

LUTHERANS IN LITHUANIA

Lithuania is a small country. It is about the size of the state of West Virginia. The distance between Vilnius on the eastern border of the republic and Klaipeda on the "West Coast" bordering the Baltic Sea is about the same as the distance between Fort Wayne, IN and Chicago, IL. The population would easily fit into the city of Chicago - there are more people in Indiana than there are in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia combined. There was a time, many centuries ago, when Lithuania was the largest and most powerful state in Eastern Europe - but that was long ago. The people of Lithuania are chiefly of a single ethnic group; they speak an ancient language which is roughly contemporaneous with classical Latin and Sanskrit. It is related to the Latvian language, but the two are separated by so many centuries that they are no longer mutually understandable. The Latvian language has been modified by the influence of German, Russian, and other tongues to a far greater extent than the Lithuanian language, which is so archaic that students of philology all over the world continue to study it. One more difference, and it is a significant difference: Lithuania, which was for centuries united with Poland dynastically and politically, is predominantly Roman Catholic. The Church of Rome no longer has any official status as the state religion, but the majority of people - although they are thoroughly secularized - identify themselves with it.

The obvious differences between Lithuania and America have some effect on Lutheranism in both nations. Lutherans in Lithuania worship, say their prayers, and sing their hymns in the Lithuanian language. Until World War II a large number of Lutherans here worshiped and prayed in German, but that ended abruptly with the forced repatriation of the Germans at the beginning of the war, the flight of thousands in the West when the Red Army swept westward across the Baltic States and Poland in 1944, and with the second repatriation in the 1950s. About 200,000 Lutherans (many of them German-speaking) left to settle in West Germany, the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania lost 9 out of 10 of its members and the majority of its pastors in the repatriations. Left behind were little more than half a dozen pastors to serve the roughly 2 dozen churches which the Soviets did not close. Today 20 pastors ("Kunigai" - "Priests") serve 54 parishes. All the Divine Services are in Lithuanian, except in the Klaipeda parish, which has a monthly German Service, and in Vilnius, the capital city, where there is an English language Service for the benefit of the diplomatic community. There are also some parishes on the Latvian border in which the Divine Services and sermons are in the Latvian language.

The government of the Lutheran Church here is in the hands of the Consistory, (7 pastors and 3 lay members) the equivalent of the ELCA Church Council, and the Bishop ("Vyskupas" - who is the chairman of the Consistory). The Synod of the church (what we call the 'ELCA Churchwide Assembly') meets once every three years for one day to transact church business. Between meetings of the Synod the Consistory takes care of the church's business.

Most of the pastors are young - under the age of 40. They are faithful and highly motivated. At most only one or two of all the clergy receive anything which might be called a salary. Most serve two or three parishes, and may receive some remuneration for car mileage, and a gift of money or food for Baptisms, Weddings, and Burials. Some earn their living working as educators, or at other employment suitable for clergymen, and most clergy wives are teachers, nurses, professional women, or have other suitable work. This does not deter them in the slightest.

They have heard that in some Lutheran churches pastors who reach a certain age *retire* from active service. They have heard it, but it is a foreign notion to them. Every pastor serves until he is prevented from doing so by infirmity or death.

About one out of four of the Lithuanian Lutheran priests were formerly Roman Catholic priests. They tell us that others too would come if there were places for them and some chance of earning a living. It is the doctrine of the Gospel which attracts them. They understand the Lutheran Confessions, the official doctrinal position of the Lutheran Church, to be a kind of MAGNA CARTA, a charter of freedom in the Gospel. I have had the privilege of serving as tutor for some of them. They are enthusiastic about Lutheran theology and its "Evangelical Catholicism." Never in the history of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church has a pastor left the communion of this church to become Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, Jewish, or to become secularized.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania is the third largest confession in the country - after Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (including groups of "Old Believers"). There are several very small Protestant groups - including half a dozen congregations of the Reformed (Calvinist) Church, some Methodists and Baptists, and a handful of Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The elite and highly educated Jewish population was almost completely destroyed by the Gestapo in only two months at the beginning of WWII. Today there are small Jewish communities in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda. There is also a small group called the Karaites. It is related to Judaism in that it accepts only the Old Testament.

It has never been easy to be a Lutheran in Lithuania. It is a church which knows well what it means to live under the cross. It was proscribed, prohibited, and persecuted for over two centuries by Roman Catholicism. The Russian Imperial regime tried to force it into union in which the promise and power of Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Body and Blood of our Lord were derided and denied. Since the advent of independence in 1991, German Protestants have tried time and again to coerce the church to adopt new theological and ecclesiological positions which deny the inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures and the importance of essential doctrines, and advocate instead practices which are contrary to the Law of God and the historical and universal practices of the Christian Church (same-sex 'marriage,' radical reordering of the Holy Ministry, et al). Against all these the church in Lithuania continues to stand firm. Since Lutheran worship is similar to worship in the Roman church, and Lutheran clergy wear similar vestments, and the church holds to traditional Lutheran doctrine, some, like the Reformed, have taken to calling the Lutherans "Little Catholics." This is really nothing new. They said the same thing over 450 years ago! In the 19th century Lutherans in Lithuania were forced by law to wear the black robe ("Talar") of the Calvinist Protestants, and here in 'Memelland,' they were required to use the liturgy of the Reformed Church in the hope that they would soon forget about being Lutherans. It did not work! Doctrine and practice are understood by Lithuanian Lutherans to be very important, and the pastors and parishioners are willing to stand up for what they believe - even when heavy crosses are laid on them. None has any desire to break the fellowship of the church. To leave for less than a very serious cause would leave them bereft of the brotherhood, the consolation - and the correction - of the larger fellowship.

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