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Article in "Lutheran Witness Reporter" about St. Luke's, 1971

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Lutheran Witness Reporter

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VILLAGE CHURCH in a semitropical setting is St. Luke's Lutheran Church at Slavia, Fla. The Lutheran congregation was founded nearly 60 years ago by a group of Slovak people who migrated from Cleveland.

Changes Upcoming For 'Village Church'

By FRANK D. STARR

SLAVIA, FLA. — The church building seems transplanted. The red brick structure, with its square tower in front, was built in the European village manner, but it stands in a semitropical setting.

The village church in its languorous surroundings is eloquent in testifying to the kind of people who came nearly 60 years ago to this flat land, dotted with orange groves and gouged by lakes. The soil is mostly sparse but sometimes, lovingly tilled, lush and fat with vegetables.

They were Slovaks, come from Cleveland to "take our children on the farms where there will be less temptation of the world and of the wickedness of a large city."

Those hardworking, God-fearing immigrants and their descendants prospered — some mightily — and the community progressed in deliberate and measured steps over the years.

Today Slavia is a neat and progressive preserve of attractive virtues and virile Slovakian Lutheranism set squarely in burgeoning central Florida.

It is a leading member of the new SELC District of the Missouri Synod, a non-geographical District formed by the former Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. The new District is due to disappear in coming years as its member churches merge with other Districts in which they are located.

The SELC District will hold its next District convention at Slavia in November 1972.

"I would just say that we are stepping into a new era in our congregation," affirms Steve Sidlik, a teacher at St. Luke's parish school for 17 years. "It is going to be interesting to see how things work out."

A new neighbor is Disney World, due to open its gates

in October and herald of what some see as a new eon of prosperity. Others are not so sure.

Look magazine, in a special Florida issue, said about Disney World's advent: "This will be the most gargantuan vacation enterprise ever devised, dropped into America's most popular tourist destination. Around Disney World the boom is on. Land values are jumping like frightened rabbits."

Sidlik notes: "The population in Seminole County (in which Slavia is located) is supposed to triple in the next 10 years. And the fastest-growing part is south Seminole County, which is this general area. I would say this by far is the most booming area in central Florida, right in our vicinity here."

But he says that not everyone in Slavia believes the extravagant talk of the area's promoters and land developers. "Perhaps so many of us are

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2,600 LWML Members Pledge to Invest Selves

By BRUCE STRADE
Special Correspondent

LOUISVILLE — A challenge to "make this a building convention" greeted more than 2,600 women gathered for the 14th biennial International Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML) convention here June 22-24.

"Not merely the building of budgets and programs," keynote speaker Rev. Andrew Sabo explained, "but the building of people."

Meeting in a colorful convention center decorated with red roses, gold tablecloths, and a 16-foot red and gold banner displaying the convention theme "Declare His Glory" and reproduced in miniature as place cards, the delegates were reminded that God has "put us in the community for ministry, mission, and service."

All of this, Rev. Sabo added, takes place where people are. The former international LWML counselor urged the delegates to be ready for change and new methods, to place a greater emphasis on the Word of God, to listen to people, and to get involved with people.

Proceeding the keynote address was a procession of 20 banners depicting Biblical variations on the convention theme, designed and constructed by zone women of the league's Indiana District, convention host.

A significant part of the convention schedule included a Bible study on the concept of glory in the Old and New Testament. Rev. Gary Schaper of Indianapolis, pastoral adviser of the Indiana district, led the study sessions.

During the convention the women heard several addresses, including a talk by Mrs. Robert Kroenke, Missouri Synod lay missionary for 5½ years. She shared her experiences as a wife, medic, bookkeeper, teacher, barber, and cook in the highlands of New Guinea.

Mrs. Kroenke dismissed the myth that missionaries are poor, suffering people and dared her listeners "to trust in God all the way." She also gave them some practical advice on what they could do for



MRS. WARREN HARTMAN
Medal Recipient

missionaries, such as prayer, financial support of missions, along with personal and frequent letters.

Dr. William Kohn, executive secretary of the Synod's Board for Missions, commended the LWML for their people-oriented projects of the past and encouraged them to continue this emphasis.

Basing his remarks on John 1:14, 16, Synod president Dr. Jacob A. O. Preus declared that we are "here to live lives charmed and charged with God's presence." He also called on the delegates to join in "giving thanks for the fellowship of conviction that we have inherited and to join in setting our faces forward."

