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Dear friends,

„What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?“ (Luke 9:25)

With the words of the watchword for the year 1997 we send you warm and heartfelt greetings, thanking many of you sincerely, who have sent us Christmas cards and letters. We appreciate so much each and every sign of worldwide friendship and fellowship across cultures. Again, we ourselves have not managed to send you our good wishes in time for Christmas, yet it is never too late to wish you God's rich blessings for a happy and peaceful year 1997. The word of Jesus, which was chosen as watchword for this year, speaks to us at a time, when phrases such as „economic growth“, „structural adjustment“ or „deregulation“ still remain as magic words. The majority of the poor however, who have been waiting for the trickle down effect of economic gains for the past ten to fifteen years, are still suffering under the same burden, and their numbers are even increasing. „Growth“ in most parts of the world means „jobless growth“, most particularly among young school leavers. Therefore, „to gain the world and to forfeit oneself“ means a challenge for each community and society as much as for each individual. Even our own children, well educated with all advantages of a German middle class background in one of the economically leading nations of the world, cannot be sure of their future - how much more millions of young people in countless countries, who end up desperate and frustrated. How many are tempted to get entangled in gangs, drug trafficking or prostitution for the sake of „gaining the world“, or are even used and forced by others to do so? How many have become soldier kids in war-torn areas, feeling strong carrying a gun and yet suffering from traumatic injuries? How many go wild here in Europe, harrassing foreigners, refugees, disabled persons, homeless vagabonds, all those who appear weaker than they themselves? And yet, aren't these signs of a young generation crying out in search of a purpose in life? How many adults just show an attitude of indifference, being only occupied with themselves? What are our visions for a future beyond consumerism? What do we offer to the generation of those, „from whom we have borrowed the earth“?

Recalling the message of Christmas we are reminded of the fact that this challenge is not a new one. Not to lose or forfeit oneself has always been a spiritual challenge for all communities throughout the ages. In the German secular society, where the churches are conspicuously losing momentum in public life, this time of crisis is also an opportunity: new small groups and initiatives are springing up, not so much based on tradition, but on a common commitment and vision. Only a week ago, the community of Taizé in France has attracted as many as 70000 young people from all over Europe for this year's „youth pilgrimage“, held in Stuttgart over New Year's Day. The message of Roger Schutz, the founder and prior of the Taizé community, is one of simplicity, of prayer and meditation, of authenticity, and of compassion with the suffering and the poor. Many people, church members, feel alienated from our churches, who they may regard as bureaucratic institutions, but many are open and responsive to the Gospel as a message of life. To convey this message in a language which speaks to secular people and to live this message faithfully is the great missionary challenge of our time. In a small way we try to find and to play our role in this struggle.

For one year, I (Bernhard) have been in charge of the General Secretariat of EMS (Association of Churches and Missions in South Western Germany), for the first half of 1996 still deputizing as Africa Desk secretary, as my successor, Christoph Reichel, could assume

his office only in August. It was a challenging and rewarding year 1996. In January, I could pay a farewell visit to Ghana, together with my successor Christoph and with Rev. Rica Goliath from South Africa, meant as a „team visit“ with the aim to promote contacts between our various partner churches and to overcome exclusively bilateral relations. Unfortunately, the visit was overshadowed by a severe malaria fever, which took me some time to recover. Unexpectedly, in October/November, I had to deputize for Christoph and could visit South Africa once again. Fortunately, Margarete could accompany me for part of the journey, meeting many old friends in Matatiele and Cape Town. For the first time we could leave our children behind for one good week. Partly they were taken care of by sisters of mine and by friends, but partly they managed perfectly well for themselves. This gives us the courage to try it again and to travel together, when I will pay an official visit to our partners in the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan, Israel/Palestine) over Easter. The international EMS Mission Council, our governing body, met twice in 1996. It is an exciting experiment to work for a meaningful participation of our 17 African and Asian partner churches in our decision making processes and in our common witness, but it also means tedious work to prepare all documents and to run international conferences in a medium language which is a foreign language for all participants. During the opening service of the Mission Council meeting in May, I was inducted as EMS General Secretary. Celebrating this event as a worldwide fellowship was a moving experience. In daily life, to represent the association, to be responsible for an office with 50 odd employees and 30 to 40 co-workers serving in partner churches, facing increasing financial constraints, sometimes causes headaches, but all in all the spirit is high and the task interesting.

Margarete continues to enjoy teaching, the spirit in her class (10 years of age) is very good, likewise the cooperation with the parents. Outings, visits to museums and concerts, a night in a nearby castle, enacting the world of knights and ladies, encounters with the world of Islam (Turkish moslems in Germany) have been highlights of the year. She continues to be in charge of the school choir, which gives her much additional work, but also much joy, involving the children, teachers and parents. She continues to sing in a choir of high standard in the town of Schwäbisch Gmünd and receives lessons in training her voice.

The children are occupied with school and home work, sports, music (Dorothee playing the flute, Christoph and Samia the piano), friends and watching TV. In May, we celebrated Dorothee's confirmation day together with a great number of relatives and friends. It was a truly commemorative day. In summer, Dorothee (15 years) spent a week in London together with her cousin and returned enthusiastically, Christoph (13 years) and Samia (11 years) still joined us during our holidays in the South of France and in the Tuscany, Italy.

Another highlight of the year was the visit of our American friends from Kenmore United Methodist Church, Buffalo, N. Y., to our former congregation in Hohenstaufen. We were happy to host our friends Don and Barb Weaver and to partly participate in the programme. A very special event, which I was privileged to attend together with Rev. Dorothea Margenfeld, was the German State President's reception for the South African Head of State, Nelson Mandela, in Augustusburg Castle in May. I will always remember greeting the grand statesman face to face, even though with some ambiguous feelings, as among all the invited guests from the political, diplomatic and business world the solidarity movement was hardly represented.

Wishing you God's guidance and blessings throughout the year 1997, hoping to meet you again one day, with much love from the Dinkelaker family,

Yours in friendship

Bernhard & Margarete