

## Spiritual Climate

The future for the evangelical church in Austria is very positive. There are the beginnings of a huge shift in the Austrian mentality about religion. We are moving into an era of pick and mix religion and that offers significant opportunities as well as important challenges. Before to be Austrian was to be Roman Catholic and that is changing; large numbers of people are giving up their nominal membership of the Roman Catholic Church (having to pay an annual church tax probably contributes to this.) Younger people see the traditional church as having lost touch and are more open to other faiths and ideologies. The more urban areas are seeing rapid change. In rural areas this is naturally slower.

The opportunity is there for the evangelical church to help people reconnect with God and to see the relevance of a Christ centred life. The Gospel remains the same but religiosity changes. New and culturally sensitive forms of worship, life application preaching and teaching and small groups meetings are important weapons in the church's armoury. Friendship evangelism has long been important in Austria but now more so given that the population is becoming more mobile and community integration (with its corresponding pressures) is lessening.

However the new spiritual climate also brings with it the challenge of other religions and ideologies. Esoteric practices, pseudo-biblical cults, eastern religions and the occult are becoming much more widespread. The evangelical church has to proclaim the absolute truth and expose the dangers of moral and religious relativity.

Another consequence of people leaving the Roman Catholic Church is religious apathy driven by the forces of materialism and secularism. Many people are simply comfortable and have no perceived need of God.

There has been a Protestant witness in Austria for centuries, but it has never been very strong. There are still only an estimated 25,000 members of evangelical churches; less than half of one percent of the population would claim to be born again. However with around 200 evangelical churches (including Baptist and Mennonite) and many other protestant churches there is a good foundation for mission.

The greatest need in the Austrian evangelical church is for Austrian leadership. The majority of the Austrian churches still rely on foreign missionaries. In the last few years mission agencies and local churches have begun to change their thinking and address this vital issue. Many young Austrians are now taking up the challenge and are training for ministry. However many of these people are still reliant on foreign funding or have to work part-time. The Austrian church will need to take on this financial challenge but the rewards should be great.