

**Darius Petkūnas**

# **Resurgence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania after the Soviet Era**



**Cover picture: The storks at Vyžiai church.  
Photo: Irena and Valdas Baltėnai**

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## Introduction

For 50 years the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania lived under the repressive strictures of the Soviet Union and its ruling atheistic Communist Party which was determined to destroy it. The Soviets forced the closure of churches, they refused pastors permission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, excepting under the close control of government bureaucrats. At least 75 percent of all church buildings were put to other uses as factories, sport halls, grain and feed storage buildings, and movie theaters. The Soviets thought that confiscation and desecration of churches would be so dispiriting to the believers that their faith would be weakened and that they would soon despair of their Gospel hope. This soon proved to be a very vain communist dream. Attempts were made to destroy church by closely controlling Christian education of the young. Under the terms of Soviet Criminal code the teaching of children in Sunday school and the holding of group catechesis was forbidden. In fact, no religious instruction was permitted to be given by pastors or their helpers excepting one-to-one teaching in the presence of the parents.

All this went on far from our eyes. Lithuania and the other Baltic States were completely isolated, even more effectively than East Berlin was hidden from us behind the Berlin wall. We knew that Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors were captive nations, but little was known of the hardships that our Evangelical Lutheran brothers and sisters, and other Christians in those nations were forced to endure.

Then a great miracle happened. The mighty Soviet government and its repressive system collapsed and the small suffering church, which had survived every attempt to destroy it, now again began to flourish. Much needed to be done. Buildings were in urgent need of repair. Many parishes which had been closed by the Communists must be reopened. Believers, who were scattered abroad, had to be gathered once again around altar and pulpit in parish congregations. Youth and educational activities on the parish level needed to be developed and implemented, so too with diaconical activities and church music. These had to be organized and set to work.

The world in which the church and her people found herself in 1990 was far different from the western world they had known over 50 years earlier when they were cut off from contact with West. It would be necessary for her to critically evaluate those changes and to stand firm in matters relating to the church's faith, teaching, and confession, just as she had in the previous half century. Indeed the church must do constantly and consistently in every age, for the world's manners, morals, and ideals are constantly changing, but the church's faith remains unchanged. She proclaims one Gospel of one Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, a changeless Christ in a changing world.

In this short study Rev. Dr. Darius Petkūnas provides us with a description of the experiences of the Lutheran Church in Lithuania since that country's 1990 declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. It is the story of the resurgence of a small, but vibrant, church which many thought to be all, but dead. He provides us with a picture of what needed to be done to get the church back on her feet after more than 50 years of constant harassment and brutality. In addition he depicts for us the resurgence also of the church's commitment to her doctrinal basis in the Scriptures, Creeds, and Confessions of the church in the face of enticements to turn away from them to find new grounds for faith, hope, and fellowship.

The reader will find in this story a new reminder that he who said "I will never leave nor forsake you" is a Lord who indeed is faithful to his word. He will find here also the story of the challenges which the church has had to address and meet during the years after she was set free.

Rev. Dr. Charles Evanson,  
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## Soviet Yoke broken and the Time of Recovery

### 1. The Revival of the Church

As for the nation, so for the Lutheran Church the independence from foreign domination, which was officially proclaimed on March 11, 1990, meant the beginning of new era. 50 years of suppression and persecution had not been able to destroy the church. By the grace of God and the determination of faithful parishioners who often had great personal cost remained faithful, the church had survived another determined attempt to destroy it.



The result was that when independence came, Evangelical Lutheran Christianity could be seen to be weakened but alive. Most of its church holdings had been turned into granaries, warehouses, factories, sports halls, cinemas, museums, swimming pools, or other secular uses. During the Khrushchev years many church buildings were erased. When the bells of freedom rang only 27 parishes could still point to a building as their church. 59 parishes had disappeared along with their property. The *ministerium* consisted of only 8 pastors, compared to 71 before WWII. However, she had never ceased to be the church. The assembly of believers continued to gather, although under very adverse conditions, around the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Now the church was again free to be the church without governmental hindrance and the people could come without fear of reprisal.

Independence brought a new situation. Now atheistic communism was clearly in disfavor and the Roman Catholic majority again began to assert itself. No one would dare to say publicly that he was

Bishop Jonas Viktoras Kalvanas, Sr. (1914-1995), first bishop of the Church 1976-1995.

communist or an unbeliever, and in every city and town some formerly avowed atheists begun to appear in the lines of communicants at Roman Catholic altars. As the media proclaimed, Lithuania was once again a Catholic nation and an evidence of Catholicism triumphant battle against

c o m m u n i s m .

Now the members of old „nomenclatura” together with faithful believers piously knelt in churches, struck their breasts in the liturgy and cried out „mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima

culpa.” For the first time in 50 years politicians



Bishop Jonas Kalvanas greets Vytautas Landsbergis, chairmen of Lithuanian Parliament, at the 1990 synod.

on television and standing in public squares piously made the sign of the cross, and when Pope John Paul II came in 1993, Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas, the former head of the Lithuanian Communist Party, humbly bowed and kissed his papal ring.

Lutheranism was seldom regarded to be an authentic expression of Lithuanian Christianity, for it was evident to all that to be Lithuanian is to be a Catholic. Of course the politicians wanted the votes of the Lutherans and would for that reason condescend on occasion to appear at Lutheran meetings, much as American politicians customarily show up at Lutheran sauerkraut suppers, but there has always been a certain air of unreality about it. In 1990 Vytautas Landsbergis, the leader of forces of independence proudly announced in the Lutheran synod at Tauragė, that his grandmother was a member or the in the evangelical church (Reformed, actually).<sup>1</sup> He neglected to mention that he had long since embraced the Roman obedience. In the eyes of the people the Lutherans, despite their Lithuanian surnames, were not real Lithuanians. In areas of the country where the Lutheran

<sup>1</sup> *Lietuvos evangelikų kelias*. 1990 m. Nr.3-4 (247-248), 13.

population was sparse they were looked upon as sectarians whose archaic beliefs and practices are hardly imaginable. Where Lutheran Churches were in evidence they were generally described as German, Prussian, or Latvian, depending upon the



Last days of the Soviet Union. Lenin protected by Soviet Army Soldiers in Klaipėda square. January 1991

geographical location of the parish. A visiting pastor frustrated in his attempts to find the local and rather imposing Lutheran church, finally asked „Where is the German church?” and had his answer in less than 10 seconds. The fact that the first Lithuanian book *Katekizmas* was written by a Lutheran pastor, and the first Bible was translated by a Lutheran clergyman, and first book of Lithuanian grammar was written by yet another Lutheran pastor, and the first poem in Lithuanian language was written by still one more Lutheran pastor, is generally unacknowledged. In every case we are told that they were priests, but it is not mentioned that they were Lutheran priests. Even in the public press Lutherans have on some occasions been described as sectarians.<sup>2</sup> Even today occasionally Roman Catholics try to attach this label to the Lutherans, although the Roman Church now officially decries such labeling.<sup>3</sup>

Few Lutherans looking forward to the coming regular synod of the church in 1990 could have imagined that by the time it convened the nation would be free and the church would no longer be answerable to a hostile foreign power. Although changes were coming rapidly in every area of personal and social life, the church pursued a steady course remembering always that the Lord watches over his church even when societal changes are momentous and state institutions

2        *Respublika*. 1992.02.28. Nr.41.

3        *Vakarų ekspresas*. 2003.04.08.



are crumbling. As Lutherans they recognized that the work which God has given must be done regardless the outward circumstances. It is as Luther answered when asked „What would you do, if you knew that the world would end tomorrow?“ He is said to have replied:



Delegates to the first synod after Lithuanian independence, 1990

„If the world should end tomorrow, still today I would plant a tree.“ Even though the bishop, clergy, and parishioners had worked according to their means for the goal of freedom, they always recognized that the church’s primary call is to proclaim that word which gathers God’s people around his altar to receive his blessings in word and sacrament. Those who came to the 1990 synod did not come with plans for the reorganization of the church to face a new day. In addressing the assembled delegates Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Sr., suggested that their first task was to revise the statutes because the church was now free of the control of the Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the USSR Council of Ministers which had formerly oppressed it. In the same meeting the bishop reminded the delegates that he was already almost 80 years old and could not continue without help. The synod decided to call his son Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., to the position of auxiliary to the bishop.

Now free to do its work without governmental interference, the church set about the task of gathering her people and reclaiming the lost. In the earliest years of independence this was largely quite successful. The churches were filled to overflowing. Not only infants but also adolescents and adults were brought as candidates for Holy Baptism. Those who had been married before civil authorities during the communist years, now came to have their marriages solemnized before the altar. Baptisms, communions, and marriages doubled

from earlier times. Those who had earlier expressed no interest in the church, now became interesting in helping to guide the church in positions of lay leadership in parish councils and the consistory. In many cases their love for the church has been shown to be quite genuine and their service has been of great benefit on every level. However, it is also true that some converts brought with them a thoroughly secularized mentality with little or no theological understanding of the nature of the church.

In places where the parish structure had been obliterated during the Soviet years it was necessary to reorganize and reestablish parishes. Such was the case in areas with a large concentration of Lutherans who had to travel great distances to find a parish church: Vilnius, Kaunas, Panevėžys, Jurbarkas, and elsewhere where groups of Lutherans applied to the consistory for parish status. None of these parishes had fit places in which to worship. Either their buildings had been destroyed or as the case of Vilnius or Kaunas, they had been put to other uses during the years of bondage. In all cases these groups had to search out a place for preaching and liturgical celebration. In Vilnius the church had been subdivided into rooms to serve as a repair workshop, and the Roman Catholic archbishop provided a hall for use by the Lutherans. In Kaunas the church had been turned into a lecture hall and the parish had to get permission from the University of Vilnius to use its own altar on Sundays.

In Klaipėda district (*Memelland*), which had in earlier times been almost completely Lutheran, many Roman Catholics entered the region after the WWII and took up residence in abandoned dwellings. In most places the Soviet



First Lutheran class in the Tauragė public school with teacher Marta Kalvanienė 1990. Only the soviet school uniforms remain.

government forbade them to organize parishes. During this period only a few Roman Catholic parishes could be established. With the coming of independence the Roman Catholic Church saw the need to establish parishes and find suitable worship facilities. In some places these authorities seem to have thought that almost all the Lutherans have disappeared, and they suggested that the Lutheran churches should open their doors to the Roman Catholics. Local governments dominated by Roman Catholics were often quick to agree that the Lutheran churches, which had been turned into secular halls and were in a condition suitable for immediate use, should be made available for use by Roman Catholic congregations. In Nida (Nidden) and Juodkrantė (Schwarzort) the Lutheran churches now came into the possession of the Roman Catholic diocese of Telšiai, because the local government simply said that they were returning this church property to the 'Christians.' The Lutherans had to seek permission from the Roman Catholic bishop of Žemaitija (Samogitia) to use their own churches. Elsewhere, as in Kintai (Kinten), the church had been a possession of the municipality of Šilutė (Heydekrug) which decided that since the Lutherans already had a prayer house in the area, the beautiful old Lutheran church in Kintai would now be given to the Catholics, who rearranged the interior according to their specifications. The only reminder that this was for centuries a Lutheran church is found on the memorial tablet which states „This used to be a Lutheran church.” In Rusnė (Ruß) the Lutherans faced strong opposition from the local Catholic community and newly elected Christian Democrat politicians who tried to claim that the church had been theirs before the war. The Lutherans correctly observed that it was with a spirit of kind-heartedness that they had allowed Roman Catholic migrant workers to enter their church for prayers before the WWII, but there was never any question that it was anything but a Lutheran church. The Roman Catholics living in Rusnė organized a so-called “Catholic-Lutheran” parish and then petitioned the government for the „restoration” of their property.<sup>4</sup> Samogitian Bishop Antanas Vaičiūnas wrote to government officials asking that this request be fulfilled. Finally in 1996, after three years of legal battles, the Lutherans, who were able to produce baptismal

<sup>4</sup> *Keleivis*. 1995. Nr.4 (16), 30; *Lietuvos rytas*. 1995.11.07; *Vakarų ekspresas*. 1995. Nr.204; *Lietuvos rytas*. 1995. Nr.287; *Šilokarčėma*. 1995.12.05 (15).

records and other parish documents which showed that the church was theirs, won their case.

In places with long established Roman Catholic parishes and Catholic public officials there was usually fewer problems in obtaining confiscating property. In Kėdainiai the Lutheran church had been used as a chemical fertilizer ware house and later as a museum. The Lutherans were allowed to use the facility on Sundays and later the museum moved out. A similar situation existed in Skuodas. There the local congregation has permitted the museum to continue to share the use of the church's facility. In some places no public facilities could be found and the congregation gathered in private homes. Elsewhere culture halls and school rooms had to be used.



So called "Catholic-Lutheran" parish intended to take over Rusnė church, the oldest Lutheran church in Lithuania. The tower dates from 1419.

