

The Missouri Synod's Presence in Eastern European Lutheranism

Colleagues,

ThTh 145 consists of five items about church conflict and church politics amongst Lutherans in Eastern Europe & the involvement of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (USA) in the turmoil.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. NEWS RELEASE – LWF

Caption: LWF General Secretary Comments on Establishment of Belarusian

Church: “Separation in ELCROS will have Negative Consequences in Central Eastern Europe” GENEVA, 19 March 2001 (LWI) – Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), has described as “very unfortunate,” the circumstances surrounding the recent establishment of the Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church. *[Ed: Belarus (or Belarusia) is one of the now independent states of the former Soviet Union. Its borders touch Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine. Minsk is the capital.]*

In a statement on March 17, Noko said the formation of an independent Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church would have a negative effect on the search for Lutheran unity in the Central Eastern Europe region of the LWF.

On 2 December 2000, representatives of Belarusian Lutheran congregations founded an independent, "confessional" Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church. Prior to this move, the Belarusian congregations belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS). The ELCROS strongly criticized the creation of the independent church.

Rev. Leonid Zwicki was on 11 March 2001 installed as bishop of the newly created Belarusian church. Bishop Jonas Kalvanas Jr. of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania presided over the inauguration ceremony in Viciebsk, Belarus. Archbishop Janis Vanags (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia), Bishop Aarre Kougappi (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia) and Bishop Dr. Diethard Roth from the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany, participated in the installation as assisting bishops.

Zwicki started bringing Evangelical Lutheran congregations in Belarus together five years ago. In summer 1999, the ELCROS appointed him as visiting bishop to Belarus, and consequently a member of the ELCROS Bishop's Council.

At its meeting last December, the Constituent Synod of the Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church adopted a declaration on its main beliefs, which in addition to the scriptures and a list of the Lutheran Confessions includes a rejection of women's ordination, homosexuality, and compromises concerning the Doctrine of Justification. The newly founded church also rejects fellowship with all churches that do not share these principles.

The text of the statement by Dr. Ishmael Noko follows:

A Statement by Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary

of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), about the newly founded Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The separation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS) can be described as very unfortunate because of the way it was done and the reasons given. There was no mutual consultation between Archbishop D. Georg Kretschmar and Rev. Leonid Zwicky, now the leader of the newly founded Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

I have no doubt that the impact of this split will be felt in the Lutheran communion, particularly in the European region. It will certainly have negative effects on the search for Lutheran unity in the Central Eastern Europe region of the LWF.

I hope, nevertheless, that a way can be found to overcome this split so that Lutherans can be united in proclamation and ecumenical engagement.

Geneva, 17 March 2001

(The LWF is a global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition. Founded in 1947 in Lund (Sweden), the LWF now has 131 member churches in 72 countries representing over 60.2 million of the nearly 64 million Lutherans worldwide. The LWF acts on behalf of its member churches in areas of common interest such as ecumenical relations, theology, humanitarian assistance, human rights, communication, and the various aspects of mission and development work. Its secretariat is located in Geneva, Switzerland.)

2. COMMENT FROM EHS:

Not evident in this announcement from the LWF is the involvement of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [LCMS] in the story. I'd learned about that a few days earlier in a German church publication–LUTHERISCHER DIENST (Lutheran Service) [Vol. 37, 2001, Nr. 1]. The headline was: "Sorgen in Belarus: Weissrusslands Lutheraner und die Missouri-Synode" [Trouble in Belarus: White Russian Lutherans & the Missouri Synod]. The German article reported that "guests" present at the constituting convention on 2 December 2000 included "a group from the Ft. Wayne (Indiana) seminary of the Missouri Synod and representatives of the USA Wisconsin Synod." What came as a second surprise in the German article was this: that the Belarus Lutherans are committed to having their bishop ordained in the "apostolic succession." Apparently that is what then transpired on 11 March when Leonid Zwicky assumed his episcopal office. How does that compute, I asked: Missouri theology and apostolic succession? But then I read on to learn that second in command after Bishop Zwicky in the new church is Kastus Mordwinzew, "who recently finished his theological studies at the LCMS Ft. Wayne seminary." It may not be widely known among ThTh receivers that the Ft. Wayne seminary is an avid promoter of apostolic succession nowadays within the LCMS. Since I was hereticized out of Missouri some 27 yrs ago, I don't get the official publications, but my friends there (former students, and thus–ahem!–good guys!) keep me posted. So the Ft. Wayne sem, still critical of Missouri's unpurged liberalism (sic!), not only keeps hustling its long-standing Orthodoxy-legalist Lutheranism, but has now added apostolic succession to the list of requirements, if you want to be "really" Lutheran.

