't need a third one. So you keep to your youth groups." This made me ask: Should I have looked for another parish where I could have both, or should I take the chance of graduating, which was a chance to start a new training to become gradually a minister. So this was a decision to move on the way if you can... which took at least ten years.

Mark B: The training...took ten years. Where did you do that?

Bernd W: And this was all done in the southern part of Hessen. In our southern part of Germany, Hessen, we have two Protestant churches. And I lived in the southern part. And the main thing was for me to become an employment by the body of the church, not by a parish. So this was after one year of training, I was employed by the body of the church and sent to a vacant parish somewhere out in the mountains. Later they told me: Yes, you were free, you could refuse to work here! But I didn't ask anything. I was certain about this challenge. I was there, and took some paint... The garden fence was painted freshly. The village people say, "Oh, this minister, he's just not asking to get everything done for himself. He's doing it by himself." So the start was very positive. Meanwhile I was married and the first child was born—in Wiesbaden when this happened. So we were three when we were coming to this place. After three years of successful work, everything was okay. But I thought, hmm, this challenge is not too big, isn't it? And then as you could not become a minister by a plan which would say you need ten years, but you could only go one step, and then some other people have to decide, whether they recommend you to be more trained. So I thought the time had come now to ask for this permission by the synod to witness about me. And after that, I was free of work and my salary was paid. Then I went to Bonn for studies in theological faculty at the university in Bonn. Which was for a year. And then after that, I had to do all this theological examinations. And then



there were lots of special trainings for a vicar and other examinations. So I finally, I have the title of vicar. So this was the way the church invented to become ministers, an assistant way. And the official way was via the university, of course. And then I worked short time in the village when I had finished all this. And sometime earlier, we had a trip to the Rhine area and we had a prayer in one of those churches there. I understood that this church said: "Oh, yes, one day it would be fine for you, if you could be one day the pastor of this church." And then, months later, I met the dean of this area, and mentioned this to him. He said, "Oh, this place is vacant for so long. We could not find anybody." He said, "Are you interested?" This was a very complicated place, but, of course, I was interested. And my predecessor, I guess it's predecessor, yes? The pastor before me?

Mark B: Yes, predecessor.

Bernd W: He was there for twenty years directly after war. And he had done such a lot of buildings and development in the past, so at the end of his time, everything was just done and parish work was low. So when I came there as a young man with new ideas, so everything was on my side.

Mark B: You were about how old when you started there?

Bernd W: Thirty-four. I was ordained when I was thirty-four. Yeah. Yeah. - Thirty-

three, actually. And so those were the busiest years of my life. So, 3,600 members in three places, three churches. And at every place you have to do some teaching in the schools. And a lot of special things. So this is important, as it shows, I didn't look too much after myself. I went into working, into training, into learning. And my family was, sat by my side, because we had the kids then.

Mark B: How many children?

Bernd W: There was another boy was born. And we had a foster boy living with us. So my wife was a very excellent and splendid wife. A real typical housewife, but open-minded and very accepted in the parish. So later I said I couldn't have done all this jobs without a fresh shirt in the cupboard. So she did a lot of key things for me. Yeah. But on the other hand, I had my gay feelings, which I had all these years. Here and there I had a chance to meet a man. Mostly when I was away from home, on training situation. Once a year or so. Being home again then cut. No writing, no telephone, nothing. But I did manage to achieve some sureness of the self, the gay soul. And during this very busy time in this place at the Rhine River, which was very beautiful, I felt totally lonely sometimes. Really deadly lonely. And dark clouds of depression came very close to me, yeah. And my... I was anxious to, that I could do something wrong. And then all this that I had achieved and was so wonderful looking could just crack down in

a moment when they say: “Oh, this man, he’s gay and we have to put him out.” Yeah. So I thought better to leave this place and to hide somewhere. And I was informed by chance about a prison ministry. Then I started to make contact to those who were in charge of this kind of people; of course, there was also a big need. And on this very small time between the decision to get the new job in prison ministry, I had my coming out. So when I started in prison ministry, I was in my mind clear that I go there as a gay man.

