RESOURCE GUIDE for Slovakia

Companion Synod Sunday

Honoring: Lutheran church in Slovakia

January 25, 2015

Prepared by
Global Missions Committee
of the Metro D.C. Synod

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PACKET OVERVIEW

This year we as the Metro D.C. Synod of the ELCA honor our Companion Synod in Slovakia in our prayers in a special way on Sunday January 25, 2015. For some years now, the Lutheran Church in Slovakia and the Metro D.C. Synod have had a special relationship of sharing. Bishop Klatik, the Bishop in Slovakia, was one of three Bishops that came from overseas to help inaugurate our Bishop Graham as he entered his ministry. Youth from both countries have shared events together. Pastors and interns have visited back and forth learning from each other.

Although January 25, 2015 has been chosen as Companion Synod Sunday honoring our relationship with the church in Slovakia, these activities can be used on another Sunday as well.

Because Slovakia is rich in history and particularly because an early adoption of the Lutheran faith can be traced back to this part of the world, there is a lot for us as American Lutherans to learn about the roots of our chosen interpretation of the Christian Bible. For this reason, we, the Slovak Task Force of our Synod’s Global Mission Committee, have compiled this packet of some basic information about the Lutheran Church in Slovakia.

This packet begins with some background information on the struggles of the Lutheran Church to survive persecution under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and more recently during the Communist regime after World War II. In particular is information on a special type of Lutheran Church listed on the register of World Heritage Sites. This type of church is called the “articulated church” and is known for its construction using strict building prohibitions. These prohibitions created difficult hurdles for the minority Lutherans in Slovakia. It was intended to make it very difficult for Lutherans to gather and worship. Nevertheless, Lutherans followed the restrictions and built the churches, using them as their chosen place of prayer.

Also in this packet of background information is some information concerning a Center for Christian Education (CCE) located in Martin, Slovakia. This CCE was created by the son of a famous Lutheran pastor who taught Bible studies in people’s homes during the Communist times despite a law that forbid him to do this. This Center was built by a few very dedicated men honoring this courageous pastor who believed strongly that God’s law must come before the law of man when there is a conflict between the two. This Center has made great strides in returning the Lutheran
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faith into the daily lives of the people in Martin.

Finally, there are some suggested lesson plans for Sunday School classes held on January 25, 2015. For the children, there are suggestions for building articular churches and discussions on the importance of prayer and worship. For youth and adults, there are some resources to view and some suggestions for questions to lead a discussion about the work of the Pastor in Martin who led Bible studies in secret and what message this might provide for us where study of the Bible is open and legal.
WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT PRAYER
AND FAITH IN GOD FROM THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SLOVAKIA?

BACKGROUND

SLOVAK LUTHERANS: A TOUGH-MINDED PEOPLE

By Mark Granquist

Reprinted from MetroLutheran (August 25, 2010), a pan-Lutheran newspaper in Minneapolis, Minnesota
http://metrolutheran.org/2010/08/slovak-lutherans-a-tough-minded-people/

Lutheranism in Europe fared best in those countries where it was a majority and was supported by the government, such as in Scandinavia, the Baltic, and parts of Germany. But the shifting fortunes of religion and politics sometimes stranded Lutheran Christians in areas where they became the religious minority among other Christians. This was a difficult thing for these Lutherans, who often faced neglect and persecution from the majorities around them, and who had to struggle to maintain their distinct Lutheran identities. Such was (and is) the case of the Lutherans in the central European country of Slovakia, where centuries of being in the minority have challenged, but not destroyed, the Lutheran community there.

Movements for reform of the medieval Catholic church took hold in Slovakia in the 15th century, 100 years before Martin Luther, through the efforts of reformer Jan Hus and organized groups such as the Hussites and later the Bohemian Brethren. Lutheranism came to Slovakia in the early 16th century, and was quickly embraced by a good portion of the people, though it was fiercely opposed by the local medieval Catholic hierarchy, with the strong support of the Hungarians rulers of Slovakia.