The size of the newly reopened parishes ranged from over 500 communicants in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Jurbarkas to only 3 in Juodkrantė. In most places average membership appears to have been from 50 to 200. Among Lutherans in Lithuania a parish of more than 200 communicants is considered large. Not all parishes were reopened. Parishes which before the WWII had consisted almost exclusively of Germans remained closed, because the German population before, during, and after the war were repatriated to Germany and there was no need to reestablish congregations in these places. In general, where Lutherans were few in number and widely scattered, the consistory deemed it unnecessary to reopen the churches and reconstitute the parishes. In Garliava (Godlewo) there is an old Lutheran church, but at present there are too few Lutherans in the area to warrant the reopening of the parish. Worshipers in the area indicated that they were ready and willing to travel to Kaunas to attend services and receive the sacrament. The similar situation exists in Vilkaviškis, Kalvarija, Plāškieiai (Plaschken), and elsewhere.

## 2. Regaining of Confiscated Property

During the Soviet era all church property had been confiscated by the Soviet controlled government. Regaining that property after the independence was no easy matter. The new Lithuanian government made it clear that it had no ties with the previous Soviet regime and could not be held responsible for its actions in confiscating private church property. Although laws were passed in the parliament which stated clearly that confiscated church properties should be returned to their rightful owners, the process by which this could be accomplished was left unclear. Church documents

and other records proving ownership had long since been confiscated by the Soviet government or simply destroyed. In addition the return of property in many cases proved inconvenient for the government, because church properties had been turned into private dwellings or offices for government bureaus or public utilities. Parsonages and teachers' homes had been turned into multifamily dwellings or apartment houses, and the return of them to the church would cause the government the inconvenience of having to find places for these families to dwell and in which to relocate public offices. Houses which formerly served as parsonages always served as the home of at least four families. In Vanagai (Wannaggen) the parsonage now housed 5 families and in Priekulė (Prökuls) there were 10 families in the Lithuanian speaking pastor's house and 11 families in the German pastor's house. It was only with great reluctance that city administrations were willing to return these properties to the church. After 1995 new restrictive legislation made it necessary for the parishes to go to court to try to affect the return of their rightful property. In Priekulė pressures on the courts from tenants led to the re-



Plaškiai church after years of Soviet use, 1994

confiscation of some properties previously returned. The greatest problems arose in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda where the parish churches had many properties the rental of which had provided the



Virbalis church reopened for worship, 2000

church with operating funds. These properties were in prime locations in the city center and had become very valuable. In the process of privatization private investors also sought to gain control of these properties. The situation became particularly difficult in Vilnius and Kaunas. In Vilnius there were numerous court cases in which the congregation fought to regain its property one building at a time. In 2000, when most of the property had been returned by court order, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania instituted new legal proceedings against the Vilnius City Municipality, and indirectly the parish itself, in order to regain all the properties which the municipality had turned over to the parish. The case went to the highest courts and it was only when the church's lawyers insisted that Lithuanian constitutional law be used as the touch stone that the matter was settled in the church's favor. In Kaunas the situation was even more difficult. There church property had been taken by the University of Vilnius and in 1995 a law was passed granting the universities and other educational institutions perpetual rights over the properties they were holding.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly it was stated that Lithuanian law forbade the return of parish property now in the hands of the university. Only through slow and painstaking negotiations has the parish in Kaunas been able little by little to regain control over some properties, which

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<sup>5</sup> March 21, 1995 church's property restoration law. Nr. I-822.

originally belonged to the parish and the consistory, which before WWII had been in the city. In Klaipėda the church had better success in regaining control of its property in the old town area,



Representatives of the Lutheran section of the Church of Lippe, Germany, meet with the consistory to discuss the renovation of churches, 1992

although even there it was not entirely successful in recovering all that had been taken from it. Even more complications developed concerning land owned by the church on which others had built farmhouses, dwellings, and others buildings. Here the government was reluctant to return land, both in the cities and the rural areas for fear that the church would require that buildings erected on it be forfeited, moved, or made subject to lease or rent. The government early understood the implications with the result that even the powerful Roman Catholic Church has not been able to take possession of much of its holdings. Only after more than ten year moratorium were the churches permitted to privatize the lands on which their urban properties stood. Rural lands were not returned to church's control at all.

The properties which the church did regain were in most cases devastated. The Soviet government had taught the people that they would look after them and their dwelling places, since they were a people's government which existed only to serve the people. In actual fact little or nothing was done to maintain property or repair it when the repairs were needed. The people had no interest in maintaining what they did not own. They expected that the government would take care of it. The result was that when the church again took possession, they found broken windows, leaky roofs, collapsing walls, sagging floors, unsafe stairways, doors that would not close properly, piles

of garbage, and a host of other practical problems. Worst of all, the condition of the churches was an abomination. Pulpits, altars, pews, organs had all long since disappeared. Renovation was badly needed and, although the state was able in a few cases to provide some assistance in the renovation of historical churches, in most cases there was no possibility of government aid and the people themselves had no recourses on which to draw. Parishioners in most parishes despaired that their churches could ever again be made usable as houses of worship. Fortunately, financial help from German and American Churches, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), private donations, and government aid made it possible to repair many churches to make them again usable. Funds were not generally available for the repair of other parish properties, excepting where private donors made special gifts available. Larger parishes received the greater part of the funds made available from foreign sources. In rural areas little money was available, excepting for the purpose of making the church building usable. Only in a few places, especially in the largest cities, have parish auxiliary properties again become income producing.



### 3. Making Decisions about New Directions

At independence the church faced problems which were not limited to questions of man power, the regaining of church property, the reclaiming of members who had strayed, and the cate-



Lithuanian and Norwegian young people play tug-of-war, Klaipėda 1993

chization of a generation which had indoctrinated in the tenancy of secular atheism. The church itself and its bishop, consistory, and synod found themselves abruptly placed in a new social setting much changed and difficult to understand. The structure of the church's organization had survived intact, but in the eyes of many it no longer seemed to fit the church's new situation. All were agreed that reforms were needed, but there was little common agreement about the content of the reforms or the manner by which there reforms should be implemented.

The bishop and consistory stated clearly their belief that the church now needed to adjust itself to life in democratic society. They envisioned no serious disruption of the church's present system of administration. Even in the time of great hardship the church had endured. It never regarded itself a creature of the state, regardless the proscriptive measures undertaken by the government. In the darkest times of the Soviet regime called and ordained servants of the word had continued to proclaim the Gospel truthfully and administer the sacraments according to Christ's institution. During this Soviet period synods were still held to discuss and vote upon issues facing the church, the consistory met regularly to maintain

order and fellowship under the guidance of the church's chief pastor. The church understood itself to be governed by her doctrine drawn from the Scripture and her historic confessions and traditions. She had always been a democratic institution in so far as that form of government could function under adverse circumstances. Nothing really had changed, except that now God's church would be unhindered by governmental regulations. In the 1990 synod at Tauragė it was understood that the church's statutes needed to be revised to reflect this new situation and implement the church's work, the work of reestablishing the parishes, the procuring of the return of church properties, and the assurance that the parishes could return to a more normal life.

Other sought more drastic reforms. Their contention was that the new situation required that the church's entire organizational structure must be changed to reflect the need of democratic and social values which were taking hold in Lithuanian society. Impressed by the models provided by some large and influential German and other Western Lutheran Churches, they insisted that the bishop and pastors should have no administrative authority and that their work should be strictly spiritual in nature. They asserted that the chairman of the consistory must henceforth be a layman and that the majority

of the members of the consistory should be lay people. It would be the responsibility of the bishop to implement the decisions of the consistory. The majority of those who took this position were themselves laymen whose involvement in the church's life during the Soviet period had been rather limited. They had an honest desire to help the church, but their notions of leadership and administrative style were clearly informed by modern secularism. It was their contention that not only the church's administration, but also her



Western European churches provided sorely needed help

doctrine and practice should be determined by majority vote.

Looking to churches in the West which were functioning in democratic fashion, they saw a society which appeared to be prosperous with job security for all church workers and a plethora of committees hard at work preparing statements on pressing societal issues. They saw also churches committed to absolute equality in which the office of the ministry was open to all, male and female alike, who met the academic requirements. In their eyes the Lithuanian Church appeared to be a poor, pathetic creature, damaged almost beyond repair by years of Soviet subjection and tied to outmoded and autocratic structures and methods. They were quick to suggest that the bishop and consistory were simply perpetuating the style of autocratic domination which had characterized the Soviet years<sup>6</sup>. Some demanded that this 'style' must be abandoned and insisted that the consistory adopt democratic and Western leadership styles. A concerned layman declared at a conference of the Lithuanian and Norwegian Churches:

We have heard more than enough accusations that many left the church in former times and the church leaders ingratiated themselves to the Communist government. It has been claimed that people were passive and that there exists a special privileged class in the church. Some say that those who do not understand church traditions bring only disorder, and there is widespread despair that church is being governed today by the same methods used 20-30 years ago. Here we mention only a few points. It is quite clear that our church now stands at the crossroads and is waiting to decide which path to follow. A discussions have already begun. Before leaving for this seminar I read a press report of the speech by the bishop's assistant, Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., that there is too much democracy in our church. This is a thought provoking statement. It is my strong conviction that the only possible future lies in democratic structures.<sup>7</sup>

Although these calls for democracy in the church were well intended, they showed no clear common understanding of what constitutes the essence of democracy. The old Soviet regime had been autocratic and had labeled every call for democracy as culture

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6 Arthur Hermann *Lietuvių vokiečių kaimynystė*. Vilnius 2000. 143.

7 *Liutis gyvas ir budi*. Apie Lietuvos - Norvegijos konferenciją. Vilnius 1994. 41-42.

revolutionary anarchy. The assertion that democracy means an end of authority seems to have taken hold in the minds of many. No one was opposed to democracy in the church, but few seemed to have a clear understanding of the nature of the church as that Body of which Christ is the head and in which he exercises authority over his members. It came to be commonly thought that the church should be governed just as any other social institution is, i. e., by the consent of the governed.

To implement its new understanding of church management the Lithuanians looked to the German territorial churches which had been the first to come to their aid with strong encouragement and financial gifts. It appeared that the German evangelical churches provided a model which the Lithuanian Lutheran Church could seek to emulate. An example of German efficiency was its unique organization „*Diakonisches Werk*,“ which had been organized as an institution

apart from the church to work for the welfare of the downtrodden and needy. The Lithuanians aware of the great impact which the German organization had made, created their own diaconal organization „*Sandora*“ on the German model. This meant that the work of providing for the spiritual needs of the people would be left entirely in the hands of the church, while charitable activities were administered by an organization completely separate in its administration, aims, and objectives. The same pattern would also be followed in neighboring Latvia and Estonia. Little thought was given to the question of the workability of this model in a small minority church in which the parish church stands at the center of church activity and charitable activity had traditionally been seen as



Representatives of „*Diakonisches Werk*“ unfurl their flag at the dedication of Klaipėda's „*Sandora*“ welfare center, 1996

an activity involving the pastor and all members. As a result, in the largest Lithuanian cities the „Sandora“ begun to take charge of all charitable activities as a separate organization, in which the pastor, parish council, and congregation had little input.

#### 4. Doctrinal Concerns

Almost from the start some member churches of LWF insisted that new Biblical understandings and modern democratic values both require that the ministry be open to all qualified candidates, female as well as male. They stated quite clearly that modern historical critical studies show that the Scriptural prohibitions against the ordination of women can no longer be taken to be an accurate statement of Christ's intention, but instead represents only an outdated



Bishop Klaus Engelhard, Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in conversation with Professor Helmutas Amašius, head of the Department of Theology at Klaipėda University, 1995

time - conditioned practice. They further reminded the Lithuanians that the ordination of women to the holy ministry is a clearly stated policy of the LWF, the largest member churches of which were all now admitting women to the ministry, as was the case also in the other Baltic States. Although it was clear that the Lithuanian Church was not willing to take this step, Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Sr., was requested in 1990 by a Lithuanian congregation in Germany to ordain a woman for service in the Lithuanian Church in Diaspora. Few church officials felt any need to enter the debates against the ordination of women, should the congregations be willing accept women pastors. It seemed to some that Lutherans in the West had surely thoroughly examined the issue, and that it was entirely natural and of no theological consequence that women should serve in the pastoral office. They regarded the ordination of women to serve the

church outside Lithuania as a positive move toward reform. They also were not equipped to object when an official of the newly organized department of Theology at Klaipėda University publicly stated that the department's purpose was „the preparation of qualified specialists in evangelical theology who could be ordained to serve as male and female priests.”<sup>8</sup> The senate of the university officially approved this statement in 1992. It was also included in the agreement between the university and the church, approved by the consistory and signed by the Bishop J. Kalvanas, Sr., and Rector *pro tem* Adolfas Brėskis in 1993.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the Mission Statement of Klaipėda University's Department of Theology made it clear that the staff of the Department intended to take its ground from the system of liberal theological education used in Germany and move in „new” theological directions with regard to biblical and systematic theology.<sup>10</sup> The director of the department made it clear that the „new” theology and the higher critical examination of the Bible would be important components of his department's teaching program. He stated:

Theology is a science which must be understood on the basis of an historical - critical framework. It is our wish to understand how peoples in times past understood and acknowledged God and the world... From this standpoint we will be able better to understand and creatively interpret legends and Scriptural stories especially in the Old Testament, which otherwise we would be forced to regard intellectual unclear and morally unacceptable. By carefully attending to the life conditions of those times long past and putting them into the proper framework we will be better able to determine what is still of importance to us today. In this way the historical - critical theology helps to bring Holy Scripture to life<sup>11</sup>.