Mark B: Could you say a little more about how that happened? About how you came to that coming out?

Bernd W: There were so many little steps which were just in time there. So was the first time the group, Homosexuals and Church, “Homosexuelle und Kirche” in Hamburg had made a note in the alternative magazine. So when I was visiting my sister after Christmas, she said, “Well, here’s the oxmox magazine.” I found the ad about homosexual groups. “Oh, you know this? You have been taught in Frankfurt ? So you should make an appointment with this man.” And I called and he said, “Oh, yes, we can talk to each other tomorrow or next time, day after Christmas.” So we had a talk. And I felt this talking at a cafe was partly gay or not, so it’s not so important. The main question: Can one be a little bit pregnant or not? So that I, with my personal experiences, was ready to accept this—the part of

being a gay man is bigger than...it's not a thing to be neglected or just ignored... which I had hoped before, so I didn't want to embarrass my wife, my children. That's the thing about that. Yeah. But then I started to say okay to myself, to think exactly but what about the others? And step by step, I had to organize this. And I think it took two or three years. And one important thing was to visit a gay friend from a conference. This was my first being on my own, away from home, just on my own interest. Earlier I was away and there was a conference, and then there were studies. But just to say, "No, I have my own interest now, I want to see this man." was different. And I can still remember the children picking me up from the station, and the wife was in sorrows.

Mark B: Do you remember where was the conference, where that was?

Bernd W: Oh, the conferences, those were from my parish work was at that time—where we are in Protestant minority in those pastors in Diaspora; all around the Catholic parishes, and I am the Protestant one. And so some other areas of our church are in the same situation and these colleagues they gathered once a year. And we visited other minorities of Protestants, for instance, in France.

Mark B: Okay.

Bernd W: Here and..and my first, I remember my attempt to join the gay group in Frankfurt now, having talked to this man in Hamburg, back home, were the Frankfurt, around the area of Frankfurt, surrounding area., surrounding area of Frankfurt, yes, there's one, so I could talk to a friend, which was named to me to see in person. "This Sunday afternoon, I will be there. And then you come and then you must look for me."

Mark B: This was around, around which year was this?

Bernd W: This was '82. Yeah, I was forty-two that year. So looking from the end that said it was not too late, it as late, and as we know, or somehow...I think, okay, the forties was not too bad a time to be a gay man. Yeah. And, yeah, so I asked first the leader of this school in Frankfurt, "Do you have people there with income tax group for number three?" I couldn't even write for married couples, it was not possible to write down: "I am married, I feel I am gay, I want to come to your group." So I finally, when I opened the door, the first man I saw was somebody I knew from somewhere. I said, "You are here?!"

Mark B: So what kind of group was it in Frankfurt? A support group?

Bernd W: Yeah. At that time—

Mark B: Men and women? Or all men? Or—

Bernd W: It was, The HuK is now a group in Germany for thirty years. At that time, she existed less than ten. Founded in '77. And we were the first in Frankfurt, the first group where you could go if you think you are gay and don't know other scene. No sports group, no movement...today, you find thirty groups.

Mark B: Right. Right.

Bernd W: So there are a lot of people of all kinds, and even some women. But our group was, yeah, I think we've never had more than five women. And sometimes one has the idea that, according to this one woman which came regularly, the others just popped in and went again, so it doesn't fit too well. And this Homosexuelle und Kirche, this group was also asked to help to organize in an academy of our church, two conferences for the church people, for the public for research. And, yes, I joined this conference and was very good on my horizon. And then this group, which meets for every two weeks in Frankfurt. At the beginning, we've got thirty people. So when all thirty people, everybody said a few words about themselves, so one hour was gone. Then we have a cup of coffee the next hour. Then after that, we even had strictly a theme, which we worked in groups.

