

For the Life of the World

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Work and Reality in Latvia

Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich

Where Is the Lutheran Cathedral?

Rev. Gottfried Martens

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Faith lives under the cross.

Nothing could be more true of the Christian existence, and nowhere could it be more truly experienced than in Latvia. Latvia is a nation with a very difficult past and an uncertain future. And in that mix stands the Lutheran Church which is itself in a period of uncertain challenge and rapid change.

The history of Christianity in Latvia begins in the 12th century when an Augustinian monk, Meinhart, accompanied German crusaders for the conversion of the peoples in the Baltic region (c. 1186). The Reformation came early to Latvia, especially to Riga, its largest city. The Livonians (as the people were called) received a short letter of encouragement from Martin Luther in 1523. The Baltic region was also much influenced by the pietism led by Count Zinzendorf.

The Latvian people were through the centuries largely under the lordship of others, the Russians, the Swedes, mostly the Germans. However, in 1918 the Latvians established their own rule in the Republic

of Latvia. Along with this was the establishment of a truly Latvian Lutheran Church (LELB) with its own bishop, Karlis Irbe, who was consecrated in 1922.

The next years saw considerable development in the country and church, but with the conclusion of WWII Latvia came under the atheistic communism of the Soviet Union. Many of its intellectuals and leaders, including clergy, either fled into exile or were

systematically eliminated. Churches were destroyed and religious education virtually disappeared. The situation dramatically changed in the early 1990s when Latvia regained its independence. The new bishop, Karlis Gailitis, unexpectedly died, and in 1993 the present bishop, Janis Vanags, was elected.

When the church came out of communist dictatorship, it immediately faced a number of difficult realities. Through the centuries and during the 20th century the LELB had traditional and close ties with the European Lutheran churches, especially that of Sweden and those of Germany. However, these churches had largely succumbed to various modern trends (higher biblical criticism, ordination of women, increasingly homosexual advocacy), and these trends the LELB wished to withstand. At the same time, the

LELB is a small church of a small country and wishes to


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maintain its ecumenical relationships to the greatest extent possible. Therefore, one challenge facing the LELB is its ecumenical position as a confessing Lutheran church within a much larger and more powerful world Lutheran community (especially in Germany and Scandinavia) that often has a more liberal agenda.

Another set of serious challenges arose from the enforced slumber of the Soviet period. Virtually all of LELB's pastors were in exile or eliminated. This means that the continuity of leadership necessary for a healthy church was gone. Today there are about 150 pastors, but the average age is only 32. The LELB lacks the pastor corps of 15-30 years experience. The maturity of church leadership, therefore, is present but not broad. It will take time for this situation to rectify itself. At the moment, the church is in the process of changing its polity. It recently elected two additional bishops, one for the eastern part of Latvian (Daugavpils) and one for the western part (Liepaja), with the Archbishop in Riga. This change in constitution is not universally accepted but was

thought useful both for the promotion of institutional unity and for the episcopal care of the pastors. The church is struggling also to solidify pastor salaries that remain very low, and this within an economy that presently has 13 percent inflation.

The Christians of Latvia are deeply pious and

committed but have serious challenges: liturgical change; pressure from the European churches to conform to new theological and social trends, institutional development, theological education needs. For me it is a great honor and privilege to work among these good people. It think that it is an honor for the LCMS to be in fellowship with the Lutherans of Latvia. I would further maintain that the LCMS has much to gain by knowing those whose faith was forged in real fire but who now look also to us for the resources to be a faithful Lutheran church in the contemporary world. 

Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich is currently serving as Rector at Luther Academy, Riga, Latvia.



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in Latvia

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