The Roman Catholic attempts to wipe out Protestantism in Slovakia (and elsewhere), called the Counter-Reformation, reached their peak in the 17th century, when hundreds of Slovak Lutheran pastors were tortured, imprisoned, exiled, and even sold into slavery. The Lutheran churches and population in Slovakia came under tremendous pressure, and many had to go underground to survive. A measure of relief came in the 18th century when enlightened rulers came to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, but the Lutherans in Slovakia had suffered greatly, and it took a long time for them to recover.
Slovak Lutherans in 1960 totaled more than 40,000 baptized members in 104 congregations.

Slovak Lutherans were, however, a stubborn (and even tough) people, and they withstood these centuries of persecution because of their deep commitment to the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith. The Bible was translated into the local languages in the early 16th century, and groups of local cities issued Lutheran confessions of faith. But it was, above all, their hymns and hymnals that formed the core of their faith and held them together during the tough times.

Most essential was the work of Pastor Jiri Tranovsky (1592-1637), who translated the Augsburg Confession into Slovak, and produced the hymnal “Cithara Sanctorum,” which has formed the bedrock of Slovak Lutheranism over the centuries. Two hymns from this hymnal are to be found in the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal: “Your Heart, O God, Is Grieved” (602) and “God, My Lord, My Strength” (795).

After World War Two, Slovakia was plunged under communist rule for 40 years, its state- atheism again challenging the Slovak Lutherans. Much damage was done to the Lutheran churches in Slovakia during this time, but, since the end of communism, American Lutherans (Slovaks and others) have worked hard to help rebuild the Slovak Lutheran communities in a newly independent Slovakia. Both the LCMS and the ELCA have sent teachers and assistance to the Slovak Lutherans, and many local congregations have helped in these efforts. Slovak Lutherans are, in many ways, survivors, and 500 years of history and tradition suggest that they will, once again, rebuild their Lutheran communities.

Mark Granquist is Associate Professor of Church History at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, and lives in Northfield, Minnesota. He is project editor of “Faithful and Reforming.”
THE ARTICULAR CHURCH IN SLOVAKIA
AS A HISTORIC MESSAGE ABOUT THE LUTHERAN BELIEF
IN THE PRIMACY OF GOD’S WORD IN SCRIPTURE AND SERMON

So why is it that these churches are worth this kind of pursuit. They are a treasure and there are only five left in existence in the world. They are in fact a precious heritage and a reminder of God’s grace in breaking through the Hapsburg anti-protestant mindset. It was a glorious day when the restrictions were relaxed and the Lutherans were allowed to build their houses of worship.

As you view the pictures of these articular churches, the reality of the Lutheran Theological position on the absolute importance and authority of God’s Word both from scripture and sermon is evident. Notice that the design of these churches is based upon all attending being able to hear. The designs are, all but one, on a Greek cross floor plan with the use of multiple balconies to enable the facility to seat many within hearing distance of the pastor. From the raised pulpit the pastor can actually see every person in the church. The construction of these buildings defies even modern builders, engineers and architects as the 'how' and the 'why' of certain parts of the structure. We know the articles under which it was built disallowed nails. The entire building is wood attached by wooden pegs and dowels. The churches have absolutely no source of heat other than human bodies and candles on the altar.

Our hope in sharing this with you is that you have grown in appreciation for, not only the history of your church, the rich heritage that is ours, but also that you might be aware that our brothers and sisters in times past had a very difficult struggle in preserving the preaching of the Gospel. We can only imagine what it must have been like to have been a professing Lutheran in those anti-reformation days. I am sure that all of us appreciate our own houses of worship, and particularly the heating system.