The bishop and senior pastors, all of whom had sworn to uphold the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions now begun to question the new „scientific” view of the Bible. They remembered that the

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8 *Evangeliskosios teologijos centro laikinieji nuostatai*. Patvirtinta 1992.09.23 Senato posėdyje. Protokolas Nr.9.

9 *Klaipėdos universiteto ir LELB bendradarbiavimo sutartis*. 1993 m. gegužės 21 d.

10 *Helmut Arnaszus* Landkirchen-Zentrum für Evangelische Theologie an der Universität zu Klaipėda / Memel. - *Annabergo lupelis / Annaberger Annalen*. Nr.23. Bonn 1992, 31-40.

11 *Helmutas Arnaszus* Dvasiškieji Evangeliskosios teologijos centro pamatai. Teologijos katedra. Evangeliskosios teologijos centras. Informacija 1. Klaipėda 1995, 4.

undermining of the authority of Scripture had been a major tactic of the Soviet atheists, who had criticized the Bible<sup>12</sup> and backed up their criticisms with quotations from German higher critics, and most notably Rudolf Bultmann, whom the atheists had called the „Copernicus of Biblical exegesis.”<sup>13</sup> The bishop and pastors understood that the terms set for it in the scriptures were not subject to the vicissitudes of modern interpretation. Slowly opposition to the new measures was beginning to take shape.

The confrontation between traditional theology and churchmanship and the new interpretations came to a head when, after a ministry of 55 years and 19 years as the church's Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Sr., died suddenly in January 1995. Highly respected not only among the Lutherans, but among all Lithuanians, Bishop Kalvanas had led the church as the father of a far-flung family. Although some laymen in the consistory and congregations opposed him concerning what direction the church ought to take, few dared to oppose him to his face. Now the situation changed, and both those who had agreed with him in his theological stance and those who wished to identify with the „modern” theology and church order, soon organized themselves in preparation for the special synod which would elect his successor. In accordance with the church's statutes, the administrative functions of the bishop and chairmanship of the consistory passed to the bishop's auxiliary, Jonas Kalvanas, Jr. It was clear to all that he would follow on the same path as his father and would lead the church to a greater awareness of and adherence to her historic confessions.

At its February 16<sup>th</sup> meeting, the first since the burial of Bishop Kalvanas, the consistory received a request from a member of the Vilnius parish who had just completed two years of study at Wycliffe Hall, an Anglican 'low church' theological college associated with the University of Oxford, that the consistory approve her ordination as a pastor in the Lithuanian Lutheran Church. Chairman Kalvanas proposed that this request be tabled until the applicant could appear in person to present her request to the consistory. At the March 7<sup>th</sup> meeting the question was raised whether the consistory was willing

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12 *Ateisto knyga*, Vilnius 1986, 312-322.

13 *Zenonas Kosidovskis Evangelijų sakmės*, Vilnius 1986, 314.



to approve her to be ordered a deacon, a step necessary before any candidate could be considered for ordination to the holy ministry. At the same meeting a second request was received from another female



Feminists advocate dancing in the Liturgy. The German feminist "worship event" in Jurmala, Latvia 1996

member of the Vilnius congregation that she be ordered a deacon, although in this case the applicant had no formal theological training. Some members of the consistory pressed for a vote on the matter, and the consistory decided to deny both applications. On May 23, a week after the monthly meeting of the consistory, Pastor Kalvanas received a call from the chairman of the Vilnius parish stating that Henning Kramer, the vice-president of the North Elbian Church (*Nord-Elbische Kirche*) was in town and that it would be helpful that they meet and talk. Chairman Kalvanas agreed to the request. As could be expected the key question was concerning the ordination of women to the holy ministry. The visitor from Germany took an active part in the discussion and stated that he was surprised that this question should even be brought up, since the church had already established a precedent, when it had acted upon the request of the Church in Diaspora and permitted the ordination of a female candidate for service in Germany. He stated that by this action the Lithuanian Church has gone on record as a church which ordains women. He noted further that no article of the church's statutes and its confessions specifically prohibited the ordination of women. To bring the matter up for discussion at this time, he stated, would constitute a rejection of the ordination of women and could be construed as a highly prejudicial and discriminatory action unacceptable in society and contrary to the Lutheran faith. Further, he noted that the Lithuanian Church holds membership in the LWF and to deny women the right of ordination would be contrary to the common position taken by partner churches in Germany and Scandinavia. On behalf of the North Elbian Church and as an act

of personal courtesy he asked that the Lithuanian Church come to a positive decision in this matter. Some lay members of the consistory also pushed for a positive decision. Pastors Kalvanas was asked to clarify his own position on the matter. His reply was not direct, but made his position clear. He stated that the matter must be taken up by the synod. At the July 14<sup>th</sup> meeting, two weeks before the coming synod, the consistory received a letter from Germany again pressing the matter of women's ordination. The consistory decided that a discussion of this question should be put on the agenda for the synod.

At the same time an article appeared in *Glaube in der II Welt* which declared that pastor Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., was a simple, uneducated man who was in no way qualified to become the bishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church. Indeed the whole *ministerium* of the church was characterized as uneducated functionaries dressed up in priestly robes („*Talarträger*“). Gerd Stricker, the author of the article, made it clear that the time had come for the Lithuanian Church to leave the past behind and move bravely forward by electing a bishop who would make positive and radical changes.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the ordination question, Vice-president Henning Kramer laid before the consistory a detailed structural plan, which would effectively take administrative and theological control of the church out of the hands of the bishop, by separating his office from the chairmanship of both the consistory and of the synod. According to his plan pastors would henceforth have little voice in consistory decisions.

The election of the bishop as the main order of business in the synod convened in Tauragė on July 29, 1995 with Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., was elected almost unanimously. Later in the day the synod faced the question of opening the ministry to female candidates. There was a long and contentious debate, in which both sides pressed their cases. In the course of the discussion the leader of the department of theology at Klaipėda University suggested that the measure should be approved, because two thirds of his students were women and they would need jobs upon graduation. „When you will see these young attractive women standing before the altar, you

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14 *Glaube in der 2. Welt* (G2W). 1995 Nr. 7/8, 6.



Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Jr. addresses the 1995 Synod describing the road ahead

will accept them more readily than the men!"<sup>15</sup> The delegates from the Vilnius congregation asked and received permission to read an important letter from an official of the North Elbian Church which again insisted that the church should open the ministry to women. „I want you to understand my words and our position very clearly. The Lithuanian Lutheran Church is of course free to make it own decision. You may decide not to ordain women. We for our part are free to react to this decision and draw our own conclusions."<sup>16</sup> Anxious voices were heard among the delegates, saying: „We had better think deeply about this because it might affect our financial aid."<sup>17</sup> Some delegates noted that the church already had a women pastor because the Vilnius parish had invited women who had been ordained for service in Germany to be their supply pastor and fly to Vilnius monthly to hold services. They stated that on this basis it could be said that the Lithuanian Church allows women to be ordained. The synod decided that it would not vote on this issue until it had received the report of a theological commission appointed to examine the issue. Only then would the synod be in a position to consider the matter.

<sup>15</sup> *Keleivis*. 1995, Nr.2-3 (14-15), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Keleivis*. 1995, Nr.2-3 (14-15), 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Keleivis*. 1995, Nr.2-3 (14-15), 7.

Following the decision of the synod at the meeting of the consistory on September 15<sup>th</sup> the decisions of the synod was implemented by the appointment of a commission of pastors to examine the issue of women's ordination and present



„I believe that women will be ordained in Lithuania”  
– Kristina Ivanauskienė. A scene from documentary film “Kristina in Christ” 2006 m.

its findings. Almost every pastor of the church was named to the commission, including even the German guest female pastor, who was temporally serving in Vilnius. No mention of the matter can be found in the consistory's protocols until the meeting of February 28, 1997, when the consistory members were given a study document entitled „The holy ministry and the ordination of women,” for their study and analysis. At the April 25, 1997 meeting in the course of a general discussion the representatives of the Church in Lippe (*Lippische Landeskirche*) touched on the issue lightly when they asked about the position of women in the Lithuanian Church. They were told that the service of women had proved indispensable to the Lithuanian Church. The majority of congregational chairmen are women, and no less than 60 percent of the delegates to synod are women. They also have taken leadership roles in the parish councils and the church's diaconal work. When asked more specifically about the ministry of women at the altar the Lithuanians answered that this one office in the church is reserved to men who have been called by both their Lord and his Church to the sacramental ministry. They stated that in this matter the Lithuanian Church has decided to follow the clear words of Scripture rather than the example of other churches.

At the July 25, 1997 meeting the consistory again received an application from the Vilnius parish member who had previously asked for ordination to the pastoral ministry. This time she asked that she be ordained a deacon in the church. The response was that the church's study of this matter has not been completed. With this

discussion of the matter ceased.

The leaders of the LWF have never flagged in their determined efforts to press their program at every opportunity and by every means available to them. In 1997 they decided to turn their attention away from the intransigent but small Lithuanian Church, to her far larger northern neighbor, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, which in 1993 had determined to discontinue the ordination of women on theological grounds. At the Hong Kong assembly of the LWF in 1997 attempts were made to force the Latvians back into line. It was determined that financial and other support for the Latvian Church should be withheld because of its discriminatory policies. It was suggested that this decision should lead to a fruitful dialogue. Representatives of the North Elbian Church proposed that the LWF assembly declare that the ordination of women is nothing less than a mark (*nota ecclesiae*) of the Lutheran Church, along with the right preaching of the Gospel and proper administration of the sacraments. In his report to the consistory Bishop Kalvanas stated that he was waiting to see when such measures would be applied also against the Lithuanian Church.<sup>18</sup> In any case the LWF decisions simply emboldened the Lithuanians to resolve that they must study in depth their own biblical and Lutheran foundations. The church was coming to an even clearer recognition that Lutheran identity cannot be built upon sociological propositions or social tendencies currently advocated in other churches. In this case the minority church may not be necessarily wrong in its doctrine and practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Bishop Kalvanas' report to the consistory on July 25, 1997.

## 5. A Growing Confessional Consciousness

The election of Jonas Kalvanas, Jr. as the church's bishop clearly marked the emergence of a growing confessional consciousness in the church. The foundation of this growing awareness of the church's confessional tradition was the conservative attitude of both the pastors and the people in the face of growing liberalism in Western churches and society. Visitors to the West returned with reports that they saw beautiful churches with many empty pews. It was increasingly clear that there was no longer a clear distinction between Christian teachings and modern



The Luther statue at the Tauragė church, dedicated in 1984

secular humanism. Attempts to impress the intelligentsia and win back the masses were not having the desired effect. Instead the intelligentsia were unimpressed and many people were abandoning the church either to go the sects or to become themselves thoroughly secularized. Representatives to international conferences returned and reported their impressions that a secular agenda had been raised to a level equal to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. , and among some traditional spirituality had been replaced by environmental and social justice concerns. They observed that traditional spirituality was being replaced by environmental and social justice concerns. They noted a tendency to define sin in terms of modern notions of social justice. Some feminist theologians were charging that not only the church but even the Scriptures are infested with patriarchal thought patterns which must be eradicated. In some Lutheran Churches theological students who question the propriety of the ordination of women are refused ordination, and as a test candidates for ordination are required not only to publicly swear that they support the church's decision in this matter, but also show their

support by publicly receiving the sacrament from the hands of a female minister on several occasions. It was observed also that in many churches the Scriptures and confessions are treated as simply historical documents which indicate what Lutherans believed in the past. The Lithuanian Lutherans were disturbed by these reports, and they determined that the church's message and faith should not be compromised.

A further incentive to deeper study of the Lutheran Confessions came in 1997 with the announcement of a joint project between the LWF and the Vatican to reexamine and reevaluate the position of the church's concerning the doctrine of justification. It was suggested that modern critical studies show that the categorical statements of the Lutheran Confessions and the Council of Trent no longer fit the present situation of the church. The LWF asserted that the Lutheran Confessions did not rightly characterize the present position being taught in the Roman Church and that it was clear that Roman theologians include sanctification together with justification, whereas Lutheran theologians always strive to consider them separately in order to avoid any notion that man contributed to his salvation. It was clear to them that the condemnation of the Roman position was an obstacle to ecumenical relations, which could be overcome if the Lutheran position were simply reworded. From the Roman Catholic perspective the doctrine of justification was seem to play only a minor role in the church's theology and since modern scholarship and consultations had clarified the position of both churches, a mutual declaration on justification would be a great ecumenical step forward. Many Lutherans regarded the statement with enthusiasm, and in the LWF all member churches were encouraged to publicly announce their agreement and enthusiastic acceptance of a closer ecumenical tie with Rome. The publication of the *Joined Declaration on Justification* and the request that all LWF member churches should endorse it moved the Lithuanian Church to study the confessional doctrine on justification deeply. They understood that the very question of Lutheran identity rides on the article of justification for this doctrine is most central in the confessions and in the church's self-understanding. If one removes the article of justification, the Lutheran Church ceases to be the

Lutheran. Its unity in that case would be only organizational and the church would indeed lose its reason for separate existence apart from Rome, for it was the dispute concerning justification which was behind Roman Catholic insistence that Lutherans had left the church and could no longer be considered Catholic Christians. On the other hand the Roman Catholic Church embraces a number of different theological emphases and theological schools. It is bound together by its mutual obedience to the Bishop of Rome as the successor of St. Peter and the Vicar of Christ on earth. The creation of Uniate Churches in Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and the Ukraine at the Union of Brest in 1596 showed that the Roman Church can be very tolerant of theological positions and liturgies so long as the doctrine of purgatory and obedience to the Roman pontiff are held. It should be stated also that ecumenical relations in Lithuania, where Lutherans make up only a small minority of Christians in comparison to the Roman Church, have been limited. Even today on the parish level Roman Catholics are often told that the Lutheran Church is not a church, but a religious fellowship lacking the authentic signs of the church and lacking also any real intention to be the church. However, the Lithuanian Lutherans were not willing without further study to summarily dismiss the joint declaration. It was, however, quickly determined that the doctrine of justification described in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession was and still is a correct statement of the Biblical doctrine and is precious to the church. On this basis the consistory and bishop of the church decided that they could not support the *Joint Declaration on Justification* as an accurate reflection of Lutheran and biblical theology. They noted that several Lutheran Churches both in the LWF and outside of were agreed that the joint declaration does not do justice to the Lutheran position. It should be noted that even before the ink was dry on the declaration, the Roman Church was preparing the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* which would clearly show that Rome regards itself as the only full and complete Christian Church. Lutherans were not even allowed the same stature as the Eastern Orthodox. Clearly the Roman Church has placed far stiffer limits on the spirit of ecumenism than does LWF. The Lithuanians were not at all surprised that Lutherans, who thought that they were now moving a closer and more intimate



relationship with the Church of Rome, found the gates to the Vatican slammed shut.

