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POLISH CHURCHES FACE NEW ISSUES IN EARLY 1990

By Bill Yoder

THE IMPACT OF POLISH ECONOMICS

Estimates on the rate of inflation in 1989 in Poland, a country of 38 million range from 600 to 1,000 percent. A Lutheran clergyman (there are no women pastors) earned 240,000 zloty per month, but that sum was upped to 400,000. Yet the average Polish salary is 600,000 zloty, or, $60 per month. That explains well why the citizens of western Poland regularly make 300-mile treks to West Berlin in order to earn $20 from the sale of contraband consumer items.

The question is from where is the Protestant churches to generate this additional cash? Understandably, roaring inflation has dampened the capability of believers to donate. Jerzy Gryniakow, the portly and charming Lutheran rector of Warsaw's ecumenical "Christian Theological Academy," unabashedly suggests, "It would be good if each congregation found a (western) sponsor. That way, we could at least guarantee the pastor's salary." Poland has roughly 100 Lutheran pastors.

The soaring costs of heating oil and coal have lead the Polish Ecumenical Council, which represents eight of Poland's 34 Christian denominations, to plead with the government to institute discount prices for the heating of church-owned buildings. Thanks to the costs of paper, the Lutheran monthly, Zwiastun, has shrunk to eight pages. In short: Polish Protestant churches are presently incapable of covering their day-to-day expenses.

The government has agreed to return all church property expropriated (or: taken over) by the communist regime after World War II. But Jan Walter, the earnest and dignified superintendent of the Warsaw diocese, concedes that Lutheran schools and hospitals can only be revived when and if a major influx of western capital occurs. Walter states, "We have a committee here which has attempted for years to initiate new businesses. Such firms could then generate the kind of capital we need to rebuild our church institutions . . . . Three generations grew up in the totalitarian system. Old economic structures, in which the Lutherans lived, were destroyed. It won't be easy to restore them." Polish Lutherans are ardently interested in importing western business and technical know-how through church channels, much as the Catholics are already doing.
Recently, a Lutheran pastor from Illinois, who was part of a delegation of farmers, took the effort to contact Warsaw Lutherans. Both Walter and Barbara Engholc-Narzynska, director of the Polish Bible Society and wife of the Lutheran bishop, Janusz Narzynski, expressed deep appreciation for the pastor's visit. Mrs. Narzynska's response though went far beyond the economic: "There would be a lot of possibilities to increase this relationship: maybe from family to family, from child to child, or between partner churches. Living in a minority situation, we need strong support from American Lutherans to feel that we have some good brothers and sisters in other parts of the world."

Even matters of nationality have economic overtones in Poland. Though liberal-minded German clergy take considerable effort to emphasize that those Poles applying for West German citizenship are indeed Germans, the Poles remaining in their nation of birth are more suspicious. After all, very many of those who applied for German citizenship in recent years did not speak German. Andrzej Hauptman, a Lutheran pastor from Zabrze in south-central Poland, states, "It's strange that ten years ago fewer (of my parishioners) considered themselves to be Germans than today. Those who have remained in Upper Silesia until now had been content with the situation. Otherwise, they would have left long ago. The difficult economic situation has given them the idea that they will be given the right to emigrate if they regard themselves as Germans." Edward Gierek, the Communist party leader deposed in 1980, put it in more cryptic terms: the Silesians (residents of south-western and south-central Poland) "regard themselves to be Poles when times are good, and as Germans when times are bad."

The new German cultural clubs legalized under the Solidarity-run government are being regarded by many as a promising ticket to the West, which was hardly the intent of their West German creators. Rev. Hauptman regards these clubs to be one factor why "a lot of people have rediscovered that their forefathers were Germans."

The Lutheran churches in Silesia, where 80% of all Polish Lutherans reside, are hit hardest by the exodus westward. Hauptman concedes that although his congregation had 1,840 members twenty years ago, only 850 remain. Nationally, Poland now boasts 74,000 Lutherans, down from 220,000 in the late 1940s. Happily, Cieszyn Silesia on the Czech border, with over half of all Lutherans, remains a stronghold of pietistic, ethnic Polish Lutheranism. Indeed, hilly, picturesque Cieszyn Silesia has been that for centuries.

Despite grave economic woes, the new government instituted after roundtable talks in August 1989 retains an astounding amount of support. The mild-mannered Zdzislaw Tranda, Reformed bishop and president of the Polish Ecumenical Council, claims, "Every previous government would have been deposed long ago in the face of such economic duress." Engholc-Narzynska regards the national mood to have been at its lowest ebb two years ago.
"We have always been fighting for political freedom. We have that now, and that is why people have hope."

Nostalgia for the best years under Gierek, when Western loans created an artificial economic boom, appears minimal. Protestant theology students assured the author that "those times were more placid, but they certainly weren't better." The light at the end of the tunnel has not yet appeared, but the expectations that it will come into view around the next bend remain strong. It is the hope for better times that explains the present gutty endurance of the Polish people.

POLISH LUTHERANS AND CATHOLICS

At least since the Reformation, non-Catholic Poles have been scourged by the practice of combining confession and nationality. Folk wisdom still maintains that the true Pole is a Catholic, the Orthodox a Russian, the Lutheran a German, and the Baptist or Methodist a North American. The Jew is, or was, a nation-less "cosmopolitan." Death-bed capers, whereby life-long Protestants have voluntarily or otherwise received last rights from a Catholic priest, are legion. Tranda relishes the story of one dispute which ended in a draw: In Kalisz, where a Catholic and a Reformed cemetery adjoin one another, a person lies buried straddling both cemeteries.