When I discussed this with one of my LCMS sources, he told

me that he hadn't heard of the Belarus item, but this he did know:

1. that LCMS is planning for another altar-and-pulpit fellowship declaration this summer [at the LCMS national convention] with the Lutheran church in LITHUANIA and
2. Fort Wayne is generally operating as a church within a church with its own mission efforts and "foreign policy" uncoordinated with the LCMS Board for Mission Services.

So I pressed on and e-mailed some Lutherans whom I know, who are close to the scene, to get more info. One has so far responded, a friend from my days in Lithuania as guest prof in 1997.

3. RESOLUTION FOR ELCL AND LCMS FELLOWSHIP

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania (ELCL), as a community established by Christ and His Gospel, confesses the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament to be the only basis for its teaching and practice. ELCL further professes that the interpretation of the Holy Scripture (Bible) has to be done according to the Apostolic, Nicean and Athanasian Creeds, as they rose in the history of Christianity as well as the unchanged Augsburg Confession, the Catechisms of Martin Luther, and all the other documents included in the Book of Concord (Liber Concordiae).

ELCL possesses and strives towards the preservation of the right and pure preaching and teaching of the apostolic Word of God and the correct administration of the

Sacraments as they were instituted by our Lord Himself.

This has been the goal of the confessors of the Augsburg Confession (AC VII) and of the Formula of Concord (FC X, 31). However, we are faced with false doctrines which endanger the biblical and confessional identity of our Lutheran Church in Lithuania. 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.

Therefore be resolved at that Synod in the presence of the official delegation from Missouri Synod, that we approve deepening the Church fellowship between ELCL and LCMS.

4. LWF NEWS RELEASE

Caption: Archbishop Kretschmar: ELCROS 'cannot welcome' Belarusian Independent Lutheran Church. An Obstacle to a joint Protestant Church in Belarus. ST. PETERSBURG, Russia/GENEVA, 20 March LWI – Archbishop D. Georg Kretschmar of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS), says the creation of an independent “confessional” Lutheran church in Belarus impedes the work of the Lutheran church in the republic.

The installation of Bishop Leonid Zwicky on March 11 is a further step in the establishment of this church,

Archbishop Kretschmar said in a statement written for Lutheran World Information (LWI). ELCROS cannot welcome the creation of this separate church.

The text of the ELCROS statement follows:

Statement by the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS) on the Installation of Bishop Leonid Zwicki, Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church On Reminiscere Sunday, 11 March 2001, the Rev. Leonid Zwicki was installed as bishop of the newly established Belarusian Evangelical Lutheran Church during a worship service in Vitebsk [or Viciebsk], Belarus. He was elected on 2 December 2000 at a synod meeting in Vitebsk. The older Lutheran congregations in Belarus originally joined ELCROS under Archbishop D. Georg Kretschmar. Some of these, including a number of newly founded congregations, founded on December 2 a "confessional" Lutheran church, signifying that they had consciously left the community of ELCROS and instead joined the community of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Bishop Leonid Zwicki's introduction into office is a further step in the establishment of this separate church. The consecration was led by Bishop Jonas Kalvanas Jr. from Lithuania, who had already ordained a number of deacons in this church. He was assisted by Bishop Dr. Diethard Roth from the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, Germany, and Bishop Aarre Kougappi from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia.

Other Lutheran churches that are close to the Missouri Synod were also represented at the worship service, among them Archbishop Janis Vanags from Riga, Latvia. Most of

the older congregations in Belarus have not joined the new church. They requested that they continue to be served by ELCROS. Preparations are being made to create a structure that could be registered and legally recognized. A first step to support these congregations was taken from March 12 to 16, when Rev. Godeke von Bremen (Novosaratovka) organized a seminar in Minsk. There are plans to regularly hold similar seminars.

The split of the Lutheran congregations in Belarus that occurred at the December 2 synod meeting will weaken the work of the Lutheran church in the republic. ELCROS will strive not to disappoint the congregations who have placed much hope in it.

This development impedes the creation of a joint Protestant church in Belarus, which had been prepared for years and which would have included the only Reformed congregation in the country. Archbishop Kretschmar had entrusted Rev. Leonid Zwicki with the preparation of this synod. For ELCROS, the decisive problem is not that there are congregations in Belarus that do not want to organize as a Lutheran church within the overall framework of ELCROS, but that the synod clearly condemned ELCROS and declared that it rejected fellowship with churches that ordain women, that do not adhere to “real presence”-meaning, most likely, membership in the Leuenberg Agreement-and who make compromises on the Doctrine of Justification-referring, probably, to the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

All these are issues that were never discussed among the Belarusian congregations, and probably no representative

of any congregation really understood at the December 2 synod what this formula of exclusion actually means. For this reason, ELCROS cannot welcome the establishment of this separate church.

St. Petersburg, 17 March 2001