Mark B: Were there other clergy or religious folks as part of it?

Bernd W: Other theological students. Yeah. Yeah.

Mark B: At this point, you had started in prison ministry?

Bernd W: Yes.

Mark B: And so you'd separated from your wife and children?

Bernd W: Yes. And so when we have the facts up to a year, you could not see that I met my first friend in between. So he was going to this group, too. And when I had my coming out, my idea was you should look for an elder friend, an older friend, you want to have a partner, a daddy. You feel so small, I was forty-two and a big man. Yeah, it would be nice, it just happened the other way around, there was of course a young man which thought I recognized for years, I have an elder friend, yes, yes, I'm a student of theology, and I'm not too certain about myself. I would like to have someone beside me. Yeah. At that time, I had not left my family, when I met him first and this so, there's some, I think, eight weeks. I think, or at least twelve. When I met him in spring, let's say in September I left my family. So the conflicts there were too big. So we first thought

we could make it a total family and friend thing. My wife said, “Oh, what a nice man. Well, I’m not against him.” And my children said, “Oh, this is Thomas, okay.” And the really sharp point was when I came back from a visit from him, he lived about fifteen kilometers away, and like kids do today, they’re just into the door and then go to the phone. That was me, I did the same. So coming in, she said, “You’re coming from your friend. Why do you have to call him just now again?” And then I felt that I was so upset, I said, never again the wife has to allow, to say how close I will be to a man. Never!

Mark B: So did you tell your wife that you thought you were gay, so she knew about that?

Bernd W: Yeah, I tried ten years ago, and she couldn’t get it.

Mark B: But you were still working in the church at this time. You were still working in the church.

Bernd W: Yeah. And at one of these conferences, my later boss, I don’t know exactly...

Mark B: Boss.



Bernd W: So he knew then my position from the first day, as we had small groups at this conference. And he was sitting there and I thought, “Now you have to decide--you lie or you tell the truth!” So he was knowing from the very beginning, and so I had to take all these next steps when I left my family... And he tried to shelter me a little, that I could keep my work. And they were not sure whether in prison—it was the treaty between church and state—and could they be regarded not faithful if they would not tell the state that I am gay. Should they have to tell them? And then they decided to take the risk and did not tell them. Yeah. There was a ... psychologist. He was gay, of course.

Mark B: So you had to go see a psychologist? That’s what they told you to do?

Bernd W: Yeah, these talks with this man from authorities in the church, they were sometimes very strong, very hard; so my boss, which was directly with me, he was more the counselor. But he had to call his colleague, who was really my boss. And he had a little booklet. And when I talked to him, he always was writing down what was named...

Mark B: But they didn’t kick you out.

Bernd W: No, no. They said, “Please pay your wife enough money. And then don’t do anything wrong.” And he let know that other, because in these matters

of divorce, do a lot of shit, yes, thank you, but don't. And of course, I didn't. I did my duty to my family. And I lived from a very small salary with some friends. And so she could keep the flat where the rent was paid by the church for some three years, at least. And then my boss, he said, "No, it's not you living in the bigamy." Yeah, you have a friend and a wife. One day, you have to decide. So they wanted me to decide what to be. And of course, it was long enough too, so regarding this time of my life, I had to pray very often to get strength to, it was like the stress my mom had when she was in her heart. Yes, yes. And looking back, I would say, we had, and, the divorce, we had a merciful divorcement. And as she, the mother of our children, she did not argue against me so I could keep up all these contacts. And now they are grownups and I'm a grandfather already.

Mark B: So am I.

Bernd W: And the Forum, yeah, the history of the Forum.

Mark B: How did you make connection? Was there a German religious group? Gay lesbian religious group that you were part of?

Bernd W: This was The Huk: Homosexuelle und Kirche.

Mark B: Okay. Okay.

