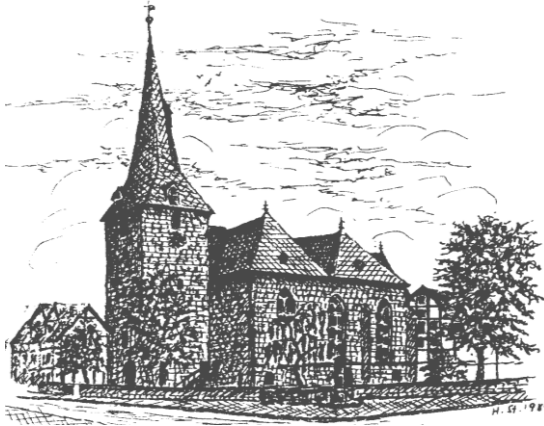


Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Melsungen

A round through the Stadtkirche



*Welcome to the „Stadtkirche“,
the City Church of the town of Melsungen*

The Christian citizens of Melsungen have been celebrating their services here in this church for 650 years!
During work days the church is a restful oasis and a place for prayers and meditation.

The Tower/Steeple

You have entered the church through the steeple-end door; built on the west side, it is the oldest part of the church and was built in 1230. Before you step into the nave(or sanctuary) you can see on your left a part of a glass window in the Neo-Gothic style showing Mary with child visiting with Elizabeth, also pregnant with John the Baptist.

The round portal in the Romanesque style guiding you into the nave of the church dates from the first building period (around 1230). Its walls are formed by small columns and little capitals; the left ones in an antique way (Corinthian), the ones on the right in a Romanesque cube-shaped-capital. Note the portal where you find capitals in shapes of figures: on the left side the head of a person, on the right the head of a lion.

The massive character of the whole portal shows its importance and is expressed symbolically through its architectural style as a secure and protective place to the visitor: In the West – direction of the sunset – you find the defending tower to show resistance against darkness and evil. Opposite, in the East, the direction of the sunrise, you find the Lord's Table where the congregation celebrates the Holy Communion giving sign of the presence of Christ's Resurrection. Imagine the whole building in the shape of a cross, and also Christ's outstretched body on it, lying flat on the ground. Christ's head faces East, thus the most sacred part of the building.

This text explains that the word east - German Ost, comes from the Latin-rooted word „orientation“. Orient (Middle East) derives from the Latin verb “oriri” = to rise – sunrise. The word Orient means land of the sunrise – and in the beginning of Christianity it ought to give orientation. The word changed during times into Ost = east, important for Christian churches, as the room, for the altar is always in the east, where hope comes from with the rising sun – and the country where Jesus Christ, the Saviors, once lived, for he had spoken to his congregation, “ I am the light of the word: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8, 12)

The Nave

Both, the nave and the choir are built in the Gothic Style. By about 1420 the nave may have been completed. The impression of wideness of the main aisle is caused by the same height of all of its parts (church like a hall = *Hallenkirche*), where you can notice that the width of 20 meters measures evidently more than the length of 17 meters.

The nave itself shows no decoration any more, which brings about an atmosphere of quietness and no distraction, in keeping with the pietistic tradition of the Reformation. In 1605 these Calvinistic ideas of the Reformation, brought forward by the Hessian Landgrave Moritz the Erudite, had caused an iconoclasm (Mauritanian Reform). This meant that all pieces of art and items for worship predating the time of Reformation, had to be taken out of all Lower Hessian churches. Moritz thought them not to be “protestant”. This is the reason why there are no altars in the aisles, no pictures of Mary or other saints, and no medieval baptismal font.

Hesse was historically one of the earliest seats of the Reformation and center of influence. The whole story of Philipp of Hessen, the protector of Martin Luther, the first “Protestant University” in Marburg, and the great doctrinal debates there, are well worth learning to understand the importance of this area in the founding of the Protestant Church.

The Choir

Before the main nave was built the choir segment had been erected (consecrated in 1354/55). Only after this the main church was built, it had to be fitted in between the tower and the choir. This is the reason why the main church is not perfectly straight, but the axe shows a little bend (just for the fitting!). Bends or cracks like this are found in different Gothic churches. On crucifixes of that period Christ is often shown with his head hanging down. Some feel that possibly this bending of the head was repeated in the bend of the church?