Posted by Pastor George at 10:14 AM
This is the articular church located in Hronsek, Slovakia. The exterior banding and cross-bracing on the Hronsec church enabled the builders to add considerable strength to the walls of this non-log structure. Notice the many mini roofs that cover the external bands the function of which is to protect the bands and the cross-bracing.
The articular church in Svaty Kris would not win a prize for exterior beauty but Internally this building is a work of art with its barrel ceiling, and multiple balconies allowing every seat in the house to be a 'front row' seat. The acoustics are so good that area concerts are often held in this church. The construction of this building defies even modern builders, engineers and architects as the 'how' and the 'why' of certain parts of the structure. We know the articles under which it was built disallowed nails. The entire building in wood attached by wooden pegs and dowels.
The officials who doled out the property for the articular Lutheran church at Lestiny certainly did their best to confound the efforts of the church members who wanted to build. Even in our day, with heavy equipment and plenty of engineering skills available, we would find it difficult to build on this site. The church is cut into the side of the hill with the upper level, which is now a cemetery, almost touching the eaves. The other side of the church is on the edge of a very steep bank. If you notice the stairway up to the church you can see that it was not only difficult to build, but also difficult for people to get up to the church. The interior of this church is a repository of 17th and 18th century Christian art.
Istebne, the smallest of the articular Lutheran wooden churches, is just absolutely breathtaking inside with artwork everywhere! Even the ceiling and the beams have become pallets. The balcony extends all the way around, even behind the altar. The church is an elongated Greek cross and is probably the smallest of the five in terms of seating capacity which is probably good in that the tighter you pack them, the warmer they are. The church has absolutely no source of heat other than human bodies and candles on the altar.
This is another view of the church in Svaty Kris. It is not the oldest, but the largest, built by a man who could not read or write. The picture also provides a glimpse of the mountainous setting surrounding the village which is so typical of Slovakia.
Goat herding is still a part of life in the small mountain villages like Lestiny. Village youth will often share in the responsibility of caring for the goat herd. Goat cheese is a staple and is often served in large braided ropes.
Here is a modern day Lutheran family posing inside their church. Church life is seeing revitalization in places like Martin Slovakia where families can now practice their faith openly without fear of losing their right to their professional positions.
BOHDAN HROBON’S STORY

Bohdan Hrobon tells a story of his life as a teen age boy in Martin Slovakia. His father, Jan Hrobon, was a Lutheran pastor during the years when Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia, an eastern block country behind what Americans used to call the Iron Curtain. Church pastors at the time were permitted to hold Sunday services but were not permitted to conduct any other part of what would be considered church ministries. For example, they were not permitted to hold bible classes or visit people in their homes and talk about religion. Bohdan’s father actively disobeyed these edicts, meeting in the basement of people’s homes conducting bible studies. Bohdan talks about how he would be present for these bible studies with his father and there would be a knock on the door. Everyone would tense as they checked to see if it were the authorities coming to arrest the participants. Jan Hrobon had to move several times as the authorities investigated reports of his actions. He spent his life spreading the word about the message in the scriptures without regard to his own safety. What follows is an excerpt from a presentation and paper Bohdan Hrobon, his son, wrote.

_The Communist world in which I grew up was anything but a safe place for Christians. My father was one of those “rebellious” pastors who obeyed God rather than men. Not only was he involved in various activities that the atheistic regime considered illegal, but he even encouraged and supported us, his six children, to participate in them. I remember a lady with tears in her eyes pleading with my father to stop ruining the future of his children by being such a vigorous Christian. Regardless of the eventual outcome (everyone in our family lives happily ever after), in that time we acquired the most precious things for our future: faith and trust in a God who cares. This is not to say we were brave; we just did not have another option. We could not rely on human rights or justice, not even on insurance, savings, or a retirement plan, so we relied on God. Moreover, we learned that being saved is more important than being safe._

...Yes, mission is not safe. It is, in fact, a high-risk endeavor, one that takes not just money, time, or energy, but also lives. However, what would have happened to our Christianity if Jesus Christ or his apostles had been worried about safety while proclaiming the gospel? Peter earned his Master’s rebuke when bringing up a safety issue: “Get behind
me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matt 16:23). And what would happen to our salvation if Jesus Christ were Mr. Play-It-Safe?

Therefore, listen to Christ’s words, “Go on your way!” and his warning, “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:18). Remember, there is no safer thing to do than what God wants you to do; there is no safer place to be than where God wants you to be. Do not be afraid to go, travel, sail, or fly, for the Lord promised that “you shall mount up with wings like an eagle” (Isa40:31). He does not give you eagle’s wings to beat the traffic on your way from Sunday worship to a restaurant, but to carry on his mission in this world.

...In Christ, we’ve got all it takes to be free indeed. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Get rid of the unnecessary burden, forget the worries about safety, get the eagle’s wings, and get to work. Or, as the apostle Paul would say it: “through love become slaves to one another” (Gal 5:13b).