Bernd W: And I felt a little, sort of, maybe it's my generation, though you feel it in grateful for the group and the whole thing has had so, you know, just go in and out as you please, if you can. And I started really from the beginning to do my duties in the association: prepared a newssheet and I was elected for some functions.

Mark B: And this was in Frankfurt.

Bernd W: Yeah. This was in Frankfurt.

Mark B: Okay.

Bernd W: Yeah. And I would like to mention that a man, which his name was, since has passed away, was Lothar Koschig. And he was from Frankfurt group, was he an important person. He was, "psychologist" I don't know, just, must be a wrong word.

Mark B: Psychologist.

Bernd W: Psychologist. He was psychologist. And he was not too well. So he was retired earlier. And he trained a group for at least. He was one of the

founders of the Forum. And the Forum was founded by the HuK Germany and David and Jonathan from France, as you would know. And he was a representative from HuK Germany.

Mark B: So you learned about the Forum through him.

Bernd W: Yeah. And so he organized a little group, and he was on the board, so we made newsheets for everybody, sending them all over Europe. So I got very well acquainted to the Forum's work. And in, here it was in '88, I don't know. The first forum in Oslo, you may look it up. He said, "Oh, you could be a speaker in the next Forum's conference." He told me the theme is "How can Christian gays face the threat of AIDS?" which was hard to pronounce for not English mother tongue. So I did a speech about that.

Mark B: Was that the first Forum that you went to? First time you went to the Forum?

Bernd W: Yeah. From then on, I was part of the Forum. You see, I was so glad to this big horizon, this international meeting, so that was close to my youth ideas of being abroad with a mission.

Mark B: So just going back a minute, were you still working in the church through this time? The church kept you employed?

Bernd W: Yes, yes, yes. So I was for eleven years in prison ministry. And I went out of this by own decision. Yes.

Mark B: Did you ever have any, did that church do any work around homosexuality? Understanding, learning homosexuality? Or they just tolerated you and let you work—sort of—don't ask, don't tell? Or?

Bernd W: I would say this Protestant Church of Hessen-Nassau that's the official name, (Hessen-Nassau). They especially - this is two or three conferences in the academy - they really tried to learn about. And even the bishops support, we have a college of bishops. They asked others and I was one day I was a part of a talk so they would inform themselves, yeah. So... yeah. This church was part of the accepting by the synod that there's gay partnerships, and the blessing of the gay partnerships.

Mark B: Okay. I just want to go back to the Forum. So we leave you in Oslo.

Bernd W: Yeah.

Mark B: Other things you remember from the first Forum gathering when you were

there? Other recollections?

Bernd W: I was a speaker. And I made some friends which I still have—Aasmund, from the first day. And this Lothar was member of the board. When he retired, you can be reelected so often, and they said—oh, yes, the Deutsch Mark is a strong currency. Bernd can keep this in Germany, this is okay. So I was elected the treasurer.

Mark B: You were the treasurer. Okay. Do you remember when that happened? That's okay.

Bernd W: I was on duty, til we had the Forum in Bratislava. But the politics were against me, as so many internal things , were going on. The women wanted to have one of themselves on the board, and they wanted to have the Czech delegate later, so she was nominated and elected, I didn't fight for that position...

Mark B: Other recollections just across those the years of the Forum? What did the Forum do for you? How that was important for you, what you remember?

Bernd W: It was very important to get to know all these people, to see that being a gay Christian is not a matter of being somewhere, that it is only an existence in your own little place. But there's a community behind it, even

in the last years open some windows to the international work in Brazil and China, too, you know. And I was let, I was, the first years when I was in the Forum, before I was elected to treasurer, the board was open for two more—seats without portfolio. And so this was very interesting to work there. And maybe in this year they've decided against, you know. On the other hand, one feels exhausted sometimes, going on and on by the same associations...

Mark B: How have you, when you look back in those early years, how have you seen the Forum change? How is the Forum different? How has the Forum grown? What have been its challenges?