In a film presentation titled "God Is Not Dead in Africa" Dr. William Danker, director of missionary training at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, emphasized the mission work being done, the unity of effort required, and the need for training national leaders in Africa.

Immediately preceding his presentation Dr. Danker awarded Mrs. Warren Hartman

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50 Million Christians To Join for Key 73

"One of the greatest things that ever happened to the Christian church in our generation and possibly for many generations." That is what Dr. Theodore A. Raedeke predicts for Key 73, a concerted interdenominational evangelism effort that will climax in 1973.

Dr. Raedeke, now executive director of Key 73, said its basic objective is "more forcefully and fully to confront people with Jesus Christ by proclamation and demonstration, by witness and ministry, by word and deed."

Committed to take part in the effort are about 80 denominations and groups representing some 50 million members. Objectives of Key 73 will be carried out through activities in three areas:

— Separately, participating denominations will develop their own program or thrust. "Never will we on the national level dictate what must be done or how they should do it," Dr. Raedeke explains. "However, we will endeavor to supply resource material to give them the finest evangelism tools."

— Simultaneously, participants will schedule "seasonal evangelism emphases" in 1973. — Cooperatively, the denominations will make extensive use of the mass media. On the local level (subject to "local decision") participating churches will join in "a community confrontation" and a mass Scripture distribution campaign.

Asked why he was chosen to head Key 73, Dr. Raedeke said that The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod "is recognized and respected by other denominations for its conservative theology and its aggressive evangelism outreach." He was also "privileged to have a big

hand" in working out the organizational structure and the steps of implementation, "which participating denominations greatly appreciated."

"I accepted the appointment," he went on, "not only because I felt led of the Spirit but because I recognized this as an opportunity for a strong Lutheran witness not only to the non-Christian but also to other denominations. I believe there is a uniqueness about Lutheran evangelism, which stresses both the Gospel and sacraments, and for this reason we have something very special to offer Key 73."

Frequently, he added, in Lutheran circles "we sit back and let others develop the program and then later decide that we can't be a part of it because it violates either our practice or our conscience."

Pastors and congregations of the Missouri Synod will be able to take part in Key 73 because it is intended "only to motivate, to encourage, and to assist," Christians for sharing Christ "with every person in North America," the executive director emphasized, adding:

"We do not minimize or ignore doctrinal differences among denominations. In the organizational structure of Key 73 we explicitly state that doctrinal differences not only exist but that they should be respected, and never should a denomination be embarrassed or faulted for not participating in every phase of Key 73."



NEWLY ELECTED LWML officers installed by Rev. Edgar Kaiser are, from left, Rev. Erhard D. Eifert, pastoral counselor; Mrs. Frank W. Ritzen, financial secretary; Mrs. Alfred Sump, third vice-president; Mrs. William E. Morris, first vice-president; and Mrs. C. R. Montz, president.

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saying, "Well, when it comes, we will do something about it." This is the one fear I have," he confides, "maybe we are going to take things too lightly, and then it is going to be upon us."

Sidlik's expectations are echoed by another teacher at the school, Joe Battle, who was born and reared at Oviedo, a few miles away, and who joined the congregation as a young adult.

"When I was in senior high school," he remembers, "the whole school, grades one through twelve, may have had three or four hundred students. Now the junior through senior high alone has more than 1,400 students."

"South Seminole over here was like this area — lots of woods, houses here and there. But the growth of South Seminole has been such that the political power has shifted from the north end of the county to the south."

He feels that the people of Slavia are aware of just how great the change in their community will be in the next few years.

Mixed Emotions

"I have mixed emotions about it myself," he says. "I think the growth is going to be good, but I still am a country boy at heart, and I'd like to find me some place that I could go to and still have several acres of land around me. You kind of like not to see the change, and yet if you are going to do something, you're going to have to accept the change."

On the whole, he says confidently, "the congregation will respond very well to these changes."

Almost everyone is optimistic about the future of Slavia and of St. Luke's Church (which, at this point, are still about the same thing). What will carry the congregation through, leaders say, is that rugged, down-to-earth faith in God that sustained early residents, a group of Slovak-speaking people from urban Ohio who set out to establish a rural Lutheran colony where they could tend to their own business of serving God and raising children in the fear of the Lord.

