

A Report on the „Gründungsfest“ (Celebration of the Founding) of the new „North Church“ in Germany

By the Rev. Bill Rauch, chair, the Mecklenburg Task Force of the Southern Ohio Synod

The Event: On May 27th, I represented the Southern Ohio Synod, its Mecklenburg Task Force, and Bishop Holloway at the ceremonies celebrating the “fusion” of three previously autonomous regional Lutheran church bodies in northern Germany. One of constituting churches was the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg, with which the Southern Ohio Synod has been in partnership for over 20 years. The new united church stretches all the way across the northern part of Germany—from the North Sea to the border with Poland.



“Setting Sail Together” ~ The theme of the event was *Wir setzen Segel* (we’re setting sail), a very symbolic premise for an area of Germany that was once the center of the Hanseatic League and which has always been strongly maritime. The celebration took place in the city of Ratzeburg, situated on an island in the middle of a beautiful lake. The whole town gave itself over to a weekend full of festivities. The main event appropriately took place on Pentecost Sunday and centered on the town’s 850 year old Romanesque cathedral.



America, and the Roman Catholic Church. The service itself was a potpourri of traditional and contemporary church music and included two brief sermons by bishops (one from the west and one from the east). At one point the collective bishops of the

For the service, which was televised nationally throughout Germany, I was seated with guests from partnerships previously developed by all three uniting bodies. I sat beside a Lutheran bishop from Denmark and nearby were representatives from partner Lutheran churches around the world: Sweden, Romania, Poland, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil, and Papua-New Guinea. There were also ecumenical guests from the Church of England, the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the United Church of Christ in

new church stood facing the congregation and solemnly declared the onset of the “fusion.” This was followed by three dancers gliding down the main aisle, each carrying a sail. In front of the altar the dancers wove the sails together with in and out movements symbolizing the union.

The Big Name ~ The most eminent guest inside the cathedral was the newly elected President of Germany, Joachim Gauck. (In Germany the president acts as the head of state for ceremonial and constitutional purposes, while actual political authority is in the hands of the chancellor.) Even though the so-called “fusion ceremony” was in itself a major national religious event, President Gauck had been specifically invited because, previous to his political career, he had been a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg. Gauck, speaking to the assembled congregation, pointed out that the three uniting church bodies had had decidedly divergent experiences over the last 60 years. The Mecklenburg and Pomeranian churches had suffered through 40 years of repression under the East German Marxist regime, while the North Elbian church had been free to function in the West. Gauck, however, urged the new church to look to the future and not to dwell on any differences coming out of the past. Noting that the creation of this new church body was happening on the traditional birthday of the Christian church, he remarked: “On Pentecost the disciples didn’t continue to dream about the good old days in Galilee...instead they looked ahead into the future and out to the world at large...to a greater community of faith.” After these remarks, one of the leaders of the event briefly responded to Gauck, by saying, “once a pastor, always a pastor!”



The Ratzeburg Mahlzeit ~ While the cathedral accommodated only some 800 of us, thousands more watched the service as it was televised outside on a huge screen. When the events inside the cathedral ended, we came out to take our places with the others at the 650 tables placed around the perimeter of the church building for a literal feeding of the 5,000! It was a simple meal of German bread, bratwurst, cheese, and strawberries. While satisfying the need for a noontime meal, it was also intended symbolically to be “the family dinner” of people representing the over 1,000 congregations of the new church body.

Sixty Venues ~ After the meal, we strolled through the streets of Ratzeburg where 60 tents showcased, among other things, the work and makeup of the 13 “Kirchenkreisen” (synods) of the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in North Germany, now nicknamed “the North Church” (Nordkirche).

Previously, we in the Southern Ohio Synod described our Mecklenburg partnership as a “synod-to-synod” relationship, but that was never quite accurate, because the Mecklenburg church was previously an independent body within the Lutheran World Federation. But now the relationship is actually akin to a synod-to-synod connection. Additionally, the 60 tents also showcased various social ministry agencies of the new church, together with the work of its educational institutions and a number of volunteer organizations. Along the route we encountered outdoor concerts by various choirs and other groups, including a brass band performing in a watercraft being rowed along the shoreline of the island. The day came to a close with a major outdoor concert of gospel/soul/blues/rock music.

On a Personal Note ~ Serving as the chair of our synod’s Mecklenburg Task Force, I have felt it ironic that my own German heritage was limited to areas farther south in Germany—Hesse and Thuringia—and seemingly having no connection to the northern parts of that country. However, just prior to leaving for Ratzeburg, a genealogist in my family informed me that I am directly related to Henry the Lion, a 12th century mover and shaker, who founded the Ratzeburg Cathedral and was also the founder of the city of Schwerin, which is the capital of the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Wow! Learning that didn’t appreciably alter my already strong commitment to the Mecklenburg-Southern Ohio Synod partnership, but it did help me feel more at home while I was there.