Bernd W: The biggest change was, I think, was when the Forum was organized a lot by myself in Germany, when most of women actors were organizing it, the main speaker was a woman too. And I think this year, I think '98, of the woman really made a big step forward in becoming seen, I think, at the Forum. Yeah...and from, yeah, there was a funny thing when the lesbians from the Netherlands, they complained a lot to the Frankfurt bishop, the lady. She had a service with us and she didn't even mention the word gay or lesbian. And when they asked her, she said, "Well, you want to be treated as ordinary Christians—as everyone. Should I have to mention dykes?" [laughs] It was a little too, too equal in her services. This is a problem. Do we want to be equal like everybody else? The others from the

other step, probably the attendance of the women at the Forum was a big step forward then. And maybe because of mentality, whatsoever, the women were the stronger part in becoming virtually as the men didn't make any good proposals of...it's just there and it was fine. And the women had to do a lot of things that we're some years behind and they want experience in international affairs. So for this year, first we have the men's day. And the men gradually became jealous about this special thing that the women have—

**[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]**

Mark B:       What kind of leadership role did you play there?

Bernd W:       Yeah, in Frankfurt, first we had just one speaker. And it was a young theologian. He was a student who was very open. And when he was ordained later, the church had, of course, time to think how they would deal with him. And he had to sign a paper he would not be, he would not stand up in public for the homosexual issues. So when he came to work as a minister, he was lost for the association.

Mark B:       This happened when? You remember roughly?

Bernd W:       '83, '85. In the '80s.



Mark B: In the '80s. Okay.

Bernd W: They had, the church bodies had these talks because they were so uncertain about the mind of the parishes in this basic conflict between leading bodies of the church and the parishes, the leading bodies say: The parishes are not so developed, they will not understand or accept gay ministers. The parishes on the other hand would say: All bodies up there should finally recognize, what we already know about the issue.

Mark B: Exactly. So you're in Frankfurt, but this was an ecumenical group, right?

Bernd W: Yes. Yeah. HuK was founded in '77, was on a federal basis. In the various regions and the. name was "Ecumenical Working Group Homosexuals and Church—German name: Oekumenische Arbeitsgruppe Homosexuelle und Kirche" So we had, from the beginning we were mixed, yeah. And in Frankfurt, we had, later we had three people in charge of the group. And we had one Catholic, one Protestant—me—and one lay man. He was just not a member of the church.

Mark B: And the group had worship on, occasionally and programs? What have you done?

Bernd W: I could have, but I was like any others, who were HuK Frankfurt members. So the Frankfurt group never developed a tradition of having service. Yeah. And probably as those who ministered in the morning already, in their own parish, they're not interested to do the same in the afternoon and put themselves into a leading position. So other HuK groups they have regular service. And the Frankfurt group just didn't do that....

Mark B: How was HuK organized nationally? Was there an annual conference, or an occasional meeting of folks from nationwide?

Bernd W: It was a very German and strict organization. We had more than twenty regional groups. And they had their own way of gathering. Some did on Sunday, some during the week. And the whole association has two meetings a year—two weekends. Friday to Saturday. And one is combined with the AGM, as HuK later became a registered association. So at times have others who didn't want to be a member of an ordinary association, said "now I'm leaving." I get this everywhere. But so you have two weekends. And then there's always a theme which is to be dealt with by a lecture and workshops, like we have here in the Forum.

Mark B: Okay. How would you see HuK? Has it been growing? It's sort of stabilized? Has its activities changed and become more active in lobbying the church? What's—

Bernd W: Yeah, I would compare it with a current – in former times we had a broad river with a slow current. And now we have a small river, but we have a strong current. The churches, the Protestant churches in Germany know very well that we are there, and what we think about it, and we have visited most of the synods and have pitched our items. But the people who do the work are only few. We have lost about four hundred or three hundred members from the early times.

Mark B: Early times.

Bernd W: Yeah, the 80s - it's about four hundred members now.

Mark B: The peak time was around when? In the '80s?