At the same time the Lithuanian Church found that she was not standing alone. In the period of clarification of Lutheran confessional theology, in which the church found herself in the last half of the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Lithuanian Church was often made to feel that she was definitely moving in the "wrong" direction and was theologically isolating herself from her partner churches and indeed world-wide Lutheranism. During this same period, however, it became increasingly evident that there were in fact other Lutheran Churches, not only in the Eastern Europe and Russia, but also in the West which shared her doctrinal position. Close contact with the Lutheran Heritage Foundation, which had made available Lutheran confessional literature of proven value, and through study made available in the seminaries of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS), especially Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA, made it clear that there were a significant number of Lutherans who shared with them a common interpretation of God's inscriptured and inspired word, and a common confessional and theological foundation. joint conferences between LCMS and the Lithuanian Church were held in September 1998 in Tauragė and on May 9, 2000 in Klaipėda. In these conferences it became clear that the churches indeed share a common theological foundation and base their practice squarely upon it.

The consistory decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Synod for further discussion and recommendations. The 2000 synod addressed a number of important questions. Several important amendments had to be made to the church's statutes to meet unforeseen matters at the present time. The foremost agenda item concerned the relationship with the Lutheran Church - Missouri synod. A full report of the joined conferences was shared with the delegates and it was proposed that intercommunion with the LCMS should be sought. The consistory had previously



"I cannot agree to such a fellowship arrangement"

- Henning Kramer, vice-president of the North Elbian Church.

notified the Church of Lippe and the North Elbian Church of their intention to bring this matter before the synod. The representative of the Church of Lippe, its Lutheran superintendent, offered no encouragement to this move, but at the same time remained quite respectful and tolerant, and made no strong objections. The North Elbian representative, Henning Kramer, was frank and direct. He stated that this action could be quite disruptive to future collaboration and harmonious relations. As had been the case in the 1995 synod, anxious voices wondered aloud whether this action would signal the end of financial support from the North Elbian Church. After long and thoughtful discussion the delegates resolved to seek a closer and deeper relationship with the LCMS because of that church's clear and orthodox position regarding the authority of Scripture, confessional subscription, and sexual morality. In its resolution the Synod clearly states the church's position with reference to the authority of the Scriptures, confessional subscription, and homosexual behavior.

Rejecting these false doctrines, we confess the complete authority of the Bible and its teachings, as it is correctly and unchangingly stated in the Book of Concord. We can have full fellowship with those Churches who share with us the same faith and teachings, and which do not ordain or promote the ordination of women, do not defend homosexual behavior, do not make compromises on the doctrine of justification, and who confess that each communicant in the Holy Communion under the sign of the bread and wine is given and receives the true Body and Blood of the Lord<sup>19</sup>.

At a meeting on December 14, 2000 the consistory determined to ask the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of LCMS to recommend that fellowship between the churches be established. After its study of this request CTCR resolved to bring this question before the 2001 delegate convention of the LCMS. The resolution to establish fellowship was passed almost unanimously and the Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., was invited to address the assembly. He assured them of the gratitude of the Lithuanian Church for the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship and for the opportunity afforded to Lithuanian students to receive confessional sound instruction and do advance theological work in the seminaries of

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19 *Lietuvos evangelikų kelias*. 2001-2002. 10.

the LCMS. He stated „We have no greater desire then to firmly and boldly confess the faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as it is expressed in its confessional writings, which are clear and adequate statements of the teachings of the inspired Word of God.”<sup>20</sup>

Also discussed in the 2000 synod were sensitive questions concerning issues of the family and human sexuality,



Delegates and guests at the synod in Tauragė, 2000

including the assertion by some churches that homosexuality and lesbianism should be accepted as life- styles free of moral judgment. Many delegates were surprised that these matters should even brought before the synod, because there was nothing in the theological and moral tradition of the Lithuanian Church or even popular Lithuanian moral standards, which approved of such notions. Not even the proposal that women might be admitted to the holy ministry was as offensive as the statements that some liberal Lutheran Churches were now discussing these questions and were prepared to assert that homosexuals and lesbians should be allowed to continue their life style without any statement of God's judgment against homosexual behavior or a call to repentance. The Lithuanian Lutheran Church was unwilling to accept new „Western” attitudes and positions for both theological and social reasons. They understood that theologically these new positions clearly contradict the Word of God. From a social standpoint Western developments in these matters clearly had no counterpart in the experience of eastern European Christians. During the Soviet period laws had strictly forbidden such behavior. Public exposure and conviction on the charge of same sex sexual relationships invariably led to three years incarceration.<sup>21</sup> No doubt this was a social factor. More telling for the church, however, was

<sup>20</sup> Bishop Kalvanas' report to the consistory on August 24, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Article 122. - Former Soviet Criminal Code.

the clear prohibition of such activity both in the Holy Scriptures and the Christian moral tradition which was quite single minded in this regard. It should be noted also that in the year 2000 the Russian Orthodox Church officially petitioned the government of the Russian Federation to forbid practicing homosexuals from teaching positions. The position of the Latvian Lutheran Church against homosexual behavior has been on record for a number of years. In Lithuania there is no disagreement with the judgment that such behavior is sinful. Debate centered around the wording of the resolution presented by a member of the synod, condemning the condition of homosexuality, rather than concentrating its attention on homosexual behavior and practices. Because this matter could not be clearly dissolved, it was decided to table the resolution. However, it was made clear that the church affirms the clear Scriptural teaching that same sex sexual relationships are sinful. The bishops of the Baltic Churches speaking on behalf of their churches have been of one voice in their attitude on matters of such relationships and family matters.

The larger European Churches in the LWF have failed to appreciate the significance of the rising tide of confessional awareness in the Lithuanian Church and other Eastern Lutheran Churches. They have argued



Lithuanian pastors and guests visit the Fort Wayne seminary, 2001

that Missouri's theology is hopelessly out of date, anti-ecumenical, and psychologically warped. Articles have appeared in religious publications questioning how a conservative church could ever hope to meet with success in this modern age. *Glaube in der 2. Welt* published a controversial article entitled *Missouri Synod on the March (Missouri-Synode im Anmarsch)*.<sup>22</sup> The 2003 edition of the

<sup>22</sup> *Glaube in der 2. Welt* (G2W). 2000 No.12.

Year book of the Martin Luther Bund *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt* published Rudolf Keller's article, entitled *Aspects from the History of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (Aspekte aus der Geschichte der „Lutherischen Kirche - Missouri Synode“)* which seeks to give sociological explanations to this phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps most interesting was an address at the Evangelical Commission for Central and Eastern Europe, in Brandenburg, April 2002 by Bishop Stefan Reder (Deputy of the Archbishop in St. Petersburg, Russia), who stated that the Missouri Synod seems well suited to the mentality of the Soviet mind. He stated that the people of Eastern Europe are still too theologically immature to think for themselves, and are happy to be told in clear terms what is right and what is wrong, just as the Soviet propaganda did. „The Soviet Union ideology had the proclivity for explaining all fundamental things on the basis of the indisputable authorities and writings of Marx, Lenin, et. al. The LCMS does this the same thing, in that it subscribes itself uncritically to Luther and the Lutheran Confessions and looks at these as a completely infallible foundation.“<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that none of these articles has dealt with the theology of Lutheran Confessions as such. The impression is given to their readers that these churches have simply surrendered their hearts and minds to conservative American Churches. What these critics missed was that the decision of the Lithuanian Church and that of some other Eastern European Lutheran Churches was a response to the modern liberal orientation in theology and ecclesiology in the Western European Churches.

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23 Rudolf Keller *Aspekte aus der Geschichte der „Lutherischen Kirche - Missouri Synode“*. - *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt*. JMLB 50. Erlangen 2003, 187 - 211.

24 „Hier liegt die eindeutige Stärke der LCMS Theologie. Sie gibt klare und eindeutige Antworten vor und entspricht daher in gewisser Weise der sowjetischen Ideologie. Eigenständiges Denken der Menschen war in sowjetischer Zeit nicht gefragt. Die Sowjetregierung hat für die Menschen gedacht.... Die Menschen haben selten gelernt, selbständig zu denken.... Darin liegt die Stärke der LCMS-Theologie. Hier braucht man nicht zu denken. Hier wird ein Komplettsystem mit einem umfassenden Wahrheitsanspruch präsentiert, worauf man sich einlassen kann.... Die sowjetische Ideologie hatte die Neigung, all grundlegenden Dinge auf unstrittige Autoritäten und deren Schriften zurückzuführen: Marx, Lenin usw. Die LCMS tut dies in gleicher Weise, indem sie sich unkritisch auf Luther und die lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften bezieht und diese als völlig unfehlbare Grundlagen ansieht.“

Shortly after the synod the consistory, acting upon the decisions of the Synod, affirmed that „the church holds to the traditional Lutheran method of interpretation of



Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus visits the consistory, 2002

the Holy Scriptures and rejects “higher (historical) criticism”<sup>25</sup>. The consistory affirmed that the Lithuanian Lutheran Church confesses the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God and the only rule and norm of all that is believed, taught, and confessed in the church. The church’s position was a rejection of the new hermeneutics which impoverish the biblical message. This positive statement of traditional Lutheran methodology reaffirms the position that the church has always confessed both before and during the Soviet era.

If there were fears that as a result of the decisions of the synod the Lithuanian Church would isolate herself from positive contacts with other European and American Lutheran Churches, and perhaps even leave the LWF, these proved to be inaccurate. The church did not in fact isolate herself and positive contacts with other churches continued as before. The bishop and consistory had always stated its independence in making decisions and the church’s respect for her ecumenical partners. In 2002 the church celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup>



10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lithuanian Lippe collaboration, 2002

25 August 24, 2000 decision of the Consistory. Protocol No. 9.

anniversary of its positive relationship with the Lutheran section of Church in Lippe in a special celebration in Tauragė, at which the church expressed its deep gratitude for the friendship and aid offered by Lippe Lutherans. Through mutual conciliation and material help the Lutherans in Lippe have aided the Lithuanian Church in every aspect of its life during this period of rebuilding. The Lithuanian Lutheran Church acknowledged that its relationship with its sister and partner churches has of necessity been rather one sided, as received far more than it could give. Its primary contribution is its positive witness to the Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

## 6. Fruits of the Efforts to Rebuild

Through the aid so generously provided by German and American Churches, and the LWF the church has been able to stand on its feet and work toward the fulfillment of her Lord's Great Commission to make disciples. In the last decade it has been possible for the church to reopen many parish churches and repair the damage which all the churches sustained during the communist era. Every year saw the re-consecration and reopening of churches which had previously been used for strictly secular purposes. In Klaipėda, where the magnificent St. John's church had been destroyed by area bombardment in 1944, and

where St. James church had been torn down by the Communists in

1958, the parish hall, which had been used for meetings of the communist youth, was returned to the parish and converted for use as a church in 1990. In 1991 the recently returned parish house of the Šilalė congregation, which had been used as a court house by the Soviets, was consecrated as its house of worship. In 1993 the church in Vyžiai (Wieszen),

which had been used as a storage barn, again opened its doors and in Natkiškiai (Nattkischken), where the church building had been destroyed, another church property, which the Soviets had used as a clothing factory, was remodeled for use as a parish church. In the same year the church in Kėdainiai, which had been used first as a storage facility for chemical fertilizers and later was turned into municipal



Katyčiai church after communist "remodeling," c. 1968



The restored Katyčiai church, 1994



history museum, again opened its doors to worshipers. In 1994 the church in Katyčiai (Coadjuthen), which in 1955-1958 had been used by the Soviets as a cinema and then was given back in almost unusable condition, along with a bill for "improvements" was renovated with a restored tower and sanctuary as befits a parish church. In 1995 the Dovilai (Dawillen) church, which had been used for grain storage, was reopened and the church in Marijampolė, which had been gutted and turned into sports hall, was restored and reopened. In the same year the Vilnius church in the center of the Vilnius business district, which had been divided into a two floor facility for building materials and repair workshop, was re-consecrated and the medieval parish church in Rusnė, the tower of which dates back to medieval times, which had been turned into a grain storage barn, was repaired and re-consecrated, and in Mažeikiai, where the church had been used as a fire station, the building was remodeled and reopened. In 1996 the church in Kretingalė (Deutsch Crottingen) which had been used for grain storage, was re-consecrated, and the Vištytis church, which had been devastated and turned in tractor repair shop, was re-consecrated. In 1997 the Vilkyškiai (Willkischken) parish church, which had been used as a mill and had been left in a devastated condition, was reopened and in Biržai the organist's house was turned into



Dovilai church used to store grain, 1988

was reopened and in Biržai the organist's house was turned into



Rededicated Dovilai church, 1995

a house of worship. In 1999 a parish house in Joniškis was remodeled and consecrated as the parish church. In 2000 the Virbalis church, which had been used for grain storage, was again restored and returned to sacred use, and the parish church



The Vilnius sanctuary returned to church after use as a repair shop, 1990

in Šakiai which had been used as a cinema and later as a sports hall, was renovated and re-consecrated. In 2001 the parish church in Panevėžys, which had been used as a farm implements store, was again restored to parish use. In 2002 the church in Pagėgiai (Pogegen), which had served as a cinema, called „Komsomoletc” (“Young Communist”), was extensively remodeled and returned to parish use. In 2004 the parish house of the Smalininkai



Vilnius parish church today

(Schmalleningken) congregation, which had been used as a cinema, was extensively renovated and consecrated to be the parish church.

