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IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award
Narrative Report

This past summer, with the help of the IRIS Graduate Student Fieldwork Award, I traveled to Düsseldorf, Germany, where I conducted follow-up research for my dissertation. My project, which focuses on Christian activism in the West German Left, relies heavily upon first person interviews as a source of information. Although I had already completed the majority of my fieldwork during the 2012-3 academic year, I was unable to interview a number of important subjects at that time. The IRIS fellowship allowed me to resolve this issue and take a crucial step toward completing my dissertation.

In order to understand why receiving this fellowship was so beneficial to me, it is necessary to describe my dissertation project. My work redefines the relationship between Christianity and the New Left, by examining a particular Christian protest group in West Germany, during the 1960s and 1970s. This group, called the Political Evensong, created a new form of worship service, which combined characteristics of the student movement, such as critique and demonstration, with Christian prayer and meditation. These worship services became gathering sites for both Christians and non-Christians in the New Left, who used them as a forum in which to discuss the relationship between religion and politics. In my dissertation, I challenge the popular assumption among historians, that the New Left's critique of Christian institutions reflected a fundamental hostility toward Christian religiosity. To the contrary, I argue that the worship services of the Political Evensong represent an attempt to restore Christianity's relevance by linking it to political action. Moreover, as a gathering place for all members of the New Left, the worship services functioned as a laboratory in which experiments in leftist Christianity could be carried out. For this reason,

my examination of the Political Evensong reveals a wide spectrum of Left responses, and greatly enhances our understanding of the German New Left and its relationship to Christianity.

Supporting these central arguments required me to gather information on a wide range of people associated with the Political Evensong. Some of them left records of their activities, which I collected during my previous fieldwork in 2012-3. But many of these individuals left no written account of their involvement in the Political Evensong, and it was only through personal interviews that this information could be gleaned. Unfortunately, difficulties with the Internal Review Board prevented me from conducting some of these interviews during my initial research trip, and after unsuccessfully attempting to write my dissertation without them, I realized that a follow-up research trip would be necessary.

The Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award provided me with the financial support to undertake this important trip. It paid for my flight, accommodations, and transportation while in Germany. It allowed me to spend seven weeks, from July 7 to August 24, conducting face-to-face interviews with 19 former members of the Political Evensong. Most of these meetings took place in the area around Düsseldorf and Cologne, but I also traveled to Hamburg, Aachen, Essen, Bonn, and Euskirchen. The trip was not without difficulties. Many of these individuals are between 65 and 85 years old, and poor health prevented three of them from meeting with me. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the information I gained from the other interviews will be enough to successfully complete my dissertation. This would not have been possible without the Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, and I remain grateful to the Institute for Regional and International Studies for its support.