The choir, separated from the naves by the triumphal arc, lights up in brightness and a warm glow, especially on sunny days, through five Gothic (pointed) windows.

These windows were restored in 1905 in a Neo-Gothic style with the figures of the four Evangelists with their symbols: St. Mathew and the angel, St. Mark with the lion, St. Luke with the bull and St. John with the eagle. In the middle there is the cross with Christ and Mary, giving indication of the coming supreme sacrifice of Jesus as the centre of the Christian belief.

The Altar

In 2003, on the occasion of the latest restoration, a new sandstone altar was erected. Though built in a modern style, it evidently correlates with the Gothic naves and the measurement of the choir; its pedestal is clearly to be seen as a contemporary design. Its altar-piece lies on a plinth from steel, by which the principal piece of the church despite of its size gives the impression of lightness.

The Antependium

Designed by Margarethe Keith, it consists of two basic linen cloths in the form of a cross. The hanging front part shows lines made with buttons of mother pearl. They follow the text of the Apostolic Creed literally. The left and right sides are mirror images. Between these two “button-written” parts hangs a handmade felt cloth in the colors of the ecclesiastic year with the respective symbolism (violet: cross as an anchor of hope; white: rising Easter sun; red: rose with cross as symbol; green: branch of the vine with a cross, for Jesus says: “I am the vine you are the branches.”

The **Easter candle stick** was carved by the Melsungen sculptor Andreas Tollhopf in 1987 (he made several fine wooden and metal pieces of art). Since the Middle Ages the pelican with its brood is a symbol for redemption through the death of Jesus Christ. It looks as

if the pelican tears open its skin to feed the brood with its own blood to give them life.

The wooden **Lectern** by the sculptor Hermann Pohl from Kassel again shows the four Evangelists in a more symbolic way.

The Font

The font was also carved by Hermann Pohl in 1983. Here the sculptor was inspired by the scene, when Jesus met the Samaritan woman. *John, 4*

On the bronze dish one can see four baptismal stories taken from Acts.

The Pulpit made from oak with its typical ornament in a Neo-Gothic style, together with the galleries, the windows in the choir, and the doors, all date from the 1896/97 restoration.

The **tombstone** on the Southern wall of the choir reminds us of William from Hesse, the illegitimate son of Landgrave Ludwig II. The inscription under the coat of arms says: “Anno domini (in the year of the Lord) 1550/ the day of St. agatha/ the honorable lord/Wilhelm from hesse/ baron of lands/castle /departed by death/ god the almighty may/ be merciful to his soul.” (the text is written in the spelling of those days).

The Showcase

In the niche of the wall in the right aisle in the showcase lies a Bible from the year 1543. It was in the possession of Johannes Lening, a former Carthusian monk near the Holy Mountain (nearby hill), who became the first Protestant pastor in Melsungen.

The Key Stones

To the vertexes of the ribbed vaults, key stones in a three-dimensional way are added. The figurative portrayals in parts had been applied to the medieval furnishing of the church.

So the head of Christ does not appear coincidentally above the altar, as the seat of the liturgical summit of the service.

Opposite this, the two figurative portrayals above the chancel have been added to the transverse arches later. One of them is St. Nicolas, the Bishop of Myra (in his red vestments and the bishop's crook) and St. George (with his lance of banner, armor and escutcheon).

The figures may have and are thought to have come from the "*Hospitalkapelle St. Georg*" on the bank of the river Fulda, where there had been built an altar for St. Nicolas in 1407.

The Depictions of Saints

Nicolas - Santa Claus - was a bishop in Myra, today in Turkey, in the 4th century. He is an historic person, around whom a circle of stories is told. First of all it is certain, that he was a friend of all children and of the poor: "A poor neighbour who had no money to feed his three daughters, and next to that, was not able to give them in marriage, because there was no money for a dowry; so this poor man thought about selling his daughters to a brothel. When Bishop Nicolas heard about that, he secretly went to the house and threw three little sacks with gold of his very own parental heritage through a window into the house, one for each daughter. The girls were saved." This was the beginning of a tradition, that the night before St. Nicolaus' Day, Dec.6th, children put their shoes in front of their door, asking the saint for sweets or a gift. A story is told that this popular saint once had saved a boat in distress. Since then Nicholas became the patron of the sailors. St. Nicolas-Churches are very often found in seaports and along river banks.