A few of the confiscated churches were returned in reasonably good condition. Such was the case in Juodkrantė and Nida, where it was necessary only to construct new altars and pulpits, and in Kaunas where the altar had survived during the years when the church was used as a university lecture hall. In Raseiniai, where the Lutheran Church was destroyed, the congregation holds services in the local Russian Orthodox Church, and in Kelmė the Lutherans

are permitted to use the facilities of an empty Reformed Church. In Rukai (Rucken) the parish church had been confiscated and given to the Roman Catholic parish during the Soviet era. It was returned to the Lutherans in 1993 and the congregation graciously permitted the Roman Catholics to use it. In 1996 a defective electrical circuit, which was used by the Roman Catholics to illuminate a picture of the Virgin Mary, short circuited and caused a fire which did extensive damage to the building. The Lutherans repaired the damage and continue to allow its use by the Roman Church.

Like the churches which had been closed many of those which had remained open were in poor physical condition. The churches had been made available to the congregations by the Soviet government "at no charge," but contingent upon their paying exorbitant hidden fees for land usage taxes and insurance charges which add up almost all the offerings of the members. There was little money left over for building maintenance. The result was sagging walls, leaky roofs, broken windows, and poor illumination. These churches too needed extensive repairs. In the case of the parish church in Švėkšna, maintained by only a few families, it was not until 1999 that the church was for the first time wired for electricity. The consistory also lost its property in Kaunas and still awaits its return. During the communist years the consistory met in one or another of the remaining churches. The consistory conducted its business in its official „office” - a room on the second floor in Bishop Kalvanas' house. The present home of the consistory is an old house donated to the Tauragė parish by a member who has moved overseas. Its meager facilities consists of four small rooms on the second floor of this building, the first floor of which serves as the offices of the Tauragė parish.

In 2005 ground was broken by Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis and the Reverent Gary Arp, President of the Iowa East District of the LCMS, for the new church and diaconical center in Palanga, an example of the close relationship between these sister churches. This project is an expression of the efforts of Lutheran brothers and sisters in congregations in the Eastern Iowa. Other strong supporters of this work are Mr. Kurtas Vėlius, a faithful supporter of Lutherans in his homeland, and Mr. Donald Ellefsen, whose late wife was

a native Lithuanian. Their financial offerings have been supplemented by the LCMS Human Care and its executive director Pastor Mathew Harrison.

Church buildings are built of brick and stone, but the church herself must always be built upon the strong foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the true corner stone. Attention must

be given not only for buildings, but also to the church's theological foundation. In the new century the church has faced no great practical problems and theological issues. Synod 2000 concerned itself mainly with the continued work of rebuilding, reclaiming the lost, and the work of opening the eyes of the people to the great missionary task of proclaiming Christ in a society, now largely secularized. Monthly pastoral seminars for the purpose of further in service education of the clergy, to study together Scriptures, and the church's confessions were instituted. For the first time in its history the church together with Lutheran Heritage Foundation and Concordia Theological Seminary organized annual international theological free conferences, open to pastors, theologians, and interested laymen from across Europe, Central Asia, Scandinavia, and North America. To date five such conferences have been held – three in Lithuania, one in Wittenberg, and one in Riga. The themes of the conferences have included the question of Lutheran identity in the modern world, catechesis, the doctrine of justification, and the church's mission. These conferences have provided valuable contacts with Lutherans who share a common commitment to the Lutheran Confessions.



Palanga church and diaconical center  
under construction

## 7. The Present Course of the Life of the Church

It was a great shock when on Easter Friday 2003 Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Jr., died suddenly. Bishop Kalvanas had studied medicine at Kaunas university and in Russia and had served as a doctor of internal medicine, neurology, and psychiatry in Omsk, Siberia, and later in Šilalė, Lithuania. To the consternation of his medical supervisors in Šilalė he announced his intention to leave the practice of medicine and seek ordination to the holy ministry. They immediately suggested that perhaps he would like a much larger flat and improved working conditions. However, they were not able to divert him



Bishop Jonas Viktoras  
Kalvanas, Jr. (1948-2003)

from pursuing the work to which the Lord was calling him. The KGB immediately blacklisted him, and he was unable to find work to support his family. He took advantage of the one job offer that he received – as a bee-keeper. After study in Riga he was called to serve as assistant and after auxiliary to his father Bishop Jonas Kalvanas, Sr. His work made him widely known in all the Lithuanian parishes. During his term of office he complemented the work which his father had undertaken to draw the parishes closer together and strengthen greatly the confessional consciousness of the pastors, consistory, synod, and parishes. Bishop Kalvanas was only 54 years old at the time of his death, and his death was completely unexpected. The church was not prepared for it.

The consistory declared the election of a bishop to be such an important matter that they would allow themselves a period of time for reflection on the present situation and needs of the church, and would call a special synod to elect the new bishop on the first anniversary of the bishop's death, April 24, 2004.

According to the statutes, certain requirements to be met by candidates for the office of bishop greatly restricted the number who could be legitimately considered. The statutes stated that episcopal candidates must have served in the ministry no less than 10 years and

have obtain academic degrees in theology. It became evident, that although there were several pastors who had served more than 10 years, only one had a degree in theology. Many felt that the church should be able to consider more candidates before the election. They therefore moved that all restrictions to nominations be lifted.

At the opening of the special synod, held on April 24, 2004 this suggestion was brought before the delegates and approved. There were the names of three nominees placed on the ballot. On the second ballot Mindaugas Sabutis, pastor of Vilnius parish, polled a simple

majority and was elected. On June 19, 2004 he was consecrated by Archbishop Jānis Vanags of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, with Archbishop Jaan Kiivit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, Archbishop Jukka Paarma of the Church of Finland, and other bishops acting as co-consecrators. Bishop Sabutis brought to his work new ideas concerning administration and church projects, but he clearly affirmed the church's traditional theological stance and his intention that the church should continue in the same spiritual path it had always followed.

The 2005 regular synod of the church met in Tauragė on July 9<sup>th</sup>. At this synod it was decided that henceforth the synod would be held every third year instead of every fifth year, that members of the consistory to be elected to a six year term, and that the term of the bishop would be nine years, at which time he would be eligible for re-election to his office. The delegates also determined to implement a plan to move toward a closer relationship with Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) and its congregations by an exchange of pulpits by pastors of the two bodies and by encouraging



Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis and Latvian Archbishop Janis Vanags, June 2004

the development of closer relationships on the parish level. It was decided that the matter of fuller fellowship should be placed on the agenda again at the synod in 2008.

In a step to draw Lithuanian Lutherans at home and overseas into



Consecration of Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis, June 2004

closer fellowship, the 2006 synod of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Diaspora voted to become a part of the National Church. As a result the overseas congregations formed by Lithuanian refugees during the occupation have accepted the jurisdiction of our bishop and consistory and participate as fully as possible in all aspects of the life of our church.

In the more than 15 years since independence the church has moved steadily forward. She has become increasingly aware of the new situation in which she is called to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a society dominated by secularism and in which the traditional religious affiliations of the people of the nation have little effect on their outlook and daily conduct. The challenges are no less great than were the obstacles placed before the church in the communist years. There is no longer any clear attempt to destroy the church by repressive government measures or manifest social pressures, but secularization has taken its toll. The altar and pulpit and the means of grace no longer occupy the central place in the nation's life. The church intends to address this situation with a more aggressive program of re-evangelization to reclaim the lost and unbelievers and fortify her young people for lives of Christian faith and service in every walk of life. Aware of the dangers of secularization the church intends to remain the church and not surrender to the spirit of the age by which she simply nods in approval or enthusiastically supports the world's programs. Her priority is not to implement the secular agenda, but to call all to repentant faith and offer the invitation to receive God's grace through word and sacrament.

## 8. Organization of the Church

The statutes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania state boldly that the church's work is to proclaim the Gospel and to administer the sacraments church in accordance with



Synodical officers at synod 2005.

the standard of teaching set down in Holy Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran Book of Concord. The church understands that although she is an organization in society, she is also more than that. She is organized by and for higher purposes. She understands that church order proceeds from the Word of God and the church's Confessions, and not human standards. Church order is both synodical and episcopal. It is synodical because decisions civil and practical matter of program and administration are decided by the synod in which all the clergy hold membership and every congregation participates through its delegates. It is episcopal because the administration of the church by its consistory operates under leadership and supervision of the bishop into whose hands also has been given the supervision of the church's spiritual life. The bishop acts as the ordainer of all pastoral candidates. He who dedicates churches and memorials; He who supervises the clergy and guides the congregations in the way of the Word. In both spiritual and civil matters he who officially represents the church in national, international, and inter-confessional contacts. As shepherd he leads and corrects the church, guiding it in such a matter as to protect it from dangerous theological error, immoral actions, improper or unwise social actions and words and actions by which the Gospel, the church, the ministry, and its congregations are misrepresented or held up to ridicule. He makes his decisions and course of action not arbitrarily, but in concert with the church's consistory.



Until 2005 synods were held every fifth year, but in 2005 the synod resolved that henceforth the synod should meet every three years to conduct church business. As is common in Lutheran Churches, the bishop and all other church officials, including the consistory,



Synod's Presidium 2005

are elected by vote of the synod, which also passes resolutions, which are prescriptive and binding upon all pastors, congregations, and church members. The synod acts upon requests and memorials brought by congregations, pastors, church members, and the consistory. It also sets the practical programs within which the consistory and the congregations are to work. However, the synod is not free to alter the church's faith and doctrine, for the church is bound to be governed in her doctrine and practice by the Word of God and the church's creeds and confessions. Should theological questions arise, advice and guidance is to be sought from theologians who have clearly and unequivocally declared themselves bound by the inspired Word of God and the church's confessional books. The synod also establishes the church's legal statutes and authorizes the publication of approved hymnals and liturgies for use in the congregations.

The administration of the church is placed in the hands of the church's elected officials, namely, the bishop and the lay and clerical members of the consistory. The consistory works under the authority of the synod and is charged by the synod with the responsibility of administering the church's affairs in accordance with its resolutions. The 11 clerical and lay members of the consistory are thus responsible for the administration of the church between public meetings of the synod. The consistory, under the leadership of the bishop, supervises the pastors and parishes, seeing to it that the church's doctrinal position and statutes are maintained and the terms of the church's program are carried out. In the discharge of

these responsibilities the consistory officially approves pastoral calls, establishes a commission to oversee theological education and the examination of theological candidates, and authorizes the ordination of candidates. It also authorizes the installation of pastors and deacons in congregations. Individual members of the consistory are assigned the responsibility of overseeing the several aspects of the church's works in education, social ministry, evangelism, stewardship, communication, etc.

Members of the church are those who have been baptized in the Lithuanian Lutheran Church or baptized members of other Lutheran Churches who request that they be received into membership. Baptized members of other confessions are accepted into membership upon instruction and examination. Invited to Holy Communion are those who have been baptized and both instructed and examined in the chief parts of the Christian doctrine, as they are explained in the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther. Normally those who have been baptized in Lutheran Church receive this instruction and are confirmed in their early teenage years. All members of the congregation are to attend services regularly, receive the sacrament frequently, and provide for the financial support of the pastor and congregation by their regular offers. Eligible to participate and vote in parish meetings are communicant members in good standing who are 18 years old or older. Members of the church are expected to be married in the Lutheran Church, to present their children for Holy Baptism and confirmation, and to be buried in the Lutheran Church. Lutherans who marry a member of another confession or no confession are not freed of the responsibility to be married in the Lutheran Church and according to its rites. It is responsibility of the pastor to warn the members of his congregation against doctrinal error and immoral words and behavior, and it is his responsibility to deny the Sacrament of the Altar to those who refuse to confess their sins and repent, until such time as they are willing to do so. Every member is encouraged to participate fully in the life of his parish church, receiving grace and strength from the proclamation of the Gospel and the sacraments and contributing to the whole body according to the gifts, talents, and resources that God has given them.

