

Churches & National Committees

Lutheran World 1/1977
pp 91-92

"Living Protestant Communities" in Central Asia and Siberia

In the Asian Soviet Republics and in Siberia, there are hundreds of living Christian communities, composed of Lutherans and others among the German-speaking citizens, Dr. Paul Hansen, Europe secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, has reported after a visit in the Soviet Union.

"It is like witnessing a resurrection of the first Christian community," Dr. Hansen said, describing a six-hour service attended by more than 600 people in the town of Alma Ata, the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Republic. "They know no explicit dogmatic theology, have no definite church order, no clergy, no outward organization; and yet their strong, simple personal faith, their active witness to the world, their joyful participation in church services, and their natural common prayer give us a vivid picture of what the primitive Christianity of the apostles was like."

Dr. Hansen had been requesting permission to visit the German-speaking Lutherans in various parts of the Soviet Union for the past 12 years, but had been able to visit only the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Yet after recent conversations at the Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow, this journey was arranged. Dr. Hansen was accompanied by Pastor Harald Kalnins from Riga, Latvia, who has been making yearly visits to Siberia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, and the Caucasus for the past seven years.

The Protestant Christians in Lutheran

churches, and the Mennonites who live and work in a diaspora situation within the Soviet Union have their church life "reduced to means of existence similar to those of the early Christians," Dr. Hansen said. "Everywhere we went the services of Pastor Kalnins were received with deep gratitude."

The Russian-Germans now living in Kazakhstan originally came from the territories once occupied by the Volga Germans and the Black Sea Germans, from Volhynia, and from the larger Russian cities like Moscow and Leningrad. During the early days of World War II, there was a massive forced resettlement of Germans into the remote areas. According to USSR government figures, there are eight million Russian-Germans in this area today. But, Dr. Hansen said, "it is impossible to ascertain how many of these regard themselves as Christian." Nonetheless, "it is a fact that in hundreds of places in Kazakhstan as well as in Siberia and in the Soviet Republics of Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizia, Moldavia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, German-speaking citizens of Lutheran, Reformed, and Mennonite persuasion get together for services, prayers, meetings, and Bible studies."

Only a few of these communities—officially about 30—are registered with the state, Dr. Hansen reported. Christian communities in the Soviet Union have only two alternatives: either to "register," name-

as individual communities or as part of an officially recognized church, or to live and work in "the underground."

The Danish clergyman was allowed to preach in the German-speaking communities, even though he has in recent years publicly pointed out restrictions placed upon church life in some socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union. But he reported that the official in charge of church affairs in the Kazakhstan Soviet Republic said, "Dr. Hansen is a man of peace and therefore always welcome here."

Even though the Russian-German Christian communities are not officially "registered," they seem to have the freedom to exist, Dr. Hansen reported. And he added that in the 16 Lutheran churches in eastern Europe—including the three Baltic churches in the Soviet Union—there have been no cases where pastors, church workers, or members were imprisoned, tortured, or put in psychiatric clinics because of their faith.

After his visit to the Russian-German communities, Dr. Hansen told the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow that many of the German-speaking communities would like to join an institutionalized church. A step towards this was

taken earlier this year when a secretariat for the pastoral care of German-speaking communities in the Soviet Union was formed by the consistory of the Latvian Lutheran Church in Riga. This secretariat, now headed by Pastor Kalnins, is working out ways to improve contacts with the German-speaking communities in the Soviet Union.

The Council for Religious Affairs told the LWF executive that the LWF would be allowed to provide the German-speaking congregations with theological literature for the education of the preachers, most of whom are laymen, and some of whom are only able to read old sermons to their congregations. He also reported that the LWF might be permitted in the near future to send German Bibles to the various Christian communities.

Dr. Hansen also reported that the Council for Religious Affairs was working for more registrations from the Christian communities. He said he was told that he would be allowed to visit the German-speaking Christians in the Soviet Union again during his attendance as an official LWF observer at the World Congress of Religious Peace Forces in Moscow in June 1977.

From LWF Information 36/76

Ishida Elected to Head Studies

Yoshiro Ishida, 48, professor of mission and preaching at the Japan Lutheran Theological College and Seminary, Tokyo, has been elected director of the LWF Department of Studies. He succeeds Dr. Ulrich Duchrow, who has been the department's director since 1970. Elected by the Federation's Executive Committee at its meeting in February in Divonne, France, Dr. Ishida will begin his work with the LWF after the Sixth Assembly. Born in Yamaguchi, Japan, he studied at Doshisha University, Kyoto, and Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, and has done graduate study at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and at Harvard Divinity School. Ordained in 1955, he was successively parish pastor and director of the Tokyo Lutheran Student Center, before joining the JLTCS faculty. From 1964 to 1968, he served in Geneva as Asia Secretary for the Federation's former Department of World Mission. He has been co-director of the Northeast Asia Association of Theological Schools; executive director, Japan Association of Theological Schools, and editor of the *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*. A member of the LWF Executive Committee since 1970, he has also been visiting professor in several USA theological schools. He and