

The Methodist Church of Eastern Europe

PETER STEPHENS

Historically Methodist Churches are related either to the British Methodist Church or to the American Methodist Church. (Since the union in 1968 with the Evangelical United Brethren, the American Church is known as the United Methodist Church.) The Methodist Churches in Eastern Europe are all related to the United Methodist Church and that is one reason why they are almost unknown in Britain.

In continental Europe as a whole there are four episcopal areas of the United Methodist Church – Central and Southern Europe, Northern Europe, East Germany, and West Germany. (In addition there are Methodist Churches in united churches – Belgium, France, Spain – and some others historically related to Britain – in France, Italy and Portugal.) Only one of these areas (West Germany) is limited to Western Europe. It was formerly part of a church that covered East and West Germany.

The largest of the churches is in East Germany and is led by Bishop Armin Haertel (Dresden). It has 18,000 full members, 4,500 who are not yet full members, 5,000 baptised children, and a total community of about 34,000. Its institutional life is much stronger than that of the other Methodist Churches of Eastern Europe. Like the West German, Scandinavian, and Swiss Methodist Churches it has deaconesses (almost 100) who are nurses and a tradition of commitment in medical and social service. The Church runs four hospitals (with 230 beds), a nursing school (with 60 student nurses), four old people's homes (with 150 residents), as well as a number of other homes. The present total of 142 ministers includes 34 who are retired. There is a small theological college at Bad Klosterlausnitz with 10–20 students. Three tutors work full time in the college, some others part time. The Church has a bookshop, and publishes a fortnightly paper (*Kirchenglocke*), with a circulation of 10,000.

Four years ago an agreement was signed with the Lutheran Churches in which the Churches recognized each other's baptism and confirmation, expressed readiness to share each other's facilities, and outlined regulations for transferring members.

Social and political involvement varies. Some believe that they should

be as actively involved as possible and they do this through the Christian Democratic Union, one of the official parties. Among them is Karl Ordnung, a leading Methodist layman. Others take the opposite view. Youth work is organized by the Church and, at the time of the Church's Annual Conference, a thousand young people normally gather for their own special celebrations. They face, as members of other Churches, the question of whether to join state youth organizations and take part in the *Jugendweihe*. It is customary for the minister to have a pastoral conversation with those in their teens, when they have decisions of this kind to make.

The only Methodist Church left in the Soviet Union is in Estonia. Before the Second World War there were Churches in Lithuania (started in 1904) and Latvia (started in 1912). The Estonian Church is part of the Northern Europe Area, whose bishop is Bishop Ole E. Borgen (Stockholm). The work was begun in 1907 by an Estonian lay preacher who was a member of the Methodist Church in Leningrad.

The Church reported only 750 members after the war, but now has 2,350 full members (active members over 18) in 15 congregations. There are 23 ministers, of whom seven are retired, as well as more than 60 active lay preachers. Overall figures show that these 15 churches hold on average four services each a week, with an average congregation of 110 at every service.

The largest congregation is in Tallinn with 1,151 members. It is cared for by two ministers, three retired ministers, and 22 lay preachers. In 1975 it had an average of over seven services a week, each with an average attendance of almost 500. The church seats only about 500 people. Music is an important part of the worship and a symphony orchestra and several choirs and musical groups (about a dozen choirs and groups altogether) help to maintain this side of the Church's life. (Recently the Methodist Church published a joint hymnbook with the Baptists.) There are two mixed choirs (Estonian and Russian speaking), a male voice choir, a ladies' choir, a chamber music choir, three choirs (one Russian) using national instruments, a trumpet group, and two modern music groups (one Russian). In every service one of the pastors and one or two laymen preach. Members also give testimonies. Services usually last one and a half to two hours. On Sundays some 600 or 700 people attend, and on festivals 800 to 900.

Before the war, in 1940, there were two Methodist churches in Tallinn, with fewer than 300 adult members. The large church building with 1,000 seats was destroyed in the war, and both congregations met in the small chapel with 150 seats. The usual attendance was only 40-60 people. The small group began to pray for revival. After the first campaign, membership rose to 170 by the end of 1945. In 1950 another church building with 500 seats was made available. After another prayer campaign, the number of members at the end of 1953 was more than

300. By the end of 1962 after a third campaign the number of members grew to 1,000. This number included a small group of Pentecostalists who had united with the Methodists.

