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POLISH LUTHERANS AFTER ELECTIONS

by Bill Yoder

Bill Yoder (Mennonite) is a frequent contributor to OPREE. He wrote this report during a visit to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and areas of former East Germany in October 1991.

The vast open spaces surrounding Warsaw's "Palace of Culture and Science" were originally intended for mass parades and demonstrations. They have now been transformed into a shantytown. Folks do eat and nap in these shantys, but fortunately, they are not intended to be living quarters. They instead huckster Western music cassettes, vacuum cleaners, and pantyhose. The massive spire towering over the palace once built as Stalin's gift to the Polish people now sports an advertisement banner. Glittering Fords sleep where politicians once trod. They are sprawled across the palace's entrance stairs patiently awaiting customers.

Warsaw is awash in Americana. Poles cannot yet boast a license for McDonald's--they are making do with hamburger stands sporting names such as "MatDonald" and "McRonald". In the main train station heavy cabin cruisers were roaring across TV monitors hung near a haggard crowd of travelers obviously too poor for Fords. The scenes were spiced with commercials touting vacations in Hawaii. Additional variety was being supplied by panhandling gypsies weaving through the crowd.

In church circles, elation is modest. Warsaw is experiencing a constant stream of Western evangelists and missionaries peddling their own pet projects and theologies. One resigned, long-time leader of a smaller Protestant denomination offered a revised version of the Golden Rule: "He who has the gold, makes the rules. Those who are needy have little freedom to make their own choices." The Pentecostal Zjednoczone (United) church has exploded into five groupings averaging 3,000 members. This leader attributes its demise directly to the financial support of Western mission groups.

Prices continue skyward. Twenty dollars once kept a pastor financially afloat for a month; now, that requires $110. The retired are in the greatest financial need. The Rev. Jan Walter, superintendent of the Lutheran Warsaw diocese, reports that many elderly are excusing themselves from church services for financial reasons. A round trip by city bus
presently costs 4,000 zloty, but that is only 35 cents. One result of capitalism has been cold churches; Warsaw's Reformed have not had the resources to heat their church during the past two winters. Aid for Protestant churches further East remains minimal, awaiting additional funding.

A new Protestant–Catholic foundation called "Samaritanus" intends to advise the poorest on how best to locate government and private aid. This effort hopes to profit from the expertise of Western social work agencies long versed on how to best counter the negative effects of capitalism.

Barbara Engholc-Narzynska, director of Warsaw's "British and Foreign Bible Society," confirms that financial aid remains most welcome. Even very small Christian initiatives are invited to fund projects. Thanks to a stable leadership, the Lutheran church appears most capable of fending off the demands of foreign sponsors. Mrs. Narzynska, spouse of the former Lutheran bishop, Janusz Narzynski, maintains, "It is most important that we retain our identity. Not all ideas being offered are good or could be implemented here. We can though remain critical if we retain our identity."

The Rev. Jan Szarek, the new bishop, sees evangelization as the primary hope for the future of the Lutheran church. The annual summer convention in Dziegielow, which is very committed to the theology of Billy Graham, remains appealing to many Lutheran youth. Indeed, both Catholics and Protestants are counting on a "re-evangelization" as the most promising means of stopping Poland's slide into Western-European-style decadence.

Yet, no one with whom I spoke believed that a spiritual revival was underway in Poland. Bishop Zdzislaw Tranda of the small Reformed church believes that revival was more apparent during the 1970s and 1980s. "Back then," he maintains, "one could reckon that a book or cassette on the topic of God would be readily bought. Such prospects are much more uncertain now."

The increase of conflict within the Roman Catholic church may yet offer Lutherans new opportunities. The Catholic Church had been welcome as the guardian of the nation but not in its most recent role as the guardian of private morality. Its demand that abortion and contraceptives be made illegal has angered progressive Catholics. Surveys claim that only 15% of Polish Catholics adhere to the moral teachings of their church. An increasing gap between the Catholic hierarchy and its grass roots is the result; Lutherans hope to find a niche for themselves by placing themselves within that gap. After World War II, Warsaw Lutherans lost their elite Mikolaj-Rej-Lyceum (High School) to the state. Now they are demanding its return. Rev. Walter claims that many Catholic parents are impatiently awaiting its reopening. Once it does, the school could play a role in maintaining the heritage of liberal Polish thought.
Bishop Szarek is a theological evangelical. His church has nevertheless issued a statement ruling out the prohibition of abortion. Protestant leaders claim they agreed to participate in religious instruction in schools only in order to keep Catholics from completely monopolizing this privilege.

The ecumenical practices of Polish Lutherans are progressive. In northeastern Poland, four Greek-Catholic ("Uniate") congregations are meeting in Lutheran churches. This is highly unusual, for Greek-Catholics regard themselves to be subject to the Vatican. Yet Roman-Catholic parishes are denying them access, suspecting them to be covert Ukrainians.

Catholic-Protestant relations remain poor. Are conservative Catholic circles still following Rome’s leading? In a welcome, first-ever sermon at Warsaw’s Lutheran Holy Trinity church on June 9, the Pope had claimed that ecumenical tolerance needed to be replaced by ecumenical love. He even criticized the Polish folk wisdom that the Lutheran is a German, the Catholic, a Pole.

Nevertheless, in a sermon a month before the elections of October 27, the bishop of Gorzow Wielkopolski, Jozef Michalik, concluded: "The Catholic is required to vote for a Catholic, . . . the Muslim for a Muslim, the Jew for a Jew, the Mason for a Mason, and every communist for a communist." This implies of course that a Catholic does not vote for Protestants or Jews. The Lutheran Andrzej Wojtowicz, director of the Polish Ecumenical Council, calls such statements "utterly incredible" and concludes despairingly: "It's amazing what these fellows still allow themselves to say!"

Thanks to the church-state agreements of May 1989, the government is returning property to the Catholic Church at an awesome rate. Even some assets confiscated after World War I are being returned to the Catholic fold. But Protestant claims remain subject to a complicated and costly legal process. Within Warsaw city limits legislation from 1946 remains binding. Consequently, the lyceum remains in government hands. Even the Bible society was recently threatened with expulsion from the very building which it purchased after World War II.

Though a further drop in living standards is being forecast, no one agreed that Poland is joining the Third World. Gritty optimism and a nearly unfathomable number of political parties and programs kept political surprises from emerging out of October’s national elections. Many parties are handcuffed by the tension between the Catholic hierarchy and its grass roots. That's a major reason why the election results were less than ideal for the Catholic Episcopate. But that is also true for Lutherans. After all, they number only 74,000 members.