Ninety-three percent of all Poles are Catholics, and the present Solidarity-run government has the reputation for being a most Catholic one. Rector Jerzy Gryniakow assures that although the present government is not a clerical one, the future danger has by no means been banned. "That would be a swing from one extreme to another, from red to black. We certainly hope that will not happen." Barbara Engholc-Narzynska from the Bible society expresses both the good and the bad news: "We now are enjoying great political pluralism, but we have not yet experienced confessional pluralism."

The three church laws passed by the Polish Seym on May 17, 1989, are a classic example of Catholic predominance. Negotiations on these laws had begun nine years earlier; they were prepared solely by Catholic and Communist government officials. Non-Catholics were never given access to them prior to 1989. In fact, one of them, the law "Regarding the Securing of Freedom of Conscience and Faith," needed to be signed by the non-Catholic churches less than 48 hours after having initially received the document. Another law, which regulates the return of property holdings to the Catholic church, was only shown to outside parties after it had been signed. Professor Gryniakow explains: "We're concerned about the principle of the matter. One should either make all churches equal or stop talking as if they were. . . . It would be more upright if the government would recognize affairs as they were described in the constitution of 1921, which stated that the Catholic church was
'the first among equals.' That was at least being honest." According to these laws in their present form, only the Catholics can legally demand the return of their property. Fortunately, Polish Protestants are not left to their own devices in the struggle against a Catholic, clerical state. Bishop Tranda proudly points out that one of the numerous Catholic "Clubs of the Intelligentsia" has promised to support Protestant efforts to create or maintain a confessional pluralistic state. Indeed, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a "progressive" Catholic, is regarded by Protestant circles as a political ally.

The undeniable affinity of Polish Lutherans for their German cousins helps to explain their thoroughness regarding judicial rights. The jovial Professor Gryniakow responds: "It has always been our pride and joy to possess a clear legal relationship with the state. The Orthodox (which have 852,000 members!) don't really care whether or not they are officially recognized by the state." One should also bear in mind that Polish Lutheranism has historically had few allies in its struggle for recognition as a legitimate Polish entity. Until the end of World War II, Polish Catholics and German Lutherans were united in their attempt to prove that all Lutherans on Polish soil were in reality Germans. As a result of that struggle, the Polish Lutheran bishop Juliusz Bursche was arrested by the Germans and died in a concentration camp. Lutherans were more than a little pleased that their bishop, Janusz Narzynski, was a participant in the top-level roundtable talks last year. Differences in tactic remain today. Of the denominations active in the Polish Ecumenical Council, only the Lutherans refused last year to sign the church legislation created by the Catholics. Bishop Tranda refers in this context to "overly-defensive behavior." "When a (soccer) team only plays defensively, then it tends to shoot the ball into its own net."

In January, two Orthodox churches in Eastern Poland were taken over by Catholic and Uniate squatters. In response, the Orthodox metropolitan of Warsaw refused to receive Cardinal Glemp, the Primate of Poland. These "Uniate" are Catholic believers who utilize the Greek-Orthodox liturgy. Their denomination, which is most active in the Ukraine, was forcibly united with Moscow-led Orthodoxy during Stalin's rule. Engholc-Narzynska, who's husband has been ill since the Lutheran convention in Curitiba, Brazil, applauded the metropolitan's response in an interview. Yet the cautious Bishop Tranda replied otherwise: "That was a mistake of the Orthodox. We should speak more with one another. This problem is very complex because the Uniates were taken over by the Orthodox in an improper manner." Engholc-Narzynska's ire is understandable, for Lutherans have long tangled with Catholics over illegally-occupied church buildings. Only last year, the Jesuits agreed to pay for a church in Lodz in which they had been squatters for nearly 45 years. Rev. Andrzej Hauptman describes a recent case in Legnica (western Poland), in which the local authorities made excessive restoration demands, threatening to hand over the church to the Catholics if the church's owners did not respond properly. Hauptman admits: "Although the church is
much too large for us, we refused to cooperate. We have only 40 persons there, and the church has 3,000 seats. But we must retain this church in order to prove that the evangelical church there had been a very strong one. We might though be willing to rent the building to the Catholics." Indeed, Polish Lutherans rarely lack sufficient chapel space.

The laws passed on May 17, 1989, decreed state neutrality in all matters of religious faith. Hopefully, the state will never again interfere in matters strictly religious in nature. It is nevertheless noteworthy that Poles regard their recent past in a more relaxed fashion than their East German neighbors. The communists retain the office of national president and the propaganda placards of a bygone socialist era have not met a violent end. The wind and the rain have instead been commissioned to remove them ultimately from the national landscape.

Engholm-Narzynska fears that Poles are ill-prepared to meet the challenges of present-day secularism. "We now have a new kind of secularism. The old challenge had been the communist state; now it is the Western style of life, the consumer society.... We are doing everything to have things, but little in order to be." Will the capitalist utopia succeed where Marx and Engels woefully failed—in supplanting widespread, "folk" faith? Perhaps, but only if the present capitalist experiment in Poland indeed does flourish.