The other Methodist Churches in Eastern Europe are in the Central and Southern Europe Area, under the leadership of Bishop Franz Schaefer (Zurich). All of them are small.

The Methodist Churches in Hungary and Yugoslavia began with German Methodists, whereas the Churches in Czechoslovakia and Poland stem from relief work done by American Methodists at the end of the First World War. (The work in Germany has a longer history: in East Germany it was promoted by Erhard Wunderlich who returned from America in 1850.)

In Czechoslovakia the Methodist Church has 1,624 full members, with a community of almost 5,000. There are 19 ministers (and four retired ministers), with seven students at the Comenius and Hus faculties in Prague, and four students studying while serving in congregations. As in the other churches in Czechoslovakia the ministers receive a modest salary from the State. The Church's 42 preaching places are grouped in 19 circuits.

The Methodist Church in Hungary has a community of 2,000 to 3,000, not all of whom are members. There are seven ministers and 17 lay preachers. Three students are preparing for the ordained ministry and six for lay ministry. The Church shares theological education with the Free Churches. The institute which they have uses correspondence courses and residential week-ends. Its final examination and diploma are given by the Reformed Theological College in Debrecen. It has altogether 80 students, who study for five years. In the last year or so there has been an internal crisis in the Church in Hungary, about which conflicting reports circulate in the West.*

The Polish Methodist Church has over 4,000 members and a community of about 6,000, with 29 ministers, one of whom is retired, and 16 theological students. An important aspect of the Church's work is the English Language College in Warsaw, which has about 5,000 students. The Deputy Superintendent is principal. At the time of the Church's recent jubilee the Methodist Conference decided to celebrate its jubilee by engaging in a mission.

Yugoslavia has 3,500 members in a church community of 5,000. There are 13 active ministers, an increase of five in the last seven years. The work is concentrated in two areas – in the North and in the South (Macedonia). The Church was particularly active among German settlers in the North, but they were compelled to leave at the end of the Second World War. The Church in Macedonia has been strengthened in life and members by a recent revival.

A number of features are common to most, if not all, of these Churches.

* RCL hopes to publish some of the facts about this crisis in a future issue. Ed.

1. They are minority Churches, indeed very small minority Churches. In several cases, however, they have produced a quality of leadership out of all proportion to their size. Dr. Witold Benedyctowicz (Poland) and Dr. Vilem Schneeberger (Czechoslovakia) are two notable examples – and they are not the only ones. Dr. Benedyctowicz is not only General Superintendent of the Church, he is also President of the Polish Ecumenical Council and Professor of Theology at the Christian Academy, as well as a leading member of the Christian Peace Conference and the Division of International Affairs of the WCC.

2. They have the strength (as well as the weakness) of a traditional piety, but this has not prevented in some cases a wider social involvement. The English Language College in Warsaw is the most striking example.

3. Because they are Methodist Churches :

(a) authority resides in the Annual Conference, or it may be with the Central or General Conference, and not with the congregation. (For example, the stationing of ministers or the ownership of church property rests with the Conference.)

(b) they seek to understand themselves in the light of the Methodist tradition. (It is significant that Dr. Schneeberger entitled his thesis "The Theological Roots of John Wesley's Social Accent"; 3,500 copies of an abridged Czech translation of Wesley's Journal were sold before publication.)

(c) They have international links as a matter of the Church's constitution. The State often requires them to have a national identity and independence, but – in some cases publicly – recognizes that they have an international dimension, of which the role of the bishop is a sign.

4. Theological education varies from one country to another. Not all have theological colleges. Yugoslavia, for example, has no theological college* of its own, and some of its students have studied for a period abroad, both in England and West Germany.

5. Ecumenical relations are generally much less developed than in Western Europe. Indeed the Free Churches in continental Europe as a whole have in the past been treated with more disdain than in England. Their smaller size and shorter history have contributed to this. Bible translation, however, is one sphere where Churches have often worked together. In Yugoslavia there is some co-operation with the Orthodox Church in the Macedonian translation. In Poland a Methodist is chairman of the group responsible for translating the New Testament.

* A new theological seminary for the Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal Churches was due to start in November 1976 in Zagreb. According to a report in AKSA (the Yugoslav Catholic weekly) of 25 June 1976 the seminary was to be called after the Reformation theologian, Matija Vlačić. Ed.