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A NEW UNDERGROUND CHURCH?

by Bill Yoder

The church square in Český Tešín just across the border from the Polish sister city of Cieszyn depicts well the plight of Silesian Lutheranism. The Church headquarters on the left, southern edge of the square are utilized by the "Silesian Evangelical Church in the Czech Republic" and its bishop, Vladislav Volny. But the parsonage in the middle and the impressive church on the right remain in the hands of ex-Bishop Vilem Stonawski. Voted out of office by a special synod session three years ago, Stonawski and his followers have refused to cede property to the victorious group. The official church only gained access to its headquarters by changing locks during an early-morning raid. Volny insists, "Legally, there is no reason why we could not take over the church [next door], but we want to create as little additional bad blood as possible." Past raids have occurred under police surveillance.

Stonawski continues to reside in the parsonage, only yards removed from official church headquarters. Bishop Volny never crosses the threshold of the church next door, although it is his official church seat. The deposed bishop claims: "I'm willing to engage in all kinds of negotiations, but first of all I'll need to be recognized as Bishop."

Stonawski, who labels himself a "traditionalist," is accused of collaboration with the communist state. As second-in-command behind the late Bishop Vladislav Kiedron and serving as his disciplinarian, Stonawski never enjoyed an untroubled term in office. Kiedron, appointed bishop in 1972, had been the government's first choice as bishop, not the synod's. Later, Stonawski would have the ill fortune to be elected bishop prior to Czechoslovakia's "silk revolution" of 1989, yet entering office afterward under dramatically different circumstances.

The church politicians of Communist Czechoslovakia were as guilty as any of interference in church affairs. But today the police remain the involuntary guardians of church concerns. More than once, for example, during the occupation of churches, the police have been forced to stand between warring factions.

Financial affairs also remain linked to the Communist past: pastors continue to receive their salaries from government coffers. Bishop Volny contends: "We don't see how we are to pay pastors' salaries within the near future." The costs of freedom appear exorbitant. Yet

Volny's adversaries are ironically demonstrating a path for the future: they are paying a pastor's salary from their own resources.

Foreign intervention has solved little. Tibor Görög, the Geneva-based European Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, calls Stonawski's position "unyielding." "It has been our position that the synod needs to decide [the question of bishop]. We from the outside should not meddle."

Stonawski claims: "The traditionalists support me, and they are the true church majority. It's illusionary to believe that the synod represents the actual majority." Görög counters: "How can one substantiate such a claim? We [the LWF] cannot conduct surveys. We have also received many supportive letters from the congregations. All of the world's Lutheran churches accept the election results. Bishop Stonawski is completely isolated: of 21 total pastors, only two men pastors and a woman pastor support him." Yet Stonawski's support is strongest in the largest congregations.

The stalwart ex-Bishop is now in his second round of collecting signatures. According to Görög, the first round was especially shrewd: "Stonawski's group said back then [at the founding of the independent Czech state at the beginning of 1993], that all churches needed to be reregistered. So many church members signed the first petition in the belief that it referred to the Volny-led church. They weren't aware that it involved an entirely different church." But because Stonawski's petition had used the name of the official church, the state refused to register a new church under the same name.

If any 10,000 Czech citizens sign this second petition (being Lutheran is not a requirement), a second Silesian Lutheran church could come into existence. In the meantime, an unregistered, "underground" church of traditionalist Lutherans once particularly loyal to the communist government exists.

This new church would most likely have fewer than 10,000 members. Formed as a church for the Polish minority within the new Czechoslovak state after World War I, the Silesian church presently has 47,000 members.

The struggles in Cesky Tesin are also a result of tensions between evangelical pietists and traditionalists. Across the border in the region of Bielsko-Biala and Cieszyn, the seedbed of Polish Lutheranism, the interdenominational "Foundation for Life and Mission" has for now lost its right to host the internationally-known tent evangelistic week in Dziegiełow. The commitment of Lutheran Foundation members to infant baptism had weakened noticeably, raising red flags among traditionalists. Volny points out that his own organization, "Mission," is denominational: "Fortunately, we have restricted ourselves to Lutheran circles. That spares us much distrust. We therefore cannot be accused of neglecting Lutheran concerns."

Bishop Volny and "Mission" have committed themselves to the spiritual rejuvenation of the church; Stonawski's refusal even after 1989 to launch into missions and charitable work are an additional cause for his demise.