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POLAND IN MID-1984

by Bill Yoder

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Continued Church Growth

Since the introduction of martial law in December, 1981, Polish Protestantism has experienced its most phenomenal growth since World War II. The Polish Baptists, who have only 2,800 members nationally, have been baptizing up to 200 persons annually. The largely-pentecostal "United Evangelical Church," with 12,000 members, is reporting even more dramatic growth. These churches still expanded during 1984 despite decreasing rates of growth.

The Protestant Bible Society has been instrumental in the greatly increased volume of Bibles distributed to Catholics, who, of course, make up 95% of the Polish population. In April 1983, the Lutherans opened the very first Protestant Polish-language bookstore in the history of the country. It is located in Cieszyn on the Czech border; roughly one-half of Poland's 70,000 Lutherans live in the surrounding region known as Cieszyn Silesia.

The Evangelistic Week, which has been held annually in Dziegiełów near Cieszyn since 1958, is growing by leaps and bounds. Roughly 2,000 persons crowded into an undersized tent for the opening services last July 15. During the last two years, the Week's evangelist has been supplied by World Vision. Stanley Mooneyham spoke there one year ago.

The evangelistic and charismatic Catholic "Oasis" movement, initially formed in 1957, is still quite active. Its retreats attract up to 50,000 young persons annually. It is reported that 40 percent of Catholic candidates for the priesthood now result from this renewal movement. Unfortunately, the decision of its founder, Father Franciszek Blachnicki, to remain in West Germany has dealt it a considerable blow. Campus Crusade has long fostered relations with the "Oasis" movement.

The Marxist-Leninist government has given up its struggle to prevent

the construction of churches in new, "socialist," high-rise apartment districts. New laws passed in November, 1981, greatly simplified the legal procedures necessary for the construction of new sanctuaries. A building boom has resulted. In Warsaw alone the Catholics are constructing 40 new churches. A pastor of the United Evangelical Church conceded to me that as much as 80 percent of the funds for one of their church buildings came from Western donors.

The Methodist pastor Witold Benedyktowicz, honorary president of the Polish Ecumenical Council, reports that the food and general aid programs of Western organizations for Poland are being brought to a close.

The Matter of Catholic-Protestant Rapproachment

The all-around expansion of Protestant denominations has led to some tension with Catholics. Early this year, the Catholic bishop of Katowice, Herbert Bednorz, warned in an aggressive pastoral letter that "centers for the work of sectarian groups are being built." The Methodists and Baptists are both building chapels in the vicinity of Katowice.

Lutheran evangelist Tomasz Bruell of Cieszyn complained that the growth of the United Evangelical Church in his region has occurred at the expense of his own renewed circles. During the past several years roughly 50 Lutherans have been rebaptized by United Evangelical pastors.

The takeover of Lutheran churches by Catholic squatters beginning in 1976 caused considerable furor. Involved were eleven churches located in northeastern Poland, most of whom were virtually unused due to the emigration of Lutheran parishioners to West Germany. But the most recent forced takeover, which occurred in Szestno in October 1981, involved a sanctuary still very much in use. Four of these cases, including Szestno, remain unsolved. Barbara Engholc-Narzyńska, director of the Protestant Bible Society and wife of the Lutheran bishop, admits that "we'll most likely be forced to give in to the Catholics, but we wish they wouldn't solve such matters in this fashion."

Northeastern Poland was part of German East Prussia until 1945, and the Polish government retained official ownership of all church structures within this region until 1971. Matters of ownership have therefore not always been entirely clear. Catholics have utilized many Lutheran churches ever since 1945 without bothering to purchase or rent

them. They frequently were simply considered to be the spoils of war.

Church-State Relations

According to the national mind-set, Lutherans who claim to be Poles are actually "Germans." Baptists and Methodists who claim the same are considered "Americans." The Orthodox--and the Marxists--are branded as "Russians." The Marxist-Leninist state and the Protestant churches therefore end up having strong common goals: both of them combat the Catholic episcopate's attempt to portray Poland as a monolithic Catholic nation. Both Protestant and Marxists fear the increasing power of the Catholic Church. The Communist state has therefore always attempted to elevate the significance of the Protestant churches at the expense of the Catholic majority.

Especially since the introduction of martial law, the state has been bending over backwards to elicit the favor of the non-Catholic denominations. Baptist General Secretary Michal Stankiewicz told me recently, "When we want to build, we may. When we want to distribute literature, we may. When we want to import Bibles, we may. We have no unresolved issues in our dealings with the state."

Most of the Protestant churches of Poland never received any legal status prior to 1947. As a result, it is not uncommon for the Protestants of Eastern Europe to claim that they fare better under Communist rule than was ever the case under a Catholic or Orthodox regime.

On the other hand, the Polish government has not found a solution for the chronic problems of corruption, bureaucracy and its own estrangement from the populace. Mrs. Narzyńska belongs to the presidium of PRON, the state-run "Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth" open to all "citizens of good will." Even she has begun to complain that the government has "returned to its former practices." Reformed bishop Zdzislaw Tranda, who has been much more reticent concerning church involvement within PRON, and the Lutheran Mrs. Narzyńska now both agree that only a major replacment of personnel within the party could conceivably bring significant improvement to the internal political climate.