## 9. The Parishes

The center of the church's life is its 54 parishes. In them the people faithfully gather to hear God's Word and to receive his sacramental gifts. Not every parish has its own church building. It was the policy of the Soviets, especially



Lithuanian Lutheran parish churches

during the Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev years, to turn the church buildings to other uses or demolish them. As a result today less than a half the parishes worship in regular church buildings. 15 parishes worship in houses of prayer which originally served as parish halls or parsonages. In some parishes nothing remains of the original property, and worship is conducted in private homes, rented halls, or churches of other confessions.

The administration of the parish is in the hands of its pastor, who is assisted by a parish chairman and council, elected in the congregational meetings. During the Soviet era it was required that each parish must have at least 20 members from which it elected its parish council. The governmental authorities usually dealt with them directly and ignored the pastor. Since 1995 the pastor has served as the chief administrative officer of the parish, working in concert with the parish council. The pastor has the necessary spiritual authority and theological training to guide his people, and in the case of parishes newly reopened, he alone had the knowledge and expertise to organize both the spiritual life and the operation of the parish as a legal entity.

Lithuania was officially Christianized in 1387 and in the case of Samogitia region in 1413. Two parishes which are now Lutheran date back to the time when Lithuania was still a pagan land. The

Klaipėda (*Memel*) parish was established by the Teutonic knights in 1252 when they arrived to build a fortress at the mouth of the Dangė river. In 1419 the knights established a parish at Rusnė(*Russ*) on the shores of the Kuronian lagoon (*Kurische Nehrung*) and the mouth of the Nemunas river (river *Memel*). These parishes became Lutheran along with the whole Prussian region in 1525, when Duke Albrecht von Brandenburg and the knights

declared for Lutheranism. In the Reformation era Klaipėda region (*Memelland*) and the eastern borders of the East Prussia, became the centers of Lithuanian speaking Lutheranism. When Klaipėda region was taken from Prussia and joined to Major Lithuania in 1923, the region retained a strong concentration of Lutherans and a substantial number of Lithuanian Lutheran parishes. The first parish established in Major Lithuania was in Vilnius, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The parish dates from 1555. The Kaunas parish was established a few years later in 1558. These two parishes have always played a major role in the life of the Lutheran Church in Major Lithuania. The majority of congregations in Major Lithuania were established after the reestablishment of the religious rights in 1668 and 1775. This area was and remains predominantly Roman Catholic and Lutheran parishes are scattered across the area mostly in cities, towns, and major settlements.

The present membership of the Lutheran Church is approximately 20 000, only a fraction of its membership before WWII. At that time there were 67,000 Lutherans in Major Lithuania and 140,000 in



The cross at Marijampolė parish church is restored to its rightful place, 1995.

Klaipėda region.<sup>26</sup> In 1941-1960 large numbers of Lutherans were forced to flee the country, or were deported, or otherwise scattered. The church was left in the hands of 10 percent of its former members, in 27 parishes. But even in days of persecution, hardship, and bitter disappointments they continued to gather to hear God's Word, receive his blessings, and maintain their parishes to the best of their ability.

The parishes receive no governmental support. They are dependant entirely upon the prayers and financial offerings of their members. Financial operation of the parishes depends upon the annual payment by parishioners of between 10 and 20 dollars a year. With these meager funds the church pays for its utilities,



First service of the reopened Raseiniai parish in the local Russian Orthodox church, 2001

maintenance, and a small stipend for its pastor. There are insufficient funds to pay for the costs of heating, with the result that during winter many parishes are unable to heat the church. Some churches have old wood stoves to keep the temperature just above freezing, but only just above freezing. The people sit in church bundled up in their overcoats and thick boots and the pastors too wear heavy coats under their vestments. This is taken as a matter of course and no one is surprised that in some churches the only heat is that provided by their clothing and warm hearted Christian fellowship. The lack of

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26 *Vilius Gaigalaitis* *Atsiminimai*. Klaipėda 1998, 187, 218.

heat does not seem to keep people away. In a few churches services are held in the coldest months in sacristies or chapels where the



Tauragé confirmation class 2002

people can huddle together in a smaller space.

Parish life is of course centered in the church where both infants and adults are baptized, the young people of the congregation are confirmed, the betrothed exchange their vows before the altar, and the departed are remembered and committed to the earth. Baptism of infants is administered within a few months of birth, although in some cases it is delayed until late spring or the summer months, when the weather is no so cold. In the larger parishes children come for catechesis and general religious instruction for all ages on Saturdays. Ordinarily candidates for confirmation receive instruction in the 6 chief parts of the Christian doctrine when they are from 12 to 14 years old. In many places confirmation instruction follows the Sunday service. The rite of confirmation is celebrated during the summer months. The boys wear dark suits and ties, and the girls dress as brides in white garments. During pietist times both boys and girls dressed in somber black. After the war the use of white gowns was introduced throughout the church. Marriage is primarily a family affair with the wedding couple, their witnesses, and parents in attendance. During the Soviet era many marriages were solemnized in secret. Because of recent changes in the law, marriage before a civil authority is no longer necessary, and a proper license and the church ceremony is all that is required. In the Soviet times civil marriage was required and the

couples came to the church for the solemnization of their vows and to receive the nuptial blessing. The wedding is followed by a special celebration by family and friends which is often not limited to a single evening. The burial of the dead has changed little in Lithuania in modern times. The deceased in country are still often laid out at home where a parish members visit and a service of hymns and prayers is held in the evening, which is called the 'watch.' Usually the diseased man is dressed in a black suit and women often in white with a shawl around the head and shoulders. Roman Catholics are laid out with the hands folded around a rosary, Lutherans, instead, are laid out with a picture of Jesus or a baptismal napkin in their hand. The service is conducted with the coffin uncovered. In the rural areas the body is taken from the home or church to the cemetery in procession led by an officer of the congregation, carrying the funeral crucifix while the mourners sing hymns. After the committal service the pastor casts earth on the coffin with the traditional words „...ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The burial place itself is often decorated with evergreen branches. After the coffin has been lowered into the ground the family and other mourners cast earth upon it. Then while man of the close the grave the women sing hymns. When the burial is completed, the mound of dirt above the grave is smoothed and the sign of the cross is made in the dirt with the handle of the shovel and the mound is covered with the flowers. The pastor and mourners remain until the burial is complete and then leave together to the home or other public place for lunch. Roman Catholic friends often remark that they are very impressed that the Lutheran pastor stays with the family through the whole burial, because in their experience the priest always leaves immediately after his part in the service.

An important mark of parish life, Lutheran as well as Roman Catholic, is the regular and devout remembrance of the faithful departed. This may be said to be part of the Lithuanian national character. In addition to the usual memorial remembrance and prayer on the Sunday after burial, it is the custom among the Lithuanian Lutherans that family and friends gather at the church for a memorial prayer, hymn, and readings during their regular services on the first, fifth, and other anniversaries of the death of their loved

one. This too has proved to be a good opportunity to reclaim the lost and do mission work among people who have no connection with the church. During the years of Soviet rule some Lutherans joined in the typically Roman Catholic practice of decorating the graves of their loved ones on All Saints Day. At first pastors discouraged this practice and pointed out that for the Lutherans the Last Sunday in the church year was the proper time to remember the departed. More recently Lutherans have more generally begun to observe All Saints Day. Lithuanian Lutherans characteristically ask their pastors to hold a special service to bless the memorial stones which mark the graves of their departed.

Every summer special services are held in the parish cemeteries at which the parish members are joined by friends and relatives from all over the nation.

Before independence these services provided a possibility for public



Pastor Erikas Laiconas leads the cemetery festival service at Ažuolpamūšis, Pasvalis district, 2002.

worship. Since independence they begun to take on a missionary character by which family members who have fallen away from the church are encouraged to return to the church. Although all learn Luther's Catechism and know Luther's morning and evening devotions which begin with the invocation of the Triune God and the sign of the cross, pietistic training has left them with the notion that to make the sign of the cross in public is a mark of empty Roman Catholic formalism and superstition. Only in the most recent years has this attitude begun to change through increased associations with foreign Lutherans who are not so reluctant to publicly exhibit their devotion in this matter. Although kneeling for prayer is the universal practice among Lithuanian Lutherans, the practice of bowing toward the altar is considered ritualistic. However, the practice of singing hymns before the service begins, which in



some other Lutheran countries is thought to be Roman Catholic, still is practiced especially in the larger parishes where people come early to get a seat. This practice now seems to be receding as under the influence of capitalism the worshiper becomes more time conscious. In some places the old practice is maintained that the pastor comes to the altar in procession behind church officers who carry the processional cross, a survival of a practice once universal in Lutheranism. In general, since independence the church has maintained attitudes of reverence and respect in the church. Those who enter the nave for worship do so either in silence or else they communicate only in whispers. For the Lithuanian Lutherans the attitude of some secularized people for whom the church is regarded as little more than a public hall has gained no foothold. The church is a sacred place, God's house, the place where his Word is heard and his people respond in confession and prayers. No one but the clergy and theological students stand before the altar, and the altar is prepared reverently by church officers and sacristans whose duties are clearly defined. Usually the sanctuary is set off from the rest of the church by the altar rail, and those not designated do not step into the sanctuary. Even outside the building, no secular or profane activities, such as cigarette smoking and frivolous behavior, can be observed within the fence that surrounds the church.

A unique feature of congregational life and worship is the practice of holding special services in each of the parish cemeteries during the summer months. Parishioners prepare by raking and sweeping the cemetery and decorating the graves of all departed parishioners whether or not there are surviving relatives. This is a big event in parish life and family members and parishioners gather from all over the country. Included among the worshipers are Lutherans who live in areas of the country where there are no Lutheran Churches, as well as secularized family members who ordinarily do not attend church services. These services have proved to be a valuable tool in reclaiming lost or strayed Lutherans. Another unusual practice is the solemn service of the blessing of memorial stones marking the graves of the departed loved ones. Since Soviet times the pastors have resolved to bless only grave stones which are shaped as a cross

or prominently feature a cross cut into the stone. It can be mentioned that soon after independence came some families quickly added crosses to the memorial stones of family members who had died during the time of oppression but whose Christian affiliation was kept secret.

During the years of suppression the parishes were largely held together by strong pietistic pastors and lay leaders. For forty years the people were forced to depend upon their own spiritual resources without easy access to regular preaching, confession, absolution, and frequent Holy Communion. In many cases the faithful had to travel over a hundred kilometers to participate in public worship. In those days the average communicant



The president of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga visits Lithuanian Latvian speaking parish at Bōtingē 2001.

received the sacrament at least four times a year and in many cases more often than that. Those who came to the sacrament did so only after intensive personal preparation and with a strong sense of personal unworthiness. Independence brought more frequent Communion services, but there was no commensurate increase in the frequency of Communion attendance. Communion services were added simply because there were now more communicants.

The family atmosphere of the congregation grew greatly during the communist times. Persecution brought the people closer together than they had been in the past. Oppression also meant that the congregations became somewhat suspicious of outsiders who came to services during that time when the state was hostile to the faith. This suspicion and isolation has largely been overcome since the independence, and now unfamiliar faces are no longer greeted with suspicion. Outsiders are welcomed and invited to become a part of the fellowship of believers.

## 10. The Pastors

The parish pastor has always been the central figure in the life of the church. He is the shepherd of his flock in the same way that the church's bishop watches over and guides the whole church. His administrative role is



Lithuanian pastors 1986

somewhat larger than that of pastors in countries where congregations are large and well organized, and there is a surplus of resourceful laymen to carry out administrative responsibilities and assist the pastor also in his spiritual ministry. In addition to his place at altar and at the pulpit, the Lithuanian pastor has to take responsibility for the administration of the physical aspects of parish life, including building repair, diaconal activities, liaison with district officials, organization and administration of parish education, and other matters. He looks for capable

individuals to assist him in this work, but in the eyes of the parish it he who is responsible for the smooth operation of every aspect of parish life. As a result the pastor is a busy man, and the fact that he heads not just one but as many as three or more parishes, increases his work load significantly. In addition, because the parishes are small and have very limited recourses, he must seek out sources of funds to keep the buildings open, the lights on, and the bills paid. The word vacation is seldom heard and normal retirement is unknown. The pastor is always on duty until such time as he is too sick or feeble to carry on.

Ordinarily the road to ordination begins with the study of theology. If the pastor believes that a student of theology is indeed called by God, he will invite him to assist in the Sunday services as a lector. He will also invite him to take part in the liturgical service by reading prayers and assisting in the administration of the sacrament.