Dear Friends of the Center for Christian Education (CCE),

For 40 years, due to communist regime, people in Slovakia could not freely adhere to Christian principles, let alone acknowledge Christian education as an important value. The life of the church was narrowed to ministry by pastors only. Lay ministry was unwelcomed and any efforts in the area of church growth were stopped radically. Due to the damaging effects of communism on people’s belief system, many families have almost completely wandered away from the church. Spiritual poverty and lack of values has become a common feature in many lives.

Since 1989, after communist regime was finally over, Christianity in Slovakia got its second chance. The church once again began to rediscover its purpose and mission. The freedom of religious creed and faith enabled religion classes to be taught even in public schools and institutions providing Christian education could be established without previous
restrictions. However, the circumstances for spreading the Gospel are still far from ideal. The church is struggling greatly from the lack of professional lay workers, who need to be educated and trained for efficient ministry. Christian schools are fighting the middle generation parents’ distrust, dedicating much of their effort into convincing them that rooting Christian principles in their children’s hearts is the most valuable asset for their future life.

Although the general public’s mindset is still not welcoming, the time has never been more right and the need for change is urging. In 1998 this need resulted in the establishment of the Bible school in Martin, which educates and trains lay people in the area of teaching, social work, mission and youth ministries. Six years later, Lutheran elementary school welcomed its first students and in January 2012 Department of Religious studies within the University of Žilina was established. Since September 2012, the CCE has been blessed to be able to open the first year of Lutheran preschool, reaching to our smallest ones. After almost 15 years of its existence, CCE now serves a total of 500 people on regular basis.

We are thankful to all of our partners helping us to use this historical opportunity for spreading the Gospel in the post-communist part of the World. Above all, we are grateful for God’s continuous guidance and care, rejoicing over the place where the people of all ages can learn and experience the love of Christ!

Bohdan Hroboň
President of CCE
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SLOVAK GLOBAL MISSION LESSON PLANS

PRESCHOOL, KINDERGARTEN

GOAL: Children will learn that church is a special place where families can get together to pray that God take care of those who are important to them.

BIBLE VERSE: 19"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20"For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:19-20)

MATERIALS: popsicle sticks, glue, cardboard, large piece of paper, crayons, pictures of articular churches, pictures of goats, and Slovak people going to church

ACTIVITY: Talk about what a church is. Tell children that many years ago in a faraway place called Slovakia people went to church in special churches built totally of wood. Everyone in the small village would come to the church every Sunday to pray together and learn more about how God takes care of them. This was a special time where they prayed for God to protect their village and the people in it. These people had many goats and they would also pray that God take care of their animals.

Show children pictures of articular churches, goats, and people. Ask children to use the popsicle sticks and glue to build their own church on a piece of cardboard. Let children build their churches in their own way. Tell them God is pleased with however they create their church.

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS: What happens in a church? Why do people go to church? Why do you go to church? What can you pray for? Who can you pray for?

END: Use a large piece of paper and crayons for each child. Ask children to work together to create a large mural of all the people and animals that they can pray for. End with a prayer for all the people and animals on the mural.
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ELEMENTARY

GOAL: Children will talk about the importance of the church as a special place where families can get together to learn about God and pray.

BIBLE VERSE: 19"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20"For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:19-20)

MATERIALS: sticks, bark, popsicle sticks, cardboard, glue, masking tape, scrap wood (any materials made of wood or paper), pencil, paper.

ACTIVITY: Talk about what a church is. Tell children that many years ago in a place called Slovakia people went to church in special churches built totally of wood. They weren’t allowed to use nails and they weren’t allowed to put a sign on the church saying it was a church. They felt so strongly that they needed a church that they worked very hard to build a church without nails and without a sign on it. They wanted to get together with other families in their village to learn more about God and to pray that God take care of their families, their friends and the animals and the buildings in their village. They did this wearing heavy winter coats because heat was not allowed in the church.

Challenge the children to use the materials you have given them to create their own church without nails and a sign. Ask them to work together as a group to build their church just as the Slovak village people would have done many years ago.

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS: Why do you think the people in the villages in Slovakia built churches even though it was hard? Why do you think they went to those churches even when it was very cold and there was no heat in the church? How do you think God felt about the churches they built? Why is it important to come to church every Sunday?

