

27. Hamlin

Nativity of the Virgin Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The Hamlin area was first settled in 1903 by several families from the village of Ispas in the Carpathian highlands of Bukovyna. By 1910, the pioneering farmers in the district—initially referred to as “North Ispas” to distinguish it from its counterpart across the North Saskatchewan River—formed a congregation that adopted the Nativity of the Virgin Mary as its feast day.

In 1911, homesteader Maftey Malysh donated five acres of land atop a knoll amid rolling hills for an Orthodox church and cemetery. An impressive log structure was built at the site by volunteer laborers under the supervision of congregation member Sydorij Stefiuk. At its inception, the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin had twenty-three members.

The sanctuary followed an abbreviated tripartite plan, omitting the narthex, and was crowned by a small central dome mounted on a large octagonal base. A smaller dome was positioned over the apse, and an enclosed storm porch provided a sheltered entryway. Donated logs were planed on two sides to produce flat interior and exterior walls, and the completed structure was later sheathed with clapboard siding for protection from the elements. Natural light entered through two pairs of windows on each side of the nave and additional windows on the dome and apse. The combination of these elements, along with the church’s picturesque setting, created a visually striking and pleasing structure. A separate clapboard bell tower was also constructed in 1911, fitted with bells donated by Maftey Malysh and Wasyl Luchak.



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Early Pastoral Care and Affiliation

Initially, the congregation was occasionally served by priests from the Russian Orthodox mission. In 1918, Rev. Dr. Lazar Gherman, a Romanian priest with experience among Ukrainians in Bukovyna and Bessarabia, began ministering to the congregation. Fr. Gherman, a former theology lecturer at the University of Chernivtsi, had emigrated to the United States in 1916 to join the Consistory of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, he soon became interested in organizing Romanian Orthodox communities in North America under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Bucharest. Realizing the challenges due to the scattered nature of Romanian settlements, Fr. Gherman shifted his focus to the more numerous and cohesive Ukrainian communities in Canada, many of whom were Bukovynian.

By late 1919, Fr. Gherman was recruited into the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOC), where he was responsible for training the first priests. In 1921, he returned to rural east-central Alberta, celebrating a liturgy in nearby Wahstao and likely visiting the Hamlin congregation. His efforts laid the groundwork for Hamlin's subsequent rejection of Russian Orthodoxy and early affiliation with the UGOC.

During the mid-1920s, Father Ivan Kusey served the spiritual needs of the Hamlin community from his base at St. Peter and Paul Church in Kaleland. On August 21, 1926, Father Kusey transported Rev. Timotei Horbay to Hamlin, where Fr. Horbay was to reside permanently in a home provided by G. Luchak. Although Fr. Horbay was officially ordained a week later in Radway, he had already served six years as a Ukrainian Catholic priest before switching allegiance to the UGOC in 1926.

At Hamlin, Fr. Horbay was paid five dollars per service by the financially constrained yet

generous congregation. Parishioners also took turns transporting him by wagon to the church at Downing, where he received an additional eight dollars for monthly liturgies, and to the railway station at Vilna. With the support of his parishioners, Fr. Horbay expanded his pastoral care to include Orthodox adherents in Glendon, Smoky Lake, Spedden, and Vilna. He later added Flat Lake, Lessard, La Corey, Bellis, Radway, and Egremont to his circuit, significantly extending the UGOC's reach in rural east-central Alberta.

In the spring of 1929, Fr. Horbay relocated to Smoky Lake, leaving the Hamlin district dependent on periodic pastoral visits from priests based in Smoky Lake or Willingdon.

Decline and Resurgence

As rural depopulation began toward the end of the Great Depression, membership at the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church declined. During World War II, six liturgies were celebrated annually, with the congregation comprising fifteen families. By 1946, this number had plummeted to six families and just five a year later. In 1948, only four Sunday services were held, casting doubt on the church's future viability.

However, the situation stabilized, and membership rebounded in the early 1950s. Hamlin residents were again allotted six liturgies per year. In 1955, Reverend Dmytro Luchak, born in Hamlin on October 29, 1923, assumed pastoral duties at the church. His parents, Petro and Anna Luchak, had farmed in the Hamlin area before relocating to Vernon, British Columbia, in 1943.

Fr. Luchak attended Edmonton Normal School for teacher training before enlisting in the Armed Forces. Following his demobilization, he enrolled at St. Andrew's College in Winnipeg, completing his theological studies. Ordained in Vancouver in 1952, he

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was assigned to eight churches in the Willingdon district, with Hamlin added to his responsibilities in 1955. When the Western Diocese attempted to transfer jurisdiction over the church back to the Smoky Lake district in 1956, Hamlin parishioners successfully appealed the decision, remaining within Willingdon's sphere of responsibility.

By 1960, the congregation had grown to twenty-six families with ninety-five adherents, and an additional six families identified as sympathizers. This brief resurgence marked a high point in Hamlin church's history. However, by the mid-1960s, the number of active families had dwindled to six, with only

thirteen paid members. Throughout these fluctuations, long-time congregational secretary Steve Ewaniuk faithfully reported on local developments in correspondence with the Winnipeg Consistory from 1936 to 1965.

Later Years and Present Day

As time progressed, the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church continued to lose long-time supporters. By 1990, only six families maintained the sanctuary, and this number shrank to two families and two individuals by 1994. Although occasional services are still held at the Hamlin church, its prospects for long-term survival appear increasingly bleak.

Priests

Soroka (ROC, 1919–20)
L. Gherman (ROC/EOC, 1918)
A. Peza (ROC, 1921–c.1924)
UGOC: I. Kusey (1924–26)
T. Horbay (1926–32)
I. Mayba (1932–36)
H. Wasyliw (1936–43)
S. Symchych (1943–44)
W. Senishen (1944–48)
A. Chrustawka (1943–48)
M. Fyk (1944–45)
W. Melnychuk (1951–54)
D. Luchak (1955–57)
S. Stolarchuk (1957–63)
I. Hykawy (1963–69)
O. Olekshy (1969–71)
P. Hnatiw (1971–74)
S. Semotiuk (1974–77)
S. Soroka (1980–81)
P. Bodnar (1981–82)
M. Bowa (1982–84)
O. Hudema (1985–87)
J. Puk (1988–94)
J. Lipinski (1995 –)

Location and Feast Day

South of Vilna, east of the Saddle Lake First Nations Reserve, at NE 20-57-13 W4. The church is situated on a small hill between Secondary Highway 652 and the North Saskatchewan River, County of Smoky Lake. *GPS Coordinates: 53.946873, -111.897907* | Celebrate on the “second” feast day of the Virgin Mother of God, September 21.

Founding Members

N. Luchak	P. Goruk
N. Malysh	S. Stefiuk
I. Malysh	G. Dary
G. Luchak	P. Prociuk

Cemetery

Located at the northeast corner of the church property. The earliest recorded burial is that of George Koroluk, who died in 1913.

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