

A Touch of Schilda¹

The Decay of the Church

Stephanuskirche is not in good condition. Years ago, blue safety nets appeared under the edge of the roof. Pieces of wall and bricks were threatening to fall down. The heating system had not worked for a long time. A drone flight soon revealed holes in the roof. A few years ago, it became clear that rain was coming into the attic, and that a whole flock of pigeons had taken up residence there. Volunteers were forbidden to enter the attic because of the bird droppings and their carcasses. There were alleged health risks.

In the autumn of 2023, a spot on the vaulted dome began to get damp. When, after a rainy winter, water was running down the southwest corner of the vault, volunteers set up buckets and paddling pools to catch the water. The managing pastor blocked access to the church. In fact, the plaster was falling out of the vault. There was a risk of whole chunks breaking off.



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Now the parish council² could no longer postpone all repairs until the subsidized renovation. The holes were patched only six months after the water damage in autumn, and certain areas are to be re-covered. This work, like the canopies on the sidewalk, which are intended to protect against increased rockfall, must be paid for entirely by the parish fund. This is the revenge for the hesitation in maintenance. It remains to be seen whether the substance and the monument value of the building have been damaged.

² “parish”: (in the Christian Church) is a small administrative district, typically having its own church and a priest or pastor. “parish council”: A council consisting of elected church members. This board is in charge of the administration of the parish.

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Who the Church didn't get along with

Some people are making a fuss: Klaus-Dieter Müller was known as a bankrupt in Schleswig-Holstein. He soon became untenable in the state parliament (Landtag). After his mandate expired, the former SPD MP² moved to Berlin.

When asked about the reputation of this tenant of the church, the former pastor Michael Glatter pointed, that Müller is paying his rent. Müller's Foundation Christliche Werte Leben (Living Christian Values) had promised a spectacular program. After a year, he quitted. There had only been one event: his birthday party. Renting Stephanuskirche was just a trial balloon for the busy Müller. In addition, with his derogatory comments about Islam, he hardly was fitting in with the neighborhood.



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² member of parliament of the Social Democratic Party

Theologian Dr. Claudia Niemann transformed Stephanuskirche into a cultural church. She built up good contacts with the artists in the neighborhood. It was a big deal. Too much for the parish council³. Niemann was denied an extension of the contract.

As the new pastor, Veronika Krötke wanted to awaken Stephanuskirche from its deep sleep. She organized political and financial support for the church and she made increasing use of the church building. She initiated the “Open Church” and “Organ with Bite”: Short organ concerts with a snack afterwards. But because of this policy, there was constant trouble with the parish council and also among the factions inside. In order to achieve peace, she called for mediation. This failed. Krötke left the parish.

Soldiner Kiez e.V. has supported the activities in Stephanuskirche in recent years.

The neighborhood association organized music programs, raised money for exhibitions of religious art and provided coaching in Public Relations. When the pastors’ way of leadership and the slow progress of the renovation were criticized, critics were insulted as "unbelievers" by the pastors’ foot soldiers. Pastor Johanna Hestermann made clear to a critic, that his opinion is not relevant at all.

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Bad Luck and Mishaps

What can be done with a church like Stephanuskirche?

The parish council² asked the architectural company D:4. But no solution did please the parish council. Public discussion was not wanted. Marcus Nitschke of D:4 suggested a postponement. Without support from the church and the population, no use of the building would be possible. For this reason, the parish council first did not want to make use of the state subsidy which was expected to cover half of the costs for renovation and conversion. But then the Federal Commissioner for Culture in charge put pressure on the project: Plans must be in place by the end of 2025. Otherwise, there will be no money.

Pastor Jürg A. Wildner got himself tangled up. Emails slipped through his fingers, he missed appointments, agreements failed. There was talk about his Incompetence. Instead of Wildner, they assigned the management to the pastor on secondment, Johanna

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Hestermann. It is rare for pastors to be in charge of such a position straight after training – and managing a multi-million Euro project. ↩

The multi-million Euro subsidy from the Federal Commissioner must be called up by thick file folders. The engineering company Seemann failed concerning the current construction phase 1, roof and outer shell. A new tender had to be issued. But the parish forgot to inform the company Seemann. Therefore, another company was awarded the contract, but the company Seemann was left to process the request for funds. This also failed at the second attempt.

Most recently, the third request by the company Seemann was made. Now there are experts in the background, says the parish council – as was the case at the second attempt.