In the course of time he will invite him to prepare for his examination short sermons on the Gospels which, if acceptable, he can deliver in the divine service. Upon the recommendation of the parish and pastor, the man is presented to the consistory and bishop with the request that he be made a deacon. After one or more years as a deacon, the supervising pastor and



Lithuanian pastors during the interim after Bishop Kalvanas death, 1993

parish may recommend his ordination to the church's ministry. The bishop ordains pastors only upon these recommendations and the consistory's approval. At ordination all neighboring pastors gather and when the bishop has ordained the candidate by prayer and the laying out of hands every pastor present speaks an appropriate word from the Scriptures and a short homily by which they welcome this new brother in the Lord's work. Then the newly ordained preaches his first sermon to his new parishioners and the bishop officiates at the service of Holy Communion. The service is usually held in the church which the candidate has been called to serve.

Now there stands before him a life which may be long but which he knows will be difficult. The first one or two parishes will normally be one of the smaller parishes of his



Dr. Charles Evanson's monthly pastoral seminars, 2001

supervising pastor, peopled by parishioners of very limited means. He knows full well that he will receive no salary and hopes only that the people will be able to help him pay for his automobile expenses. For living he will depend upon his savings, the assistance of family and friends, gifts received for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Often he will find it necessary to seek outside employment to keep body and soul together. If he is married, the family will have to depend upon the incomes of both husband and wife. Pastors who find it necessary to seek employment always turn to employment suitable to a pastor. They become teachers, tutors, social service workers, or engage in other ethical activities. During the Soviet years pastors worked as foresters, farmers, beekeepers, and electricians to support their families. Perhaps in the future the young pastor will be called to a larger parish which may be able to provide him with a small stipend. There are few parishes in the church which are able to provide a normal salary for their pastor. Since independence Lutheran Churches abroad have provided some help for the support of pastors. Substantial help has come from the „*Partnerhilfe*“ of the *Evangelical Church in Germany* (EKD). Since 1998 the church has established a Stipend and Pension Fund which is hoped will grow to the point that some material aid can be given to pastors of the smallest parishes. According to the terms of this plan pastors and parishes are asked to give 5-10 percent of their income.

Those who come from abroad often express astonishment both that pastors are willing to serve under such adverse conditions and that so many of them are young. In



Lithuanian pastors vested as in the old day

fact fully 50 percent of the pastors are less than 35 years old and well educated. They have studied in Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Germany, and the United States, and some have obtained advanced theological degrees. Only three of the pastors now serving were ordained during the Soviet occupation. After independence the need for pastors was great, and young men of the church perceived the Lord's call and rose to the challenge, knowing that the life to which they were being called would require many sacrifices and strong resolve. None of these young men has chosen to leave the ministry to seek greener pastures in the secular world. Six pastors serving in the church are converts from Roman Catholicism. Of this number two were formerly Roman Catholic priests and one was a seminarist in the Roman Catholic seminary in Telšiai. The remaining three were laymen who decided to study Lutheran theology and then found themselves drawn to the holy ministry. No Lithuanian Lutheran pastor in this country has converted to the Roman Church, Orthodoxy, or Protestant confessions – a remarkable record.

In earlier times the pastors appeared before the church's altars in the traditional vestments of the Western Church. Although this raised the ire of the Roman Catholic bishops,<sup>27</sup> attempts to proscribe the use of the traditional vestments came to nothing until by the edict of the Prussian king the pastors were forced to appear in church in their street clothes, the „Talar“ and „Beffchen.“ The first step toward the restoration of proper vestments came in 1976 with the consecration of the first bishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church. It was decided that his characteristic vestment would be the alb, stole, and cincture and that



Mrs. Elzbieta Fetingienė talks about life on the farm with Pastor Klaus Fitzner from Germany. Her farming skills bring in needed income for her

27 Adam Ferdinand Adamowicz: Die

Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche zu Wilna. Eine Chronik. Wilna 1855, 18.

he would carry the bishop's crosier. When the second bishop was consecrated in 1995, it was decided that henceforth the bishop's vestments would include the alb and cincture, stole, cope, mitre, and crosier.<sup>28</sup>

In 2007 the bishop, consistory and clergy decided that the official vestments of our clergy would be the alb, cincture, and stole. Pastors who wished to do so could continue to wear "talar" and "beffchen," and clergy who desire to do so may wear full Eucharistic vestments (alb, cincture, stole, and chasuble) at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Deacons wear an alb, cincture, and the deacon's stole. Some initially feared that this action might provoke a strong reaction and that some might protest that the church was abandoning the true Lutheran vestments and was becoming too much like the Roman Catholic Church. No protests emerged.

Pastors' wives also provide important services in the parishes as organists, choir masters, Christian education teachers, and directors of diaconal services. The pastor is called „*kunigas*” (Pastor) and his wife is called „*kunigienė*” (Frau Pastor) as a sign of respect for the important work she does in her support of her husband and service to the parish.

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28 *Lietuvos evangelikų kelias*. 1996 (1-2), 16-17.

## 11. Liturgy and Worship

Since Reformation times the worship of Lithuanian Lutheran Church has been based upon the model of the early Saxon Church orders. Until the time of Pietism worship in a typical Lithuanian parish would probably be considered quite Catholic by modern standards, for the pre-Reformation traditions concerning altars, liturgical vestments, candles, statues, and pictures remained largely undisturbed. As directed in the church orders, the Sacrament of the Altar was celebrated weekly, prayers and lessons were chanted, and the Lutheran chorals were quickly translated into the Lithuanian language. Daily Matins and Vespers were held in Lutheran schools in Vilnius, Kaunas, and elsewhere. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Pietism celebrations of the Sacrament of the Altar came to be held less frequently, and the primary emphasis was now placed on personal preparation through fasting and prayer, and the presentation of a godly life as a prerequisite for all communicants.

The church's liturgical usages and vestments however remained unchanged, and both church and clergy were held in high esteem – especially in the Lithuanian speaking congregations where many of the pastors strongly supported the aims of the pietists. After the third partition of Poland and Lithuania in 1795, when the Major Lithuania was ceded to the Russian empire, the liturgical traditions of Russian Lutheranism were introduced, along with the strong influences of rationalism which the Lutherans in Russia had experienced. It was not until 1832 that Lutherans in the Russian empire had their own agenda, based of Swedish and Prussian sources, which for the first time unified all Lutheran groups from Kretinga in western Lithuania to Irkutsk in Siberia. Theodosius Harnack and other members of the Dorpat (Tartu, Estonia) theological faculty in Livonia took a



The 1897 Russian Imperial Lutheran agenda, used in Lithuania until 1997



leading role in preparing liturgical materials for use in the Livonian Church and elsewhere in Baltic region. The 1885 Livonian agenda was published as a step forward to build upon the 1832 rite correct of its deficiencies and restore ancient introits and collects. This book was approved for optional use in the Baltic lands and demonstrated to the general consistory in St. Petersburg the need for an updated agenda for use throughout the empire. A step in this direction was taken with a publication of a new book in 1893 and the appearance of the official St. Petersburg agenda of 1897, authorized for use in all Lutheran congregations in Russia and throughout the empire. The new rites appeared in Russian, German, Latvian, Estonian, and Finish language editions. The agenda was never translated into Lithuanian because Lithuanian congregations were few in number and made use of the German, Russian, and Latvian editions. In 1918 when Lithuania became an independent country for the first time since 1795, the 1897 agenda continued in use, but prayers for the tsar and his regime were replaced by prayers for the Lithuanian parliament and president.

Congregations in Klaipėda region and elsewhere in East Prussia made use of the Prussian church orders and had done so since the days of Reformation. Most important in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the work of Martynas Mažvydas, whose 1547 *Katekizmas* included the Litany, Our Father, Creed (Apostles' and Nicene), and psalms. He later supplemented his early work by publishing the rite of Holy Baptism, the Ambrosian hymn *Te Deum Laudamus*, and the *Paraphrasis*. Mažvydas' *magnum opus* was his two volume hymnal *Gesmes Chriksczoniskas* (Christian hymns) printed in 1566 and 1570 which included also the Lithuanian translations of the offices of Matins and Vespers, introits, collects, antiphons, versicles, and other liturgical materials.

The Lutheran Church in Minor Lithuania was much more influenced by Pietism than the Church in Major Lithuania, with the result that in the west the church's liturgical rites and ceremonies suffered greatly. The 1730 agenda demonstrates that by this time the celebration of the Holy Eucharist had become one of the occasional services. The Communion had lost the preface and the service was greatly impoverished. Little was left of the traditional mass.

The service was reduced to a strongly worded exhortation to the communicants, public confession and absolution, Christ's Testamentary Words and the Our Father. The 1817 edict of King Friedrich Wilhelm III forcibly uniting the Lutheran and Reformed



Herbertas Neimanas of Denmark provided needed organs for the devastated churches, 1993

confessions into a single Evangelical Church necessitated the issuance of a new liturgy. Although the Lutherans were dissatisfied with many of the provisions of the Berlin 1822 agenda, it must be admitted that it was a step up from the liturgical chaos which prevailed in pietist and rationalist times. The shape of the traditional *Missa fidelium* was regained together with the preface, introits and collects, but the provisions for the Communion service were hardly satisfactory to the Lutherans. In 1829 a new agenda was published which again attempted to achieve a balance acceptable to both the Lutherans and the Reformed. This liturgy was still strongly criticized by the Prussian Lutherans, but it was translated into Lithuanian in 1830 and continued in use until 1897. It must be said, however, that Prussian Lithuanian Lutherans who were strongly influenced by Pietism did not struggle much against it and received the 1830 book without complaint. They did not pay much attention to the words of the liturgy and never questioned the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper under the forms of bread and wine. In 1895 the new Berlin agenda appeared authorized for use throughout the Prussian territories. The Lithuanian translation was published in 1897 and some of its rites are still in use.

The 1897 Prussian and 1897 Russian liturgies had much in common. The form of the service was similar in all congregations, however, the Introits and Collects differed, as did



Lithuanian Lutherans visit the Tolminkiemis church of Pastor Kristijonas Donelaitis, the great Lithuanian poet, in Kaliningrad (Königsberg) region, 1999

also the Prayer of the Church. What one may call the core hymns, all of which were German in origin, were used throughout the church. However, the melodies used for the ordinary service of the mass, including the *Kyrie* and the singing of Christ Testamentary words, differed in the two traditions. Throughout the country preparation for Holy Communion included prayers, readings, and singing of hymns at home, fasting from the night before reception, and personal appearance before the pastor before the celebration for registration ('*Anmeldung*'). In addition all communicants would gather before the altar for Confession and Absolution after the Prayer of the Church and continue kneeling before the altar until the Distribution. For many, especially those strongly influenced by Pietism, Communion was received with sobs and tears. Thus communion reception came to be something of an ordeal which one could not frequently endure. From both these rites the Lithuanians have retained the practice of attaching the *Kyrie* to the confession of sins and the Confession and Absolution stand between the introit and the *Gloria in Excelsis* instead of preceding the Introit.

Both the Prussian and Russian traditions continued side by side after WWII even though Prussia had disappeared from the map. In place of it is the Russian province of Kaliningrad. The Evangelical Church in Klaipėda region returned to its Lutheran confession. Supervision of the Klaipėda region (*Memelland*) parishes passed to

the Lithuanian consistory in 1944. This move brought with it the hope that a Lithuanian common order might be established for all the Lutheran parishes in the country. The consistory chose to use as its basis for parish worship the Russian liturgical tradition, adding to it some Prussian musical elements which were dear to the heart of the Lutherans in the Klaipėda region. After independence the 1995 synod resolved that the liturgy should be revised. The provisional 1997 rite, which was approved for use throughout the church, affirms the service of Holy Communion as the ordinary Sunday service once again. However, it was recognized that it would take many years before the Holy Eucharist would once again be the weekly service in every parish.

Communion is celebrated weekly during Advent and Lent and at other times when it is requested by communicants. In some parishes there is a monthly celebration and in the largest congregations the Mass is celebrated almost every



Pastor Friedhelm Kalkbrener, benefactor of Lithuanian parish brass-bands, at the rededication of the Katyčiai parish church in 1994

Sunday. Services are conducted with great reverence. During the service the people sit only to sing the hymns and hear the sermon. Otherwise they stand or kneel as appropriate. The liturgy is chanted and to the traditional Gregorian melodies are added some hymn stanzas which date back to pietist times. In addition every service has at least four hymns. Among the Lithuanians it is usual that every stanza of the hymn should be sung. Parish announcements and special intercessory prayers are read from the pulpit after the sermon, before the Prayer of the Church, which is always read at the altar. Also before every altar is a kneeling pad at which the pastor and other ministers kneel for prayer every time they come to the

altar. During the services every candle on or near the altar is lit. Although only two candles are required, there are almost always many more, sometimes as many as thirty-four or more. At the center of every altar is an open Bible and behind it a crucifix. No Lithuanian Lutheran Church has on its altar a cross without the body of Christ. The Scriptural readings are read from the altar, for the lectern is not a common thing in Lithuanian Churches.

In general it may be said that Lithuanian worship is ceremonial, but it would probably not be described as „high church“, probably because the Lutherans experienced oppression in the past from Roman Catholicism with the result that some practices, such as the personal use of the sign of the cross came to be regarded by many as a symbol of Roman Catholicism. It became a mark of Lutheran identity not to do what Roman Catholics did. These prejudices are now being overcome with the restoration of fuller liturgical uses and a more thorough catechesis of the people.

## 12. Ecumenical Relations

The Lithuanian Lutheran Church maintains a close working relationship with the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches and the congregations of the Reformed Church in the Lithuanian Council of Churches.



