



Confessional Lutherans in Latvia: Contending for the Faith since the 13th Century

Latvia plays a unique and irreplaceable role in God's narrative for the spread of Christianity and Lutheranism. It has an interesting history and beautiful future. Jānis Vanags, the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL) shared the history of the Lutheran Church in Latvia, his personal experience and his hopes for the future of the Church at a Fireside Chat on January 18, 2022, at the Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN.

The ELCL is the largest Christian denomination in Latvia. It was one of the last areas of Europe to be Christianized. The church was established in the region during the 13th century by conquerors through sword and fire. As such, Christianity was viewed as a religion of oppression. The Latvian people continued to practice paganistic rituals as part of their cultural and spiritual life as late as the 19th century. It was an intensely difficult mission field.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Latvia. In 1652, the Reformation started in Riga when the Council of Riga fired approximately thirty Catholic priests and appointed Lutheran pastors to replace them. Two and a half centuries later, in 1918, Latvia became an independent state after the breakdown of the Russian Empire.

A once strong relationship with the German Lutherans deteriorated after World War I, which led to the adoption of the Swedish governance model. In keeping with the desire to retain the canonical church structure with a presiding bishop, the Lutheran Church of Latvia appointed her first bishop in 1922. Lutheranism was the dominant church in the region between 1918 and 1940. This marked the first time of real independence for the Latvian people since they were conquered during the crusades. Unfortunately, liberal theology gained much ground before World War II. Two Lutheran theological institutions

emerged, one more conservative than the other. Both institutions were closed by the Nazis and were not reopened under the Soviets.

Soviet rule of the region had a devastating effect on the Church. The Church could not properly form pastors, train teachers or catechize the people. In the 1960's, pastoral conferences were allowed, but they were heavily monitored by the KGB. As a result, churches and pews were empty. The people of God were not regularly fed with the Word, nor did they receive the sustaining gifts of the Sacraments.

By the 1980's, there was little theological training for pastors. A man desiring to study theology was only allowed to study theology books for three days a month. Yet the Lord in His gracious mercy still called men through the Gospel to preserve His Church in Latvia. A young chemistry teacher, Jānis Vanags, who had converted to Christianity and was baptized in the ELCL, began to read theology books. Eventually, he was fired from his teaching position when his superiors learned of his interest in theology.

Thereafter, Vanags and some friends organized a dissident group called "Rebirth and Renewal" with the goal of achieving independence of the Church from the government. They met in a forest to sign the founding documents. Unbeknownst to them, they had been betrayed and were greeted by the KGB. The documents were secreted away and no arrests were made. Vanags and his colleagues lived under a constant threat of imprisonment. He was visited in his home by the KGB on no less than five occasions.

In 1987, the independence movement of Perestroika was in full swing in Latvia. The Church gained in popularity because it was countercultural and had access to humanitarian aid. Many heard the Gospel for the first time when they received aid from the Church. At that time, the Lutheran Confessions had yet to be translated into Latvian. A state-funded Lutheran theological

Latvia becomes Member of the International Lutheran Council

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia voted to apply for membership in the International Lutheran at its 28th synod on August 6, 2021. Earlier the synod voted to withdraw from membership in the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe formerly know as the Leuenberg Church Fellowship which consisted of altar and pulpit fellowship between Lutherans and Reformed churches. Remarkably, the vote consisted of 198 delegates voting in favor of leaving the communion, with ten against and eleven abstaining.

On January 28, 2022, the Board of Directors of the International Lutheran Council voted unanimously to grant Latvia Observer Membership. This opens the door to voting membership, which is decided by a vote of existing ILC members.

institution was reopened. Gradually, the theological faculty was governed by the state instead of the Church. Jānis Vanags was elected and consecrated the Archbishop of Riga in 1993. Vanags knew the liberal theology of the day was not what men before him were willing to die for or be sentenced to prison. His goals were two-fold. First, he knew the Church must take back theological education. This led to the establishment of the Lutheran Theological Academy of Riga (LTAR). Secondly, he worked for legislative reform to ensure that Lutherans could exercise their faith without state interference and yet partner with the state to assist with social welfare programs.

Initially, the LTAR was funded by the Lutheran World Federation. Their monetary support was withdrawn because of the ELCL's opposition to the ordination of women. What could have been devastating to the future of the Church provided a wonderful opportunity for confessional Lutheranism in Latvia. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) invited Latvian men to our seminaries, and provided financial support and faculty to LTAR. It is the only Lutheran educational institution in Latvia and provides a rich theological, liturgical and musical education.

Fostering confessional fellowship with the LCMS has been a key objective for Vanags. The ELCL is dedicated to the true teaching of the Scriptures, faithfully expounded in the Lutheran Confessions. The ELCL is in full fellowship with the LCMS and has applied for membership with the International Lutheran Council (ILC, *see inset above*). The ELCL desires to fully participate in this external union of Lutheran Churches around the world that share an internal unity of faith, doctrine and confession. The opportunities for joint study of contemporary theological issues, planning for mission outreach, mutual support and encouragement, as well as the strengthening of theological education that membership in the ILC provides will be invaluable to the ELCL.

According to Vanags, the biggest challenges the ELCL faces as a church body is post-modern neo-marxism, rampant secularization and materialism. Although the people of Latvia are fairly conservative, Latvian journalists are hostile to religion, and a liberal court of six judges often render decisions that are relativistic and contrary to a Biblical world view. Christian traditions and values were destroyed by many years of Soviet occupation. The Church is truly a Church of neophytes. Confessional Lutheran education for future workers is critical. The ELCL must work diligently to catechize her people so that the faith may once again be handed down from generation to generation.

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