

# Daniel S. Johnson

## – Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστος Воскрес!

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Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org

### Lutheranism in Lithuania – a brief history

Did you know that Lutherans have a significant presence in Lithuania? Permit me to share a little history.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Lithuania was understood in two ethnic and geopolitical terms. There was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which consisted of the territories of present eastern Lithuania—but also including modern-day Belarus and Ukraine. There was also the region known as Lithuania Minor, which comprised the territories occupied by ethnic Lithuanians in the lands of East Prussia.

Since the Grand Duchy was under Polish influence, the spread of Lutheranism was banned in his region of “major” Lithuania until after the death of the Polish king. It was only after his death in 1548 that the establishment of Lutheran congregations was permitted. The first Lutheran church in the Grand Duchy was in Vilnius, which dates back to 1555 and today is the episcopal congregation (where the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania serves). The second Lutheran congregation to appear in Lithuanian territory was established in Kaunas in 1558. Most of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Lutherans living in the Grand Duchy territories were not ethnic Lithuanians who spoke the Lithuanian language but rather were of German heritage.

However, in East Prussia—Lithuania Minor—Lutheranism was welcome. “Minor” Lithuania was among the earliest countries to embrace Lutheranism. Shortly after Luther posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517, Lutherans were already settling in Lithuanian territory. By 1525 the Lutheran Church had become a recognized church in Prussian Lithuania. The Lutheran Church became an authentic and culturally Lithuanian church. It was in Prussian Lithuania that a written language developed, with its own dictionary, grammar, and Bible. The first book written in the Lithuanian language, in 1547, was Luther’s Small Catechism.

It was not until the end of World War I that “major,” and parts of “minor,” Lithuania were joined under a single governor. During this merger, **continued on next page**



For more information on the ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania, see:

<http://www.liuteronai.lt/eng>

Church officials from the Lithuanian, Latvian and Siberian Lutheran churches frequently visit the United States. If you wish to invite one of these church officials to visit your congregation, please contact me at:

[Daniel.johnson@lcmsintl.org](mailto:Daniel.johnson@lcmsintl.org)

Rev. Dr. Darius Petkunas of Palanga, Lithuania has published a book: [The Repression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania during the Stalinist Era](#). It is recommend reading for those interested in Lithuanian history.

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**Church in Priekule which was torn down by the Soviets in the 1950s**





### Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Please pray for the Lutherans in Lithuania and those who proclaim the incarnation of Jesus during this Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Pray that the preached Word is heard and believed.

As winter approaches the risk of travel increases. Many Lithuanian pastors serve multiple congregation parishes. Pray for safe travel as these dedicated clergy travel to provide care for their parishioners. Also, pray for the laity as they travel to attend liturgy.

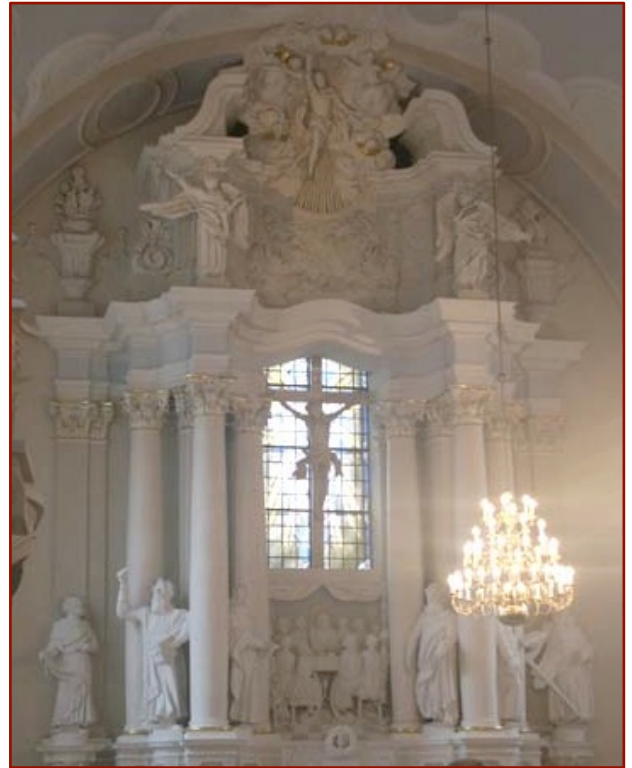
During winter months heating bills escalate. Many Lithuanian congregations cannot afford to heat their buildings. Pray that such conditions do not deter worshippers from attending liturgy.

Pray for the Lithuanian catechumens as they learn the Christian vocation.

Lutherans in Lithuanian lands made up approximately 10 percent of the population—a diverse ethnic populous consisting of primarily Germans, Lithuanians, and Latvians.

In 1941, ethnic Germans were forced to repatriate, and many ethnically Lithuanian Lutherans followed. In 1944, when the German armies were retreating from the advancing Russian troops, many people of Memelland (former areas of Prussian Lithuania) left with them. During World War II the Lutheran Church in Lithuania was decimated. Of the 212,000 Lutherans living in Lithuania in 1941, only 10 percent remained in 1944.

Today the Lutherans are the third largest Christian confession in Lithuania, at about 1 percent of the population. Among the 3.2 million people living in modern Lithuania, Lutherans are outnumbered by Roman Catholics (79 percent of the population) and Russian Orthodox (4.9 percent of the population). The Reformed Church consists of only a handful of congregations.



**The Chancel of the Vilnius Lutheran Church where the bishop serves**



The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania has 21,000 members, 52 congregations, and 15 pastors. Rev. Charles Evanson serves as the theological educator, providing theological and pastoral instruction to the church. My work will involve pastoral and catechetical training among the clergy and laity, under the direction of Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis and Rev. Evanson. ✘ --DSJ



To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to:

**The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
P.O. Box 790089  
St. Louis, MO 63179-0089.**

**Make checks payable to “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “ Write “Support of Rev. Daniel S. Johnson” on the memo line. Gifts can also be given securely online through the LCMS website, on my online giving page at [www.lcms.org/Johnson](http://www.lcms.org/Johnson).**