

**ST PETER'S ESTONIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF
TORONTO
OVERVIEW OF 2019 AND 2020**

For many years now, I have provided a statistical overview of the past financial year, as was the case in last year's „Eesti Elu“ newspaper Christmas insert, where I wrote about 2018 statistics. As the 2020 year has not yet come to a close, I cannot report on 2020 statistics, however 2020 being the year that it is, I cannot help but comment on certain events all the while providing you with an overview of 2019 along with a comparison to 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has put our faith and sustainability as a congregation to the test. Although certain things will have changed forever, I am thankful that the foundations we hold dear stand the test of time. Each challenge presents us with opportunities. Let us now have a look at our recent past as a whole, from both a negative and positive perspective.

In 2019, 252 households made donations to the church

This is a drop of 94 households from the year prior and the biggest decrease in the past seven years. There were 1,466 members in the register, representing 923 households. Thus, under 1/3 of our members donate to the church. At first glance, this may appear depressing. We continue to hear the same message – our membership is ageing and decreasing in numbers. Why? Because this is the situation in our community in general. Our congregation exists within the community and its trends mirror those of our community. If we take a wider view of our donation statistics, the story becomes clear.

In actual fact, we should be proud that our congregation has lasted over 70 years. We remain the largest Estonian Lutheran congregation in the diaspora. The fact that almost a 1/3 of our membership donate to the church is a problem many other congregations would be happy to have. If we take a narrower view of our statistics over the past 10 years, we see that 10 years ago, we had 577 donor households. During the past 10 years we have had 39 christenings, 61 confirmations, 20 marriages, and 514 deaths.

Considering this, the fact that we had 252 donor households at the end of 2019 is not a bad result, particularly put in the context of our community as a whole. There is growing secularization in the world. Active membership is minimal. How many of our members who were confirmed between 1970 and 1990 donate to the church? How many have been raised with the custom of attending church services? In the ten years I have been here, I can put a name to the faces I see on a regular basis and can count them on both hands. Naturally, some services have more participation and the Christmas Eve congregation is something else entirely.

Please do not take this as a personal affront. I am certain every family has done their very best to pass on traditions of love, culture and faith. There are many subjective and objective reasons for not attending church - long distances, other commitments, poor health, bad weather, etc.

That said, this downward trend directly impacts our financial situation. During the past 10 years to simply manage church upkeep, we have had to rely on the savings put aside from our more prosperous years. The sad truth is that regrettably, the beautiful building we hold dear has become too large for our purposes and too expensive to maintain.

The status of our active membership list will become clear after the year closes. We do know that as of December 7th, 2020, 120 families had made donations to the church. Whether or not we reach 150 donating households by year end is still unknown. Many of the 48 people we remembered at the Day of Remembrance service on November 29th were active members. I fear last year's number of 252 is highly optimistic. This is our reality.

But optimism is not lost. Recently, a group of volunteers formed an Ad Hoc committee to preserve the church and published an article in „Eesti Elu“ calling for our community to donate to save the church. This is a very moving gesture. It would be wonderful if such a drive were to result in sufficient income to keep our finances in the black for many years. This would mean however, that in addition to the 120

families who have already donated this year, another 600 families would need to donate an average of \$300 on a regular basis. The sad fact is that the generation who viewed donating as a sacrifice has long passed on. The difference between sacrifice and donations is that sacrifices are made in the name of God. Donations are made from the desire to do good. Churches exist in the name of faith in God.

Sunday services are the backbone of our church, around which other activities take place. In other words, everything begins with the altar – from the gospel and from the holy sacraments. When attending services ceases, sooner or later the bonds that tie us to the church are weakened and our Sundays are filled with other activities.

This is the reason why church constitutions and by-laws as a rule consider voting members to be those who both contribute financially to the church and who partake in Holy Communion at least once a year.

We all know it is possible to contribute financially without coming to church. Partaking of Holy Communion however means that one must be physically present. If attending church is not expedient, a Pastor, myself included, will come to a parishioner's home or hospital bed to serve communion. Just make a call.

In 2019, St. Peter's Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Toronto hosted 84 church services: 51 within the sanctuary, 26 of which offered Holy Communion; 3 at various cemeteries; 20 at Ehatare, of which some were bible study; 9 at Suomi Koti; and 1 at Eesti Kodu.

Attendance at regular Sunday services was relatively stable. Average attendance for the entire year was 27 parishioners. At first glance, this appears to be very low. Considering this represents more than 10% of our donating households, I consider this to be a positive result. And certainly the number of people who attended Christmas services outweighed the number who made donations. Thus, attendance at services is completely in line with our active membership.

Supporting this is another statistic – the total attendance figure. There were 1,398 instances of attendance at the church during 2019 for all services combined. Attendance at services outside of the church (Ehatare, cemetery services, funerals etc.) was even greater with 1,494 instances. In total, 2,892 instances were recorded in 2019 with fewer than 50% occurring within the sanctuary itself, which housed 51 services, 2 christenings and 3 funerals.

Services in 2020 have been very different.