Lithuanian consistory meets with Bishop Dr. Diethardt Roth and the officials of Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK), 2004

This Council has been organized to coordinate the humanitarian, political, and social activities of the Christian Churches of the nation. The Lutheran church is registered according to the provisions of Lithuanian Constitution and has been designated by the governmental Ministry of Justice as a historical church with full rights. Under these terms the church is permitted to function under its own statutes, collect and distribute funds, provide religious instructions in public schools and offer chaplaincy services in public institutions and the military.

During the Soviet occupation the church was permitted almost no contact with Lutherans or other Christians outside Lithuania. In 1968 the church was allowed to join the LWF, and this provided an opportunity for some very limited contacts with the West. Today the church maintains membership in the LWF, the Conference of European Churches (CEC), and the Theobalt network of churches in states bordering the Baltic Sea, the main purpose of which is to address the international environmental and cultural issues.

First contacts with foreign churches after independence came in 1992 when a relationship was established with the Lutheran section of the Church in Lippe of North West Germany. In 1993 an additional contact was made with the Grand Canyon synod of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). Both these groups have assisted the Lithuanian Church in its attempts to regain title

and use of properties confiscated during the Soviet years and continue to support the social and diaconal activities in the church. Exchange visits have provided firsthand knowledge with the spiritual and social conditions in the churches. In 1995 closer contacts with the Scandinavian



Bishop Kalvanas, LCMS Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, president of LCMS, and Dr. Samuel Nafzger, 2002

Churches led to involvement of the Lithuanian Church in the discussions which led to the Porvoo Agreement. During these same years the church has given greater attention to its confessional and doctrinal positions. Doctrinal discussions with official representatives of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod resulted in complete agreement concerning doctrine and practice between the LCMS and the Lithuanian Church. In 2000 the Lithuanian Church declared itself to be in full fellowship with LCMS and the LCMS 2001 convention declared full fellowship with the Lithuanian Church. In 2005 the church's synod determined to implement a program of closer contacts with the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) which will lead finally to a declaration of full fellowship.

In all its contacts with other churches at home and abroad the Lithuanian Church always insists on maintaining its traditional Lutheran doctrinal position and strives to follow church practices consistent with that position. The Lithuanian Lutheran Church has no desire to isolate itself from churches which desire to maintain orthodox theological positions and practices and wishes also to remain in cooperative contact with churches which are willing to respect its doctrinal commitments.

### 13. Ministry to the Young

The pressures of a secular society are particularly strong for young people who are constantly bombarded by movies, television shows, magazines, and music which all glorify a style of life which is completely self-centered. During the Soviet years the church had very limited power to counteract these influences. The schools openly ridiculed Christian faith and activity, and Christian young people often paid dearly for their Christian commitment. In the parishes the young people were encouraged to live lives of faith and be of service to their neighbors. This was a strong theme of sermons during those years and the church sought to provide opportunities for the young for Christian fellowship and service. With independence have come temptations and pressures which are no less serious. Now secularism no longer clearly identifies itself as anti-Christian. The church has seen the need to nurture



Kėdainiai youths perform at Lutheran young people's music festival in Vilnius, 2006



Young campers at the annual Būtingė youth camp, 2002



and fortify her young people and set before them the challenges of the life of faith.

Young people are invited to become actively involved and many have responded. They serve as choir members, church school helpers, and



Vanagai youth camp, 2004

the workers in church's diaconal activities. Many parishes organize camps and seminars at which Bible study and music are central activities.

Organized in 1992, the Youth Center has taken responsibility for a youth camp, established in 1981 which meets annually at Būtingė near the shores of the Baltic Sea. Here 100-300 young people from Lithuania and abroad gather for Bible study, singing, drama, and recreation. Since 1999 the Latvian and Estonian young people have also been involved in the Būtingė program.

To build upon the confirmation instruction which the young people receive in their home parishes, and to provide an opportunity for the newly confirmed from all parishes to meet, study, and play together, a summer camp especially for them has been in operation every year since 1995 at Vanagai, near Klaipėda. In this camp between 400-550 young people, age from 12 to 16, participate together in daily worship services, Bible study, games, talent shows, and concerts are held under the leadership of the pastors and young adults from many parishes. The purpose of the camp is to provide Christian nurture and to encourage the newly confirmed to attend church regularly, to pray daily, and to serve others according to their needs.

The church understands that the real center of youth education and activity is and must be the parish church. Camps and other special gatherings are few and far between, and religious instructions in the

public schools is seen to be largely without measurable effect. It is through parish Bible classes led by the pastor, or a trained person he has designated, and parish music programs can



Not just one, but two... There is plenty for all, Vanagai 2004

be seen to be the most effective vehicles for the involvement of the young. The church also realizes that special efforts also have to be made to keep the newly confirmed involved in the worship life of the congregation. Many congregations have Saturday School programs which involve both education and recreational opportunities for both the young people of the congregation and the un-churched.



Plikiai parish chairman Saulius Jašmantas and his championship parish basketball team "Žaibas" ("Lightening")

Education materials and other literature is important, but at present apart from the catechism, hymnal, Bible, and very few Lutheran tracts, there is little available which is more than very general in nature. In 1996 the consistory decided to translate and make available material from

the „*Pathlight*“ educational series of the LCMS. This material has been found to be most helpful in Saturday School and public school instruction programs. A special benefit of these series is its inclusion of material related to Luther's Catechism.

Lithuanian Lutheran Church does not have either opportunity or means to sponsor mass gatherings of young people, as is done in many western churches. She understands her primary responsibility to be the support of the work of the parishes both in establishing and strengthening young Christians and evangelizing the un-churched. The church understands that without this two pronged effort the young will be left without recourses for Christian faith and life. The national church sees the need to offer spiritual and material support to this important work of the parish churches.

## 14. Church Music

All Lithuanians love to sing and Lutherans extend this love for music to parish life. From the days of the Reformation the Lithuanian Lutheran Church has been a singing church. The great German hymns were all translated into Lithuanian, and hymns by Lithuanian Lutherans have been

added to this treasury. Not only in the Sunday services but in educational classes, parish meetings, funerals, and every other parish activity the singing of hymns is always an important component. Even before the first Lithuanian book was translated, Latin hymns were translated by Stanislovas Rapolionis and Abraomas Kulvietis. The treasury of Lutheran hymns has grown to the point where the Lithuanian Lutheran hymnal is quite large in comparison to the hymnbooks used Roman Catholic Church and other confessions. One can easily see who is a visitor in the Sunday services. He is the one who is not robustly joining in the hymn singing.

Most congregations have choirs



Ieva and Augustė Petkūnaitės sing at the young people's hymn festival in Plikiai, 2004



Kretinga youth choir sings at young people's hymn festival in Skirsnemunė, 2005

of young people and also adult choirs. The parishes have found that many young people are attracted to the church through choir membership. Like all other Lithuanians, they are unwilling to miss any opportunity to sing. In many cases young choristers come faithfully even when their parents do not. In fact these young people who sing every Sunday are among the most regular in their attendance. Older people in the congregation too like to gather for no other purpose than to praise God through singing the hymns appropriate to the season of the church year.

Every year since 1992 children and young people from all the parishes have gathered annually for a concert of parish choirs „*Giesmių Giesmelė*” (“Young People’s Hymn Festival”). The service begins with the procession into the local church and continues for as many as six hours until every choir has had a chance to sing at least two or three songs. This is a major event which draws people from all over the country and is always a news item seen on the evening national news. Every choir spends many weeks in preparation for this very special event.

Adult choirs too gather for their music festival „*Giesmių šventė*” (“Hymn Festival”) day with no less enthusiasm than the children. The high point in the adult fellowship is the joining of all the parish groups together in a mass choir to sing a major choral work with orchestral accompaniment. Every choir takes home a good supply of music used in the festival for use during the coming year.

After independence it became evident that trained organists were in short supply.

To meet this need seminars were organized beginning in 1993 for the training of church musicians



2002 hymn festival at Klaipėda

These seminars still meet every summer to provide training for the growing number of church musicians.

In 1995 a Music Association „*Muzikos Sandrauga*”



Brass choir performs in the Silutė parish church

was established to raise the level of church music in the parishes. In annual seminars professional musicians from Lithuania and abroad provide instructions in singing, instrumental technique, and conducting through lectures and practical sessions. The work of this association has been a great blessing to the church. The church musicians have become more competent and have become acquainted with the music of great composers from every century from the Reformation to the present. The organization supplements practical instruction and demonstration with literature helpful to church musicians across the nation. In addition to its many concerts and publications, in the year 2000 the Association's choir *Cantate Dominum* issued a recording of Bach's Cantata BWV 106 „*Actus tragicus*” („*Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*”). Literature published by the Music Association has raised the level of musicianship in the parishes significantly.

The church is currently in the last phase of preparing a revised hymnal with notes and modern language. Bishop Jonan Kalvanas, Sr., had done significant work toward the revision of the hymnal in 1982 and 1988, but it was impossible during the Soviet times to complete the work. In 1992 work on a new book begun the purpose of which is to make available the treasury of Lithuanian Lutheran hymnody, much of which had fallen into disuse or had otherwise

been forgotten. Native Lithuanian hymns and melodies will play a more prominent role in the new hymnal. This will be a further enrichment of the already strong music program in the parishes and will further improve the quality of congregational singing.

Through the church's music the word proclaimed from the pulpit will also find its way in to the heart of the people through song. As in the time of the Reformation so too today the Lutheran hymns present a message heard nowhere else in strong and certain tones very different from the repetitious „mantras“ and shallow sentimentality of so many modern „spiritual songs.“ They give clear and bold statement of the Gospel seldom heard elsewhere. They teach, they comfort, they uplift, and they inspire Lithuanian hearts to joyful confidence in Christ.

15. Stat Crux dum volvitur Orbis  
("The Cross stands firm while the world is turning")



"I will go unto the altar of God..." (Psalm 43:4). Kėdainiai 2005.

Time and again the Lutheran Church in Lithuania has faced obstacles which might well be described as insurmountable, but still she survives. From her beginning she has made intellectual, artistic, and cultural contributions to the Lithuanian nation which far exceed anything that might be expected from such a small church in a predominantly Roman Catholic society. Lutherans gave Lithuanians their first book, their first Bible, their first grammar, and their first major literary figure, Pastor Kristijonas Donelaitis who wrote the first Lithuanian poem. The index of the major Lithuanian writers notes many Lutheran authors because their literary output so far exceeded that of the Roman Catholics in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lutherans maintained a steady flow of Lithuanian literature into the country during the period of Russification when the use of the Latin alphabet was prohibited by law. Lithuanian speaking Lutherans in Klaipėda region under the leadership of Pastor Dr. Vilius Gaigalaitis provided the patriotic fervor which eventually brought the two Lithuanians together into a single nation. Their motto was well summarized in the words of prominent Lutheran writer Ieva Simonaitytė: „One nation, one land, one Lithuania.” Although the church is gratified that her



faithful sons and daughters have made such great contributions to the nation, she realizes that the church must always remember that she is an assembly of believers gathered by and around the preaching of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and the right administration of his sacraments. She exists as the fellowship of those who have been baptized into Christ and receive ever anew the gifts of forgiveness and new life and promise of eternity through Christ.

The world in which the Lithuanian Lutheran Church lives today is a world in motion. No longer can the church expect that the children brought to the altar for Holy Baptism will conduct their lives in their home towns, their home parishes, or even their home nation. The reality is that Lithuania is now a part of the European Union, in which officially Christianity is hardly mentioned. The church must prepare her children for lives of faithfulness wherever they may find themselves in Europe or overseas, and at home she must energetically pursue the Great Commission, making disciples of people whose connection with any church at all is at present negligible. The age in which the church finds itself today is one of religious indifference in general, and doctrinal indifference in particular. A small church seeking to assert her Lutheran identity and become more knowledgeable about her own confessional commitments is constantly warned that the age of the confessions has passed, that this is now a post-denominational age, and that little is gained by holding to theological statements which may have had some positive value in the past. She knows that she must take a strong position against such indifferentism and hold firmly to the treasures which Dr. Martin Luther reopened and to which the Lutheran confessional writings bear such strong witness.

The Lithuanian Church knows that she has been given a great treasure, the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, and dedicated and determined pastors and people who desire to share this treasure with others. It is her mission to do so, and not just because Christianity is on the wane throughout Europe and everywhere church attendance seems to be dwindling. The church does not involve herself in mission in order to save herself. She does not need to fear, for she is in the Lord's hands. The church is called to mission so that she may share with others the gifts that God has given her to offer.

## 16. Statistics

Population of Lithuania - 3,700,000  
Total number of Lutherans - 19,650  
Parishes – 54  
Total number of services - 1,500  
Total number of communicants - 10 000  
Mean parish membership - 50-200  
Average Sunday attendance – 25/30 %  
Bishop – 1  
Pastors – 19  
Deacons - 2  
Average pastoral allowance per month 100-200 Euro  
Church buildings – 44  
Prayer houses - 7  
Public schools offering courses in Lutheran Christianity – 22  
Number of teachers – 27  
Sunday schools – 18  
Diaconical centers – 6  
Orphan homes – 1  
Kindergartens - 1  
Rented facilities for worship – 4  
Organists - 34  
Choir masters - 24  
Parish choirs – 30