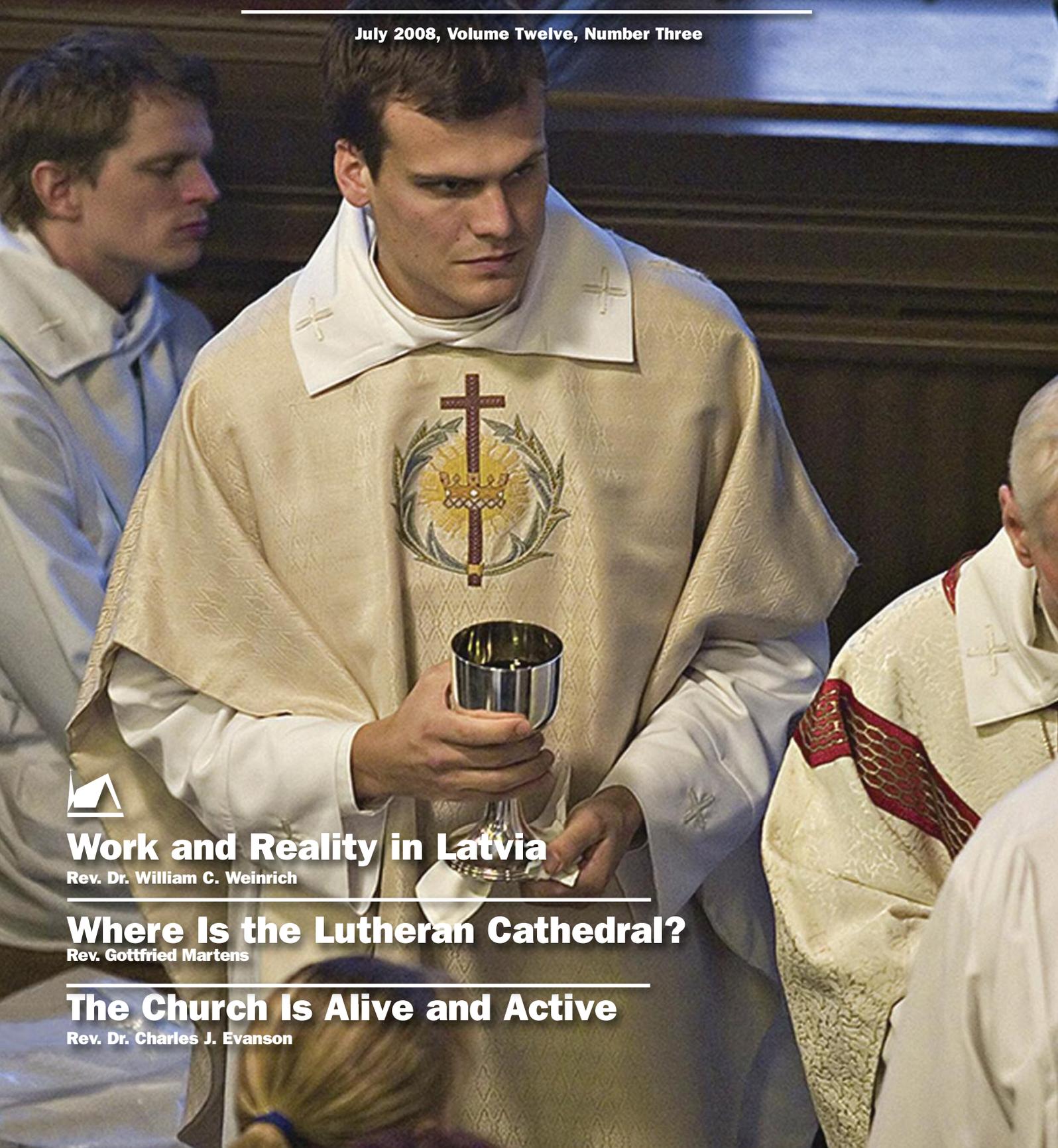


For the Life of the World

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

July 2008, Volume Twelve, Number Three



Work and Reality in Latvia

Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich

Where Is the Lutheran Cathedral?