To date, very few in-person services have been able to be held. Regularly scheduled services at the church itself, Ehatare, and Suomi Koti were possible only in January and February of this year. From March 15 to June 27, COVID-19 regulations prohibited all services to be held, whether at the church or elsewhere. From June 28th to date, we have been able to hold services with limited attendance and only two services have been possible at Ehatare. In total, there have been 43 services in 2020: 17 before the pandemic hit and 26 after. The doors were closed fully for three months.

While services have been held on a limited basis, all fellowship activities have been prohibited. The Ladies Guild and Vocal Ensemble have not gathered since March and Confirmation classes ceased. Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Mother's Day services were cancelled – all significant events in our church. Cemeteries were closed and our traditional June cemetery service could not be held and special permission had to be obtained to allow a pre-recorded service held by me and Reverend Kalle Kadakas to be recorded, that was later shared on social media. Christmas is around the corner and all signs are that the restrictions will not be lifted. The impact this will have on our future church services remains to be seen.

Technology is a blessing. COVID-19 has spurred us on into the land of the internet. We have our own Facebook group, „St. Peter's Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Toronto“, where many video prayer services and a few full services like the aforementioned Cemetery service are uploaded. The prayer services are recorded with a smartphone, but the full services are professionally videotaped. What is interesting is that the viewership of these services far exceeds

regular church service attendance. For example, the Trinity Sunday recording was viewed by 97 people, whereas 12 people attended in-person at the same service in 2019. The Cemetery Service was attended by 20-30 people in 2019, but 104 views of the video-taped service were counted. Between 55-120 people view the services posted to Facebook, compared to the average attendance of 27 mentioned earlier.

We can conclude that even when the pandemic has ended, there will be a need to record all services to be made available to those who are unable to attend services in person.

From the second week of the shutdown „Eesti Elu“ made space available for a weekly spiritual reflection column and an ecumenical working group was formed whereby I, Jüri Puusaag, Kalle Kadakas, Algur Kaerma and Timo Lige took turns writing Sunday-themed meditations. I would like to express my sincere thanks to them and to Chief Editor Kai Kiillaspea for their cooperation that allowed us to reach out and provide some form of spiritual support to many readers.

When one door closes, another opens. This pandemic year has caused many congregations to find new ways to spread the message, just as all of us have had to find new ways to cope with the restrictions placed on us. We will carry some of our learnings in to the future.

The celebration of spiritual life-events has been quite different.

In 2019, we christened 4 children, confirmed 2 youth, married 3 couples and buried 38 members. The start of 2020 was promising. 10 youth were preparing to be confirmed, several families were planning on christening their children and 2 couples expressed interested in marrying. The pandemic put all of these events on hold. Initially until the summer, and then until 2021. Only death waits for no one. In 2020, 49 of our members have departed. The pandemic has impacted funerals such that only close family are permitted and wakes have been all but eliminated.

It has been difficult for our community to not be able to mourn our departed. When COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted,

consideration should be given to a larger service allowing the community to commemorate those we were unable to mourn. Some events are just not possible to celebrate virtually: love, birth and death being examples of those.

The administrative life of the church does not stop. The congregation has a constitutional obligation to hold an annual general meeting and the Board must meet its legal obligations.

In 2019, we were able to hold two assembly meetings, two council meetings and monthly board meetings. Early in 2020 the planning for the annual assembly meeting was in full gear and Council had met to determine the date. After the first wave of the pandemic had passed, Council met again and determined September 27th would be the best date, which was thankfully before the onset of the second wave.

The meeting on September 27, 2020 was historic for a three reasons. Firstly, it was the first meeting that was attended virtually by almost 50% of the participants. Secondly, the assembly voted to accept a new Constitution and By-Laws that reflects the guidelines of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) as well as our membership in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Estonia (EELK). This document sets the stage for any future mergers with other Estonian congregations in Canada, all of whom belong to the ELCIC.

Thirdly, the assembly voted to allow the Board to search for possible buyers of the church property thus preserving the congregation for as long as it is needed.

As our Board shared information both before and after this momentous decision, I will not focus on this topic at this time, except to report that ELCIC has accepted the Constitution and By-Laws as passed and we are in the process of finalizing the remaining requirements to complete our acceptance into the ELCIC, which should happen in the new year.

The Board is working to fulfil the assembly vote to solicit a purchaser for our property. It is also considering suggestions that the sale may be postponed for a few years. Several meetings have been held with specialists in their field of expertise and the discussions will continue into the new year. Much will depend on the shape of our congregation and community once the pandemic has lifted.

In summary, despite its trials, 2020 has been both a busy and blessed year. We have been able to reach out to more of our members than ever before and spread the word of God through both social and paper media and our Council members have been actively involved in contacting our members on several occasions. This has helped to maintain spiritual ties when attending church services has been difficult or even impossible.

May we let this year end with feelings of peace and thanks. Time is in God's hands and may we greet the new year with hope. May the Lord's blessings be with us all.

Dean Mart Salumäe
December 2020, Toronto