First hopes were high, and enthusiasm bubbled over in letters back to more cautious stay-at-home friends and relatives. "Hurry after us," one settler wrote. "Here we have a real paradise. In winter you have snow while here we raise celery, cucumbers, cabbage, and other vegetables."

A descendant, writing in the congregation's golden-anniversary booklet, responds: "A paradise indeed! We were remind-

ed of the words of God to Adam after the Fall: 'In the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread till thou return to the ground. . . .'

The easy life the settlers first expected unfolded instead in years of poverty and hardship which disciplined and molded them into seasoned farmers and strengthened their faith and reliance in God.

"I feel these people who are close to the earth are closer to their Lord and love to hear His Word and study it," affirms Rev. John Kucharik, present pastor at Slavia.

A son of one of Slavia's founders remarks: "You can see the hand of God much more clearly on the farm than you can in an office or factory job."

Although the colony was without a pastor for its first 22 years, worship services were held faithfully "every Sunday and holy day," and, declares Ferdinand Duda, president of the congregation (and Sunday school teacher of a class of pre-schoolers), "if a person didn't attend church in the old times, he was sick."

A resident pastor arrived in 1934. He was Rev. Stephen M. Tuhy, who remained as shepherd of the colony for 33 years.

Under Pastor Tuhy's leadership the congregation matured. Not only did the congregation build a new church — an architectural gem which reflects Pastor Tuhy's interest in liturgy and worship — but St. Luke's founded a school which has won the confidence and respect of the entire area and serves a great many children beyond the congregation.

Synod Leader

Also, St. Luke's became a leader in the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, which was founded by Lutherans of Czechoslovakian descent. Eventually Lutheran Haven, a complex which includes a children's home, a home for the aged, and a retirement village, was founded on land next to the church in Slavia.

Under Pastor Tuhy's leadership the congregation reached out to serve and gradually include many more than simply those of Slavic heritage. With the congregation's knowledge and by its own choice it became less and less a distinctively Slovak group.

"Now the larger percentage of the people in the congregation are not of Slavic descent," Pastor Kucharik says. They are just as likely to be of English, Irish, or German background, with some coming from other places and some native central Floridians.

Christine Mikler, a teen



AT CHAPEL SERVICES for children of St. Luke's school Pastor Kucharik makes a point about prayer by using an object. Fewer than half of the students at the school are members of St. Luke's congregation.

whose family has farmed the Florida flatland for generations, observes: "Our church has branched out. Not everyone comes from here anymore."

"It was strictly a church of farming people as it started, and it remained that way for a number of years," Ferdinand Duda says. "But now it is composed of different segments of people." That the congregation has been active in reaching out in the community "can be seen by the growth," he maintains.

A former teacher at St. Luke's school, and currently president of St. Luke's LWML, Mary Ann Weisenbarger, remarks that "it wouldn't be being church, would it?" for the congregation to have remained to themselves.

Although the congregation already has a strong sense of mission which causes them to reach out into the community, some members of the congregation want to see this aspect of congregational life developed more.

Rev. George Marcek, retired SELC pastor and a resident of Lutheran Haven retirement village, says that "a great challenge" facing the congregation is the need "to be more active in personal mission work by witnessing to Jesus and His kingdom. But our people are starting to wake up to their challenge, and they are starting to make a little progress."

Mrs. Walter (Judy) Duda, who came to the congregation about 13 years ago as a teacher and later married into a Slavia family, says she has always been impressed with the con- (See VILLAGE CHURCH, P. 5)



LUTHERAN HAVEN RESIDENTS John and Helen Pravnan met and married after both had retired to the SELC's home for the aged. Mr. Pravnan, whose hobby is raising flowers, hands his wife one of his roses.



ON SCHOOL GROUNDS teachers Joe Battle, left, and Kenneth Markert, right, talk with Parent-Teacher League president Mrs. Walter Duda, center, and several students.



CONGREGATION'S PRESIDENT, Ferdinand Duda Sr., right, confers with St. Luke's pastor, Rev. John Kucharik. Mr. Duda has also taught a class of preschool-age children for more than 35 years.



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ON SCHOOL GROUNDS teachers Joe Battle, left, and Kenneth Markert, right, talk with Parent-Teacher League president Mrs. Walter Duda, center, and several students.

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gregation but that "if I would make any criticism of the people of St. Luke's — and I would include myself in this — it would be that we are a little shy. . . . The people are basically humble and quiet people. They hesitate to go out and knock on doors and push themselves."

