

Austrian Government Grants Unification Church Legal Status

Peter Zoehrer
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After more than 40 years of being an “underground” movement, the Austrian branch of the Unification Church has been officially recognized by the Austrian government.

On June 15, 2015, the federal government’s Office for Religious Affairs officially registered the Austrian Unification Church and recognized it as a “confessional community.” This is a significant step for the Unification Church, as it means it has received “state recognition without privileges” from the federal government. The church is now the eighth confessional community to be officially registered in Austria.

Professor Dr. Christian Bruenner, a constitutional lawyer and the co-founder and former president of Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, said: “This is a sign of a pluralistic state under the rule of law. One of the most essential rights in a functioning democracy, namely the right to the freedom of religion, has hereby been granted.”

The Unification Church was first established in Austria in 1965 with the arrival of missionary Paul Werner, a German brother who had joined the church in the United States. However, in 1974, the church’s legal status as a religious association, which had been granted in 1966, was suspended by the Security Agency of Vienna due to “formal reasons.”

For decades, Unificationists in Austria fought the stigma placed on them by anti-cult advocates, who branded the association as a “threat to public security and order.” Though these claims were exposed as

myths by sociologists and scholars of religion as early as the 1980s, this official recognition is a huge step forward for the church and for freedom of religion in Europe. The Austrian federal government's decision essentially has rebutted those prejudicial claims, something that Unificationists in other parts of the world are still fighting for.

“Finally our movement has been rehabilitated through the decision of the Office for Religious Affairs,” said Peter Zoehrer, national leader of the Unification Church of Austria.

Even during the “underground” years, in spite of legal strife and discrimination, the church continued to draw young Austrians who were inspired by its message of peace and its many public service activities. Among other achievements, the Unification Church sent twenty Austrian missionaries into countries of the communist Eastern bloc during the Cold War years.

Unificationists in Austria have continuously contributed to activities that promote the spiritual progress of society, intercultural cooperation, and an ethical consciousness for the sake of future generations. This was evident in True Mother's recent address at the Vienna headquarters of the United Nations. After joining nearly 2,500 Unificationists the day before in a celebration of 50 years of the Unification Church in Europe, True Mother spoke to a gathering of international dignitaries at the UN's Vienna headquarters on May 11, 2015, on the importance of resolving tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

True Mother's visit to Europe was a tremendous victory, considering the fact that less than a decade earlier she and True Father were unable to even set foot on the continent. In 1995, following the lead of the United Kingdom government, which placed a ban on True Father entering the country, the government of Germany banned not only True Father but also True Mother. Because Germany was a signatory to the Schengen Convention, which established a common visa policy for all the member nations of the European Economic Community, every other signatory nation was obligated to ban True Parents.

Until the United Kingdom and Germany rescinded the ban on True Parents in 2005 and 2007, respectively, for all those years most of Europe was closed to True Parents.

This decision by the Austrian government is a victory not only for Austria but also for the whole of Europe. It sets a precedent for freedom of religion, something that is still very much a priority and concern for Unificationists around the world.