Rev. Gottfried Martens

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The Church in Germany: A Struggle with Culture

By Mr. Jacob Gaugert

In many midwestern LCMS congregations one is likely to find an old German Agenda, Bible, or congregational register lying around somewhere. People tell stories of the “good ol’ days” when Pastor So-and-so had to preach in German and English. A good German Lutheran was seen as someone with stubbornness, conviction, and holding on to the “old ways”—just like great-grandpa. Growing up in such a context one can often make the assumption that to be a good Lutheran is to be a good German. The more Lutheran, the more German; the more German, the more Lutheran. This was certainly the image I had before I began spending time in Germany.

My first extended stay in Germany was in 2003 in Wittenberg, Luther’s city. I was going to spend three weeks enjoying church life in the same place where Luther walked. I was going to sit in packed pews among throngs of faithful Lutherans in Luther’s church and sing “Ein Feste Burg.” I had grown up a German Lutheran in Wisconsin all of my life, but now I was really going to see what real “Lutheranism” looked like. What I actually experienced was quite different from what I had expected.

I expected Luther’s church, St. Mary’s, to be full. Instead, on the first Sunday I was there, only about eighty people—half of them tourists—showed up. In the

following weeks, I learned that such a low attendance was not uncommon—both in this church and in many of the other official Protestant churches in Germany. But why? How could it be that in the city of Luther, where the Gospel had once been so clearly confessed, today so few people even cared?

One must consider some historical events that led up to the current situation. One such event was the forced union between Lutheran and Reformed churches in the nineteenth century. The Lutherans and the Reformed were forced to merge into the same church, known as the Prussian Union. This union is still in effect and is seen in the décor of many important church buildings in Germany. Not only will one see statues of Luther but often statues of Calvin, Zwingli, and Melancthon, side by side, as in the Berlin Cathedral. Confessional distinction is watered down; theological differences on issues such as the understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper are downplayed. Along with this forced union, rationalism also came into the church. Christ's miracles, His bodily resurrection, the virgin birth, and other supernatural events were explained away as pious fables. It is not uncommon even to this day for certain clergy to openly deny the bodily resurrection from their pulpits and in their church newsletters during Easter.

The events of the Second World War also affected the church. Under Hitler's regime, the state churches of Germany bought into the false ideology of a master race and the persecution of anyone of Jewish origin. Red paraments with swastikas adorned the altars of many churches, and Christian clergy with Jewish ancestry were banned from preaching and teaching. There were individuals who fought against this trend. One thinks of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hermann Sasse, and numerous others, who risked or even lost their lives to support their persecuted neighbors.

After the war, the church in former East Germany faced difficulties under the communist government. Church members were overlooked for job positions. Sadly, church leadership sometimes cooperated with the state in giving out incriminating information on

their own members. It is easy to see why the majority of Germans today—especially those of the former East—feel no need for the church. Although the official state church does much work with social outreach for the poor and marginalized, they no longer offer a voice that calls people to repentance and offers the comfort found exclusively in Christ. Particularly in the field of sexual ethics, the church takes an open stance towards divorce, premarital sex, and homosexuality. There are exceptions, both in independent churches like our sister church, the



When the church chooses to latch on to an outside worldview, the reputation and witness of the church will suffer when the outside worldview fails. When the church bows to the culture and ignores biblical truths, the Gospel message becomes muffled or eventually muted.

SELK (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany), or in some conservative corners of the state church, but for the most part the message the church has to share is no different from what one can hear in the secular culture. Messages of tolerance, love, and acceptance can be found in popular literature or TV programming. When people do choose to be religious, they often opt for a sect or a completely different religion like Islam, some belief system that acknowledges right and wrong and offers a distinctive message.

What I learned from my experience in Germany is that to be a good Lutheran has nothing to do with being a good German. The example of the current state of affairs in Germany is one that we all should take to heart. When the church chooses to latch on to an outside worldview, the reputation and witness of the church will suffer when the outside worldview fails. When the church bows to the culture and ignores biblical truths, the Gospel message becomes muffled or eventually muted.

To be a good Lutheran, that is, to be a good Christian, is not dependent on popular trends, language, political parties, nationalities, or race. The church is her own culture. The church and her ministers are called to proclaim Christ to all and to remain faithful to His Word, "both in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). May the Lord grant this to His church in every time and place. 🏰

Mr. Jacob Gaugert vicared in Berlin and will be heading to Norman, Oklahoma, as vicar of Trinity Lutheran Church.