A strong evidence of the congregation's openness to outsiders in the past can be seen in the parish school. Some 60 percent of the 263 students are from families who are not members of the congregation, the school's principal, E. L. Bellhorn, points out.

Many of these, of course, are members of various churches, but some have no church background at all.

Of these last Pastor Kucharik says, "We do visit them and acquaint them with the Gospel of Christ as taught by the Lutheran Church. St. Luke's school is a mission arm of the congregation."

Until about 10 years ago the parish school included mostly children from the congregation. At that time the congregation decided to open the school to more outside children. Since then the school has grown rapidly. Now 10 teachers lead classes from kindergarten through junior high.

Recent Growth

School leaders say the greatest growth in recent years has been in the junior high department. Last year the school had to turn down 52 applicants, many of them for the upper grades. Principal Bellhorn predicts that next year "we will have to refuse a good number of applications for the seventh grade."

Reasons for the growing popularity of the school in the community include the reputation the school has earned over the years for academic excellence, crowded public schools, and the dissatisfaction of parents with what they see as relaxed standards and lack of control in public school classrooms.

"Parents are concerned about the atmosphere of the schools," Principal Bellhorn says. "Many parents see a need for a basic Christian education at this age" when "children need special consideration."

Now congregational leaders are pondering whether they should not expand the school in staff and space to accommodate the growing number of applications (which the congregation sees as opportunities).

Judy Duda, who is president of the Parent-Teacher League, notes: "I would certainly think that our school is in the middle of a metamorphosis here, when



ONLY FOUNDER of St. Luke's Lutheran Church and of the Slavia community who is still living is George Jacobin Sr., right, telling Pastor Kucharik about the congregation's original church building (background), now used for storage.

we are actually coming to terms with what purpose we want our school to actually serve."

While the congregation considers expansion, two other developments loom ahead.

One is the growing financial cost in maintaining a parish school. For the first time next year parents who are members of the congregation will also be asked to pay tuition for their school-going children, although scholarship money will be available "so that no member of our congregation will be denied a Christian education because of costs," according to Joe Battle.

The other development is the growing possibility of a senior Lutheran high school supported by all Missouri Synod congregations of the Orlando and central Florida area.

Wider Variety

The growth of St. Luke's school has not been an unmixed blessing. With more children coming from a wider variety of backgrounds the problems already faced by public schools are beginning to make inroads at St. Luke's.

Judy Duda says, "Our kids here have led a more sheltered life, certainly." But, she says, "I think we are finding with our young people the same problems that every other congregation has. I have seen a tremendous change in the attitude of young people in junior high age. They're maturing so much faster in terms of worldly sophistication: knowing what there is to know about the world and feeling ready to go out and face it."

"The only anxieties that people have are really concerned with the youth—not just in our congregation but with youth at large, because, after all, our kids go out and meet all the others, too."

Some of the young people themselves are concerned also.

A high school sophomore told of worrying about being able to maintain her standards as a Christian and about wondering what is missing in the lives of classmates who had turned to abuse of drugs and to other antisocial behavior.

A seventh-grade student at St. Luke's own school was of the opinion that "the school is starting to get problems like many public schools have."

The community whose forefathers decided to "take our children on the farms where there will be less temptations of the world and of the wickedness of a large city" has found that the world's temptations and wickedness have moved in next door and threaten to move in altogether.

Still, though some take occasional sidelong glances at the past, few in the congregation seem resentful or repentant of past decisions.

Wouldn't Go Back

Steve Sidlik remarks, "In a little village church, closely knit, you have your advantages, and then as you grow larger, well, there are some things you wish you could have back again." But he wouldn't want to go back, he says.

Judy Duda, remembering her impressions when she first came from Chicago, says: "There's a community spirit which is, I have to admit, changing a little bit. Our school is growing so that a smaller percentage every year are actual members of St. Luke's. And that has changed things a bit. . . . You know, its bound to. It's the price you pay for expansion and progress."

Anyway, members say, it wouldn't make sense to have the Christian faith and not want to share it, even if there are risks that must be taken.

Congregation president Ferdinand Duda declares emphatically: "You can't have faith and not try to practice it."



FAMILY DEVOTIONS bring together residents of one of the children's cottages at Luther Haven, maintained by the SELC District on grounds next to St. Luke's school. In this cottage Mr. and Mrs. John Kern serve as parents for nine teens as well as for their own two smaller children.