

# History

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The Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research arose in 1957/58 through the merger of two small church-sponsored academic institutions: the research institute of the Protestant academies in Bad Boll (Württemberg), with its noted commission for Marxism research, and the Christophorus-Stift in Hemer (Westphalia), that apart from studies on church law (Hans Dombois) concentrated on the dialogue between quantum physics, theology and philosophy (Günter Howe). The first director of the newly established institute (German acronym FEST) was the eminent philosopher and educational reformer Georg Picht, who had been ordinary professor for philosophy of religion at the theology faculty of Heidelberg University from 1964. The first chair of the new academic board of trustees was Ludwig Raiser, while the executive board was chaired by Karl Lücking, deputy theological president of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia. They both played a major part in establishing the institute.



On 26 April 1957 the board of trustees decided at its first meeting to take up the request of Protestant military bishop Hermann Kunst and convene an interdisciplinary commission to explore the theological implications of people's perception of war, which had undergone a sea change since the advent of nuclear weapons. At the time, the passionate arguments about institutionalized military chaplaincies and a possible nuclear armament of the federal armed forces were threatening to divide the Evangelical Church in Germany. Two years later, after embittered debates, the commission in 1959 adopted the "Heidelberg Theses", which deal with the way the church regards the issue of nuclear weapons. To this day, these theses, drafted by physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, play a significant role in the discussion of the ethical aspects of nuclear armament.

From the start, FEST projects followed three principles and, despite all the changes at the Institute, they still apply:

1. Interdisciplinary methods are regarded as necessary and appropriate for dealing with the closely interwoven and often interactive processes of the modern world. It is clear that interdisciplinary scholarship is not possible without competence in the individual disciplines.
2. Christians bear political responsibility for shaping the world, hence the importance attached to policy advice in most of the Institute's projects. It is clear that such advice must never be along party lines.
3. Critique of science and technology is an essential part of the research process, in an age in which they are also proving a threat to a civilization based on technological progress. It is clear that philosophy will play a crucial part here as the "study of learning".

In the 1960s FEST grew steadily, with theologians, natural scientists, social scientists and economists being attracted to join the team. The infrastructure was

expanded. All this enabled the Institute to undertake major projects. Apart from the ongoing working groups, two large commissions were established which, linking up with "Nuclear age – war and peace", produced Studies on the social and political situation of the federal armed forces (1965/66). In the 1960s and 1970s, five groups involving about 80 (in-house and external) scholars have taken part in a peace research project focusing on the possible contribution of theology and the church to peace as the condition for human survival in an age of weapons of mass destruction. Fifteen *Studien zur Friedensforschung* (studies on peace research), several volumes in the Klett-Cotta series *Forschungen und Berichten* (research and reports) and in the FEST *Texten und Materialien* (texts and materials) contain the results of this work, which has become thematically more many-faceted over the years.

The varied advisory activities pursued by FEST were enabled and sustained by a broad fundamental research base in Theology, Philosophy, Law, Theory of Natural Sciences, Medical Ethics, Ecology, Economics and, not least, by the endeavours to find a theoretical foundation for the new discipline of Peace Research. Studies on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's works formed a further focus after the arrival at FEST of Heinz Eduard Tödt and Ilse Tödt in 1961.

Every week the staff discuss historical, systematic and methodological topics, to which all could contribute. Once a year, a whole week was devoted to a thorough discussion of philosophical questions. These "philosopher talks", with a guest speaker, were attended by the staff and members of the board of trustees. The board of trustees devoted years of work to questions related to the "preconditions of scholarship".

After the death of Georg Picht in 1982 the executive board appointed Klaus von Schubert as director. A political scientist, he initiated the annual peace analyses known as *Friedensgutachten*, published in cooperation with other research institutes, and made new contacts with arms control specialists in Western countries and also in Eastern Europe. He was only granted five more years to live. Sociologist Johannes Schwerdtfeger took over as acting director for a time, then the philosopher Heinz Wismann succeeded him as director. From 2003 to 2006 Eberhard Jüngel, professor of theology at Tübingen University, directed the institute alongside his other commitments. The next part-time FEST director, from 2007 to 2011, was the Heidelberg professor for German and European administrative law Eberhard Schmidt-Aßmann. Since 2012 Klaus Tanner, full professor in the Theology Faculty of Heidelberg University for Systematic Theology and Ethics, has been the part-time director of FEST.

The first two and a half decades were characterised by a carefully planned



and consistently conducted process of establishing FEST and building it up, generously supported by the churches. The subsequent years saw more difficult conditions for exploring new work areas and developing projects thematically. In times of declining church income a core task has become the maintaining of the organisation itself. Gaining third-party funding has become vital. The governing bodies have also had to be adapted to the change in contemporary circumstances, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Projects have shifted to new emphases. "Peace" has been supplemented by "sustainable

development", "church law" by "religion and culture". Huge areas of work have opened up, particularly the dialogue between theology and the social sciences, as well as studies on ecology in the broadest sense of the word. The churches' interest in the FEST research projects is ongoing and, indeed, has increased.

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