

Historic U.S. Slovak church celebrates **100 years** through partnership with CBF field personnel

By Blake Tommey

Poplar Springs Baptist Church does not exactly act its age. As the first Slovak church in Virginia, Poplar Springs celebrated a monumental centennial this year in a 4-year-old sanctuary. Instead of singing “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” late-service worshippers belt out folk music hits at a summer service for boaters on the James River. Rather than tending to prized antiques from another age, Poplar Springs Baptist tends to the hearts of church members as well as those who do not yet feel at home in the congregation. And as its steeple peaks over the hills just southeast of Richmond, the church gleams as a symbol of new life, not tired customs.



From top, left to right,
Poplar Springs 1914
sanctuary; 1932 sanctuary;
1951 sanctuary; 1913
congregation at Ukrop Farm



PHOTOS COURTESY OF POPLAR SPRINGS BAPTIST CHURCH

Poplar Springs Baptist Church, the first Slovak church in Virginia, celebrated its 100th anniversary with a group photo outside of the church's new sanctuary.

So what do 100 years mean to Poplar Springs Baptist Church in 2013? They mean heritage, not just history.

“At our centennial, we didn’t just celebrate our history; we celebrated our heritage,” said Stephen Crane, pastor of Poplar Springs. “That heritage isn’t just Slovakia, but rather Christians from Slovakia, who founded this church with the hope of the gospel and a heart that beats for the needs of its community. So when we mark 100 years, we not only celebrate the years themselves, but we celebrate a heartbeat for reaching people with the good news of Jesus.”

At the church’s beginning, several Slovak families from Czechoslovakia moved from Pennsylvania to Virginia. In their desire to continue Sunday worship, they held services in the homes of the Stefan Ukrop family, the Juraj Ukrop family and the Jan Chudy family. By 1913, the group officially

became the First Slovak Baptist Church, with 26 charter members.

With the support of the Virginia Baptist State Mission Board, they began ministry in the local community through outdoor recreation and worship. By the 1940s, the church began holding evangelistic meetings not only for the Slovak community but for people of all ethnicities, and used English for the first time in worship.

In the early 1950s, the church changed its name to Poplar Springs Baptist Church as it sought further relevance to non-Slovak peoples in the Richmond area. By the turn of the 21st century, the church had seen the addition of a renovated auditorium, the Preschool Education Building and finally the Christian Life Center, in which the church holds a recreation ministry.

But in 2004, the congregation experienced what many call both “the worst day and the best day” in the life of

the church, as the sanctuary was burned and destroyed by arson. The “worst day” entailed immense pain and grieving over the loss of a cherished worship space, Crane says, but the “best day” saw brand new life rise from the ashes.

“Poplar Springs is a 100-year-old church but it doesn’t act like one,” Crane said. “There’s no museum to maintain or prop up anymore. The fire may have destroyed a building, but it re-birthed a church with a renewed mission to bring the hope of the gospel to its community. When you burn a forest, you only set the stage for new growth to break out, and that day saw the beginning of a new chapter in the church’s long history of rebirth.”

The church celebrated the completion of its new sanctuary in April 2009, with a special morning worship to remember the past joys and sorrows of church members. Diane Korman, granddaughter-in-law to

one of the founding members, as well as coordinator for the church's centennial, believes that, through remembering, the church finds its truest identity.

"Our Slovak heritage means a strong work ethic, a knack for friendship, compassion for all people and a mission to be vital to our community," Korman said. "That mission has been the center of this church for 100 years. It's what led the first generation to embrace the English language. It's what led the second to marry outside of the Slovak ethnicity. It's what led the church to change and grow rather than close its mind. And it's what my four daughters will connect with in the life of this church for years to come."

The most visible expression of their calling to adapt to the needs of the community, according to Korman, is a recreation ministry called The Dock, in which a small group of ministers and laypeople offer a weekly worship service for boaters and skiers on the James River.

On Sundays at 12:30 p.m., from Memorial Day to Labor Day, those passing by on the river are invited to take a break, board a floating dock, sing songs and listen

to a brief message among friends. Some are unchurched, some are hurting, some are Hindu, some are Boy Scouts, some are music lovers, some are Buddhist and some are just curious, Crane points out. But the desire to create faith conversations among the most unlikely church-goers has been the congregation's mission from the start.

"We want to impact people with the reality of Jesus Christ," Crane emphasized. "We want the people in our community to know that God is real, that God's love for them is real and that they can know God in an intimate way through the person of Jesus. The question we must ask is, 'Where can we take the word of God to people who haven't heard, haven't understood or haven't had the opportunity for conversation?' What about those who have always wanted to ask somebody about faith, but haven't found that opportunity? We want to ask those questions with the unchurched as we both listen for the call of Christ to come and follow."

This year, Poplar Springs is coming full circle as they partner with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Virginia (CBFVA) in their 2013-14 focus on missions in Slovakia. In addition to hosting the CBFVA

General Assembly in September, Poplar Springs is also centering its heart and giving on the work of Jon and Tanya Parks, CBF field personnel serving among the Roma people in Košice, Slovakia. Crane says the partnership with CBFVA and field coordinator Rob Fox was a natural move for a church with Slovak roots.

"We're only able to be the presence of Christ in Virginia because immigrants from Slovakia sought freedom and a new life here," Crane said. "Our desire is to return that ministry to those in Slovakia who are seeking the same new life in their own country. We want to provide any encouragement and support possible to Christians, and especially Baptists, there working among the outcast and ethnic minority."

As Poplar Springs Baptist Church marks 100 years, it remembers when its founders were the outcast and ethnic minority in the United States, a memory that remains at the heart of their mission to those in need. As the congregation looks to the future, Poplar Springs hopes to reach a growing population of commuters into Richmond as it seeks to continue the mission and identity the church has always embraced.



Poplar Springs Baptist continues to hold close and express its Slovak heritage. The church is currently partnering with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Virginia, focusing together on missions in Slovakia with CBF field personnel.