The parish council was looking for an architect to monitor the project. Experts criticized that normally such a contract is assigned to an urban development office or to civil engineers or to social scientists. It is supposed to be unattractive for architects. No one applied, the deadline was extended, and cultural scientist Anna Wiese was found. She initially disappeared in the triangle of the parish, the church administration office and the Federal Commissioner. It is important to catch up on time and to ensure that old mistakes are not made by anyone again.

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Fresh Wind and Clear View

Inhabitants are involved in many public projects. The buildings are to be accepted by the neighborhood and other users, they shouldn't just be standing around. However, the state cannot force private owners to implement public participation. As long as they are receiving a maximum of 50 percent of subsidies, they can do whatever they want with their property.

A church congregation is considered private. It does not have to worry about its neighbors when renovating a place of worship. The resistance by the parish council² and by the pastors to calls for a public discussion of alternative uses for Stephanuskirche may not be particularly smart if the building is to be renovated suiting the location. But certainly this secrecy is legally covered.



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Nevertheless, committed citizens are worrying. Workshops are a common way of gathering and bringing together different views on the desired future. That is why the Initiative Denkmal Stephanuskirche (Initiative for the Monument Stephanuskirche) called for such a meeting on June 29, 2024.

With twelve people, the meeting was not overly well attended. In terms of content, a wide range of ideas was presented: from demolition to cultural or social use to a spiritual place of interreligiousness. At a meeting in the parish, despite the restriction to activists, some of whom had years of experience, there was a similarly diffuse picture. Where on the one hand there is uncertainty due to a lack of knowledge, the discussion of the insiders seems to lack quality and determination. Can a breath of fresh air and more information help?

Stephanuskirche: pretty much 1900 ...

Introduction:

The protestant Stephanuskirche was built between 1902 and 1904. The architect was Adolf Bürckner.

Since the congregation of Stephanuskirche merged with another congregation in 2007, only a few services have taken place here. ~~The church has not been repaired in recent years. Therefore, the church room has not been open to the public since the beginning of 2024.~~ Renovation is scheduled to begin in 2025.

Stephanus:

The church is named after Stephanus. He lived 2000 years ago and stood up for the poor. ~~Because of his views on religion, he was sentenced to death and executed.~~

Architecture:

The architectural style is called historicism/neo-Gothic. The architecture was inspired by the Gothic style of the Middle Ages. This can be seen in the red bricks on the outside and in the vaults from inside. The architecture is intended to create a feeling of reverence for God and the church.



Special features:

The special features of this church ~~are~~ the chandelier (diameter: 8 meters) and six figures in sandstone about 3 meters in height each.

Additional text by Malte Heidemann:

It is clearly visible how the light is falling into the building from above. This is reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals from the Middle Ages.

Description:

The building is consisting of three parts. The parish hall can be seen on the left.

On the right there ~~is~~ the bell tower of 76 meters in height.

You can only see the entrance to the interior of the church **here**.

Inner church room:

The inner church room has a floor plan like a cross. ~~The chancel is connected to it. There is~~ the altar. The chancel is located on the eastern side of the building. The church is ~~therefore~~ oriented towards the east.

Stephanuskirche: pretty much 1900 ... / A Touch of Schilda¹

The Story of an Unwanted Gift

The poster next to this one is showing some basic information about Stephanuskirche.

It was offered to the parish² to be displayed at the entrance of the church.

Chairman Malte Heidemann made corrections on behalf of the parish council³. There was no explanation for neither the petty stylistic changes nor for the changes in content. As a result, once again we were unable to start a discussion – as it was the case previously with the unwillingness to set up the exhibition in the premises of the church.

As you can see, the changes in content are amounting, on the one hand, to a rejection of humor. On the other hand, we are seeing a refusal by the parish to take responsibility for the neglect of Stephanuskirche which has come to light in recent years.



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The nationwide initiative “Kirchenmanifest” (Church Manifesto)⁴ reported that parishes are not able to maintain on their own those churches which are no longer needed for religious purposes. We are supporting this conclusion.

However, we would like to see these places of worship transferred to new ownership structures with shared responsibility between parishes, neighbors as well as public, civil-society-oriented and private financiers. Reckless building management by church owners must become an issue in this cooperation, if only to prevent the practice of passing on the consequences of avoidable mistakes to others.

⁴ The initiative “Kirchenmanifest” (“Church Manifesto”) wants a new community of responsibility for churches as common goods. The manifesto and further information can be found at <https://www.moderne-regional.de/kirchenmanifest/>