END: Ask each child to create a special prayer on a piece of paper and read it to each other in a prayer circle. End by having each child place their prayer inside the church they have built together.
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LATE ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE SCHOOL

GOAL: To enable children to learn about articular churches - What they are & How they were put together

BIBLE VERSE: For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

MATERIALS: A wooden “Slovak Church Puzzle” kit (ordering instructions at www.metrodcelca.org/events/companion-synod-sunday/) to be pieced together

ACTIVITY: Assemble the ‘Slovak Church Puzzle’ and discuss articular churches of Slovakia

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS: Why do people go to church? Why do you go to church? Is it because of the unconditional love of God? Because Jesus has set you free? Free from what? For what purpose? What does it mean for you to stand firm in your faith?

END: Pray for members of the churches in Slovakia and also for members of the churches of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod that all may remain firm in their faith in Jesus who has set us free.

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SHARING ABOUT ARTICULAR CHURCHES OF SLOVAKIA

Congregations of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod are observing on January 25, 2015 (or another suitable day) the companionship shared with brothers and sister in the congregations of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia (Lutheran).

Slovakia is a small country which lies at the center of Europe. The commonwealth of Virginia is twice the size of the country of Slovakia. Slovakia is bordered by Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine and Hungary. It has high mountains in the north and hilly farmlands in the southwest. Traces of ancient settlements go back 22,800 years.

The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession had its beginnings with the reform movement of the church led by Martin Luther. Martin Luther was led to believe through study of the Bible that our relationship with God is dependent upon God’s love for us. God sets us free from sin and death. God’s love is to be received as a gift. It is not something to be achieved.
This reform movement caught on with people throughout much of middle and northern Europe.

Most of the people of the land which is now known as Slovakia became part of the reform movement.

But the reform movement wasn’t well received by either the ruler of the land, Emperor Leopold I of the Hapsburg monarchy, or the roman church. A counter movement, the “counter reformation,” pushed back against the reformers. Leopold I issued “Articles” putting restrictions upon the reformed churches. The Articles stipulated that there could be only two reformed churches in each administrative area, that the churches must be outside the town/city wall, that the churches must be off the main road and on land difficult to get to, that the entrance to the church would have to be from the side or rear of the church and that the church could not use nails in its construction (the entire building must be wood attached only by wooden pegs and dowels). The churches were not allowed to have any source of heat other than human bodies and burning candles on the altar. Of the articular churches which were allowed to exist, only five remain today and continue to be used for congregation worship.

As well, many pastors and members of the reformed churches were arrested and put in prison. Some were sent off into exile to work as slaves on ships. Still others were executed.

It was a tough time for the reformers. But they remained firm in their faith that Jesus had set them free. They held fast to their belief that God’s love is unconditional.

The church in Lestiny is one of the five remaining articular churches. It was built in 1688-89 by local carpenters as a simple wooden rustic structure. Pictured is a member of the congregation visiting the gravesite of a beloved family member.
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HIGH SCHOOL, ADULT

GOAL: Reflect upon the meaning of the Christian call to mission in today’s world.

BIBLE VERSE: “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” (Luke 10:18)

MATERIALS: reading materials and pictures of articular churches.

ACTIVITY: Read and watch the attached article about and written by Bohdan Hrobon. Explain his position as the Director of the Center for Christian Education in Martin Slovakia. He grew up as the son of a very famous revolutionary Lutheran pastor who struggled to keep Christianity alive during Slovakia’s Communist era. Talk about Bohdan’s call to be saved rather than to be safe. Discuss what this means for American Christians. Then read and watch the video www.cce.sk. What is Bohdan’s new struggle as he builds his Center for Christian Education? What is the message for us?

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS: What did it mean to be an actively practicing Lutheran during the Communist times in Slovakia? What does this mean for us now today? How did the Bible School in Martin (now Center for Christian Education) reach 78 students (instead of the expected 20) when it first opened? Why did it grow so exponentially in a town where no Christian education was permitted for forty years? Why did this new idea of Christian education reach the hearts of so many after 40 years of religious oppression?

END: End in prayer asking for everyone present to continue to reflect upon the meaning of Bohdan’s message. More information on Hrobon’s school can be found at www. cce.sk.