George is the courageous fighter against non-believers. It is told that in a sea near the town of Selena in Libya a terrible dragon menaced the citizens by his poisonous breath. To protect themselves they had to deliver two lambs a day; later the dragon demanded the sacrifice of many of their sons and daughters. Eventually the king's daughter also was chosen by lot. After a touching good-bye to her parents, the princess left for the sea near the town. In that very moment the knight George came along on his horse, making the sign of the cross with his lance, which he then ran through the dragon. The monster sank down, heavily injured. The princess guided the

dragon on a leach into town, where everybody was going to flee. But George promised to kill the beast, if they would be willing to convert to Christianity. Thereupon the king and all the citizens were baptized and the demon never again was able to poison the town. This legend reminds that Christianity was regarded as a spiritual and religious liberation by the former pagan peoples. Next to that, the achievement of the Christian belief did not come about without struggling and often not without martyrdom.

On the key stone in the vaulting in front of the sill to the chancel the **Annunciation to Mary** of Christ's birth is shown. Mary in her blue gown stands in front of the Angel Gabriel. Blue is the color of virginity. Frightened and humbly she crosses her hands in front of her chest. Between the two persons the open Bible on a lectern gives a sign that here God's will is being done. A golden ribbon (banner) symbolizes the announcement of the angel, "Be saluted, you Blessed Virgin. Our Lord is with you. ... You will be pregnant and delivered of a son and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and be called "Son of the Highest."

Mary's unique experience with God remains a secret. Mary gives birth to God's Son, a child in which we meet the nature of God in a human body. This fact gives Mary a high regard within Christian tradition. So this church, too, once was consecrated as a church for Mother Mary ("church of Our Lady").

On a red key stone in the left nave you can see **Archangel Michael** in his white gown. Michael conquers the dragon and kills him with his golden lance. The dragon symbolizes satanic power.

Since the Middle Ages, Archangel Michael has been a well-loved saint. He always works on behalf of the people, and is told to be the guide for their souls into eternity. In addition, he was honoured as the patron of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nations. Hence comes the nickname "German Michel" - Deutscher Michel. - a naive person, a bit silly. God's messenger Michael symbolizes that Christians are taught to beware of sin, death, and devil. ... "for he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep you in all thy ways." (Psalms 91, 11)

Opposite in the right nave on a key stone you can make out **St. Katharina** with her crown and her symbols, the wheel and sword. In 1423 an altar for St. Katharina had been founded in the Stadtkirche of Melsungen. It was taken away during the Reformation to make sure that Christ is the only center of worship, not Mother Mary, nor any saints.

Saint Catherine – Katharina: The intelligent princess of Egypt has become a martyr because she had ordered the Roman Emperor to neglect all pagan goddesses and accept the Christian God as the only and true one. Impressed by this keen lady, the despot tried to fight the clever and brave Christian lady by means of her own intelligence. In a disputation 50 philosophers should convince her of the absurdity of the Christian belief. But the contrary happened: Catherine's belief persuaded the philosophical opponents. Now the frustrated emperor tried to make the believing woman obedient by bribe. He would make her his empress, if she was willing to leave her idolatry.

A small laughter followed this offer. Full of anger the neglected dictator threw her into the dungeon. But in the end even the emperor's mother was highly inspired by Catherine, and was baptized. He had a short and cruel punishment ready for the saint: he ordered to fix Catherine onto a wheel with nails and knives as to tear her body into pieces. When she was guided to her martyr-wheel a flash came and destroyed it. Thereupon he killed her with a sword.

These legends have made Catherine known as an intelligent confessor of the Belief, and as an ideal of female emancipation. She belongs to the history of Christian devoutness.