
In view of the dearth of material in English about church life in the Baltic States, this informative and well produced volume is especially welcome. It marks the twentieth anniversary of the Estonian Council of Churches, and has been published in partnership with the theological faculty of the University of Tartu.

This pioneering study of ecumenical activities in Estonia reaches back to the early twentieth century. Much of its interest lies in analysing the background circumstances that led to the current cooperation between Christian denominations. All contributors to this project are Estonian, and are academically well qualified. Their material has been ably translated into readable, idiomatic English. The text is supported by potted biographies of 100 leading personalities; 168 black-and-white photographs; a detailed chronology of the Estonian Council of Churches; and comprehensive indexes of names, sources and literature – very careful and competent work! A map showing place-names would have been useful.

The introduction locates this study in the context of world-wide ecumenism, and describes the process used for its compilation. With admirably clarity Part I (pages 21-105) traces the story of Estonian church life from the end of the Russian empire up to World War II. The 1920s were a decade of confusion and self-examination as the churches found their place in a changed society. Some left-wing politicians wanted to fragment the churches’ influence, but the so-called ‘years of silence’ in the 1930s actually brought the churches more financial support coupled with more state control. During this first period of independence new national structures had to be devised by all denominations as they struggled for their own identity and contended with strong internal conflicts. These tensions are candidly described. Ensuing chapters deal separately with the ecumenical relations of the Lutheran, Orthodox and Free Churches (Roman Catholics were then only a tiny minority mostly of Poles and Lithuanians). For non-Estonian readers more could have been said about the reasons for Lutheran dominance, deriving from both the former Swedish empire and the German Baltic nobility.

Of particular interest to Anglican readers are the conversations with the Church of England in 1936-38. I was astonished to discover how far the
Estonian Orthodox Church, too, was keen on closer Anglican links – even to asking the Church of England to become their mother church and the Archbishop of Canterbury to consecrate a replacement for the first Estonian Orthodox bishop who had been murdered by the Red Army! Though these approaches came to nothing, they indicated similarities in ecclesiology. The Free Churches, however, had very different understandings of ecclesiology, mission and worship, and efforts towards merger made little headway. Part I concludes with this apt comment: ‘The ecumenical movement was understood in Estonia before the Second World War as a process of recognising similar religious traditions, not as a task of learning from different religious traditions.’

Part II (pages 109-225) covers the period of Estonia’s illegal occupation from 1940 to 1989 – first by Nazi Germany, then by Russia – and follows a similar historical approach. Distinct phases reflected changes of Soviet policy towards the churches. The appalling pressures, especially under Stalin and Kruschev, on church members, on clergy in particular, and on church finance and property, are documented with factual objectivity and moderation. Church membership was seriously weakened by the losses through murder, arrest, forced deportation and escape into exile. It is left to the reader's imagination to appreciate the heavy human cost and the heroism of many Christians during this period of attrition. Their leaders had to stick to Soviet rules of political correctness, and were unable to speak freely.

Again, separate chapters tell the story of what happened to each denomination. Some Lutherans managed to keep abreast of the wider ecumenical movement, and the Church in Exile acted as guardians of continuity. The supportive role of the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Lutheran World Federation is acknowledged. The Orthodox, at one time encouraged by Moscow to suspect the ecumenical movement as a ‘trap set by the Protestant majority and a means of socio-political leverage’, later enjoyed a golden era of co-operation under Bishop Alexiy from 1961 to 1989. Four different Free Churches merged under an umbrella body – the ‘All Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists’ – and some ground-breaking work was achieved through youth evangelism and music groups.

The liveliest chapter is that on building up so-called ‘friendship circles’ across denominational barriers (pages 194-225). Based on 17 narrative interviews and 31 biographical memoirs, this chapter examines oral evidence of