Bernd W: Yeah. End of '80s.

Mark B: End of '80s.

Bernd W: When AIDS was really becoming a problem, and so we lost some of our members to becoming activists in the AIDS camp and other associations. And so regarding this, HuK has not developed a broad influence but on a small and very direct ways it's partnered with the Protestant churches to

be heard and we also tried to get the Catholic bodies even to acknowledge that they have received a letter from us, they do sometimes. Yeah, and these two weekends, and one week, every year is the so-called “Kirchentag” (Church assembly) or “Katholikentag”(Catholic assembly). The Protestant Kirchentag have more than 100,000 Protestants gathering for those three days, from Wednesday to Sunday. And then next year, it’s Catholics assembly which has a lot of tradition but it’s not so open in its idea, like the Protestant meeting is.

Mark B: So HuK goes and is present at those large gatherings?

Bernd W: Yeah. We have, in the Protestant Kirchentag we have granted to have a school building, which we make it a gay and lesbian center. And have a program of various issues. And also try to work in the official program so that we have outside, well the others, also. From the years we were the first who really made sex an item on this big church. They didn’t want to know. So then we had to turn other places, not only in the school or in our center.

Mark B: And with the Catholics? How has HuK been involved?

Bernd W: Yeah, the Catholics, they are beside or at the side of HuK. We have now the working communities of service, communities of holy supper. I mean,

these are groups which have someplace in Germany where they started as gay and lesbian christians to have their own service. So in Frankfurt and Stuttgart and Basel, and they have started to form a closer link. And they also participate when there's a big Catholic meeting, the "Katholikentag". And this is only possible, it was the Catholics as the head of this Catholic meeting with a lay president. Formally the bishop is, of course, upon him or her, so they can decide a little easier how much space we have for our group. Christians of...

Mark B: So you've retired from the ministry, correct?

Bernd W: Yes. For the seventh year now. Yeah, we had a program of early retirement in our church. And I had faced some problems with my hipbones. Yeah. And the event, the local circumstances. So if I had not really retired, I had to do the double work. And my colleague had to leave, fast... You understand?

Mark B: Yes, I understand.

Bernd W: ...retirement.

Mark B: So you have particular interests or projects you've been doing in your retirement?

Bernd W: Yeah, the HuK, the work with HuK is the only hobby I have so far which is really for a long time. And as being gay and Christian or lesbian is a minority, I'm still engaged in helping minority Christians, by the Gustav-Adolf Association founded in memory of the work of the King Gustav Adolf from Sweden. He helped the Reformed forces to resist the Catholic troops in 17<sup>th</sup> century war...

Mark B: Okay.

Bernd W: But this is also a very interesting field of Christianity and living in special circumstances. So it fits very well together.

Mark B: Thank you. Do you have some, do you want to, as you look back over all the years with HuK and all the years of the Forum, are there any other particular experiences that stand out, or reflections that you have on what this has meant for you, how it has changed the church? I assume you think you've seen significant change in the church in Germany? Or do you think the change is slight?

Bernd W: Yeah, the position of the church I am in, our church in the community of the Protestant churches in Germany, we have a reverence for years, so we were the church of Martin Niemöller. He is famous. And so this is going

to be lost a little these days. The title “president of the church” will be dismissed, and we will have a bishop as all the others have. And we do not know how much democracy will this bring? Or do we have less? And very interesting was the time when I was in prison ministry, as this was on the clash of state and church structures and the church’s ideas so you got to know a lot of things which are behind everyday decisions. I’m doing still some Internet counseling for HuK. So when somebody says, “I would like to have some—”

Mark B: Like to talk to somebody.

Bernd W: Yeah. We do writing, mostly.

Mark B: Right. Right. Talk with them through the Internet. Bernd, thank you. Anything else you thought of that you’d like to say, Bernd? We want to thank you very much for taking this time. Great story. Thank you.

**[End Interview.]**