

WHEN WILL THE CROATIAN SPLIT END?

By Bill Yoder

The tiny Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Croatia has been split since the formation of a second synod in February 1996. Since then, the old church leadership has been headquartered in Zagreb, the new in Legrad 50 miles northeast of the capital.

The dark cloud hovering over this church is especially obvious in the resort spa of Opatija on the Dalmatian coast. The 25-member congregation has been locked out of its chapel by court order since March. Even Aldo Poscic, the church caretaker whose family has overseen the property since 1933, has no access. The rare services still held within the building are organized by phone from Zagreb headquarters. No local oldtimers are invited.

In Opatija, the misuse of humanitarian aid as payment for loyalty can be documented. A receipt from June 1, 1997 shows that Andrija Luksa, a pastor from Zagreb, divided 1,500 kuna (\$238) - and humanitarian goods - among the five persons who attended the service that day and had signed on as members. The oldtimers in Opatija have received nothing in recent years.

On February 5 of this year, over 50 unopened sacks of tightly-packed, chemically-cleaned clothing marked "Lutheran World Relief" were discovered on a garbage dump near Zagreb. Canned food was nearby. These items stemmed from Zagreb church offices, the total discovery weighed roughly 2,200 kilos (4,840 US pounds). Rev. Matija Deutsch, the son of the senior (or bishop), Vlado Deutsch, explained that these items had been donated 40 years ago when the previous senior, Edgar Popp, was still in office. But this claim is angrily refuted by Popp. In addition, 900 kilos of flour (1,980 pounds) had been dumped in 1994. Obviously, Zagreb offices did not distribute all humanitarian aid promptly.

The legal anarchy prevalent within the Zagreb-run church can also be documented in Opatija. Ana Poscic, the wife of Aldo, was appointed to its newly-founded synod in March 1996 for a six-year period. But she was soon no longer invited to attend. When she questioned Vlado Deutsch on July 25, 1997, he responded: "I select the members of the synod and I remove them when they are no longer useful to me." Critics are quickly stricken from the rolls and synod. This is one reason why the Zagreb congregation, which listed 1,072 members in 1960, now has roughly 100 members.

The current church constitution of 1951 was unearthed by a Norwegian pastor four years ago. It states that the senior can only be elected to six-year terms. The

Legrad-based synod therefore concludes that Deutsch, initially installed in 1960, has not legally been senior since 1966.

Accusations of financial impropriety abound. Legal measures have kept Deutsch from selling a church in Podravska Slatina and a care center purchased with Austrian church funds in Velika Gorica. Yet he did succeed in selling the massive Lutheran church of Sarajevo in 1969. The final destination of the roughly \$1.17 Mio. profits from that sale remains unclear. Only a fraction of the 40,000 German marks donated for restoration work in Opatija were spent there. Deutsch prefers cash transactions: The 120,000 German marks (\$68,000) intended for the war-damaged chapel in Osijek were transported from Zagreb in cash. Yet claims that Rev. Deutsch has become a millionaire through the misappropriation of funds remain unproven.

In addition, claims circulate that Deutsch has been co-responsible for government measures taken against pastors before and since communist rule. Is Deutsch accountable for the arrest of Istvan Csepány, a Lutheran pastor in the Serb-held Vojvodina? Csepány died in the 1970s after his release from seven years of imprisonment. Clearly, Vlado Deutsch's name can only be cleared by a thorough investigation of church archives. Yet there is no indication that such an undertaking is possible.

Vlado Deutsch is becoming increasingly isolated. The synod headed by Senior Marijan Sporcic of Legrad presently has 1,920 members in 13 congregations. Deutsch can count on only two congregations: Zagreb and one in the village of Antunovac. Membership loyal to Deutsch's synod numbers less than 150. Deutsch is alienated from the Reformed Church of Croatia and the neighboring ethnic-Slovak Lutheran church in the Vojvodina (northern Serbia). The Croatian state no longer accepts the Zagreb church as the sole legitimate Lutheran denomination. The 69-year-old Deutsch has no successor acceptable to the other synod. Son Matija and Branko Beric, a longtime communist party functionary who became a Lutheran in 1993, boast only several supporters. All international Lutheran agencies active in Croatia now agree that Vlado Deutsch must retire, yet the way to engineer an honorable departure remains unclear.

In any case, hard questions can also be directed at supporting agencies such as the Lutheran World Federation and Germany's "Gustav-Adolf-Werk". In its 25-year existence, Zagreb's Lutheran seminary has permitted less than 10 students to graduate. Only two of them are Croatian citizens: Matija Deutsch and Marijan Sporcic. Why has this not been a cause for donor concern? Foreign funding for the faculty and Zagreb headquarters was not suspended until 1997.

Undoubtedly, the lenient stance on financial accountability was long driven by the legitimate desire to respect the autonomy of the national church. Yet a financially-dependent church cannot be truly autonomous. Channelling all foreign

financial support through the central office in Zagreb, as well as the recent practice of bypassing Zagreb and making payments directly to needy local congregations, dramatically affected the balance of power in the national church.

Reiner Rinne from Evangelical Church in Germany headquarters in Hannover assures: "It is our job to foster the unity of the church, not its division. We do not want to place ourselves in the role of judge." Yet only foreign church agencies pack the wallop to invoke significant change in Zagreb. The founding of an alternative synod may have been the sole means for critics to restrain the one-family rule of a small church cut loose from its constitutional moorings. Edgar Popp, Senior of the Croatian church until 1960, demands: "The LWF must drop recognition of Deutsch. As soon as that occurs, he will also be dropped by the Croatian government."