

Equipping Reliable Leaders in
Sound Doctrine
in

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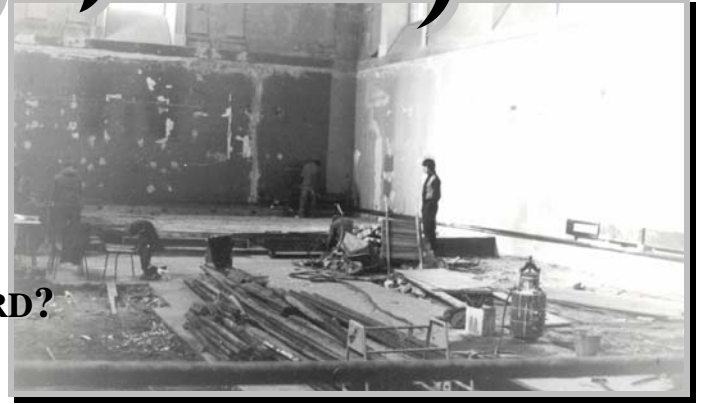
Fall 2007
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Serving Christ by equipping pastors,
teachers and lay leaders in Reformed,
Biblical doctrine in Central and Eastern
Europe and the former Soviet Union

NEWSITEMS



Fall Edition



Vilnius, 1993 - interior of the church building after the communist depression.
Much work needed to go into the reconstruction, much love too.

HOW LONG, O LORD?

By Dr. R. David Ludwick, ITEM
President

How long o Lord?

This is a call from God's people on His Name asking again the same question. His answer is "not long" and yet it seems to be forever. This time the call comes from Lithuania, who, like comrades in adjoining countries, are seeking to pull themselves out of the mores left by three generations of communist depression.

While we were in Vilnius, John Lewis Esquire and I experienced the aftermath of gross injustice, power and greed of oppression and denial. For three generations the communist rule took away, enslaved and destroyed the precious things of life and the legacy of possessions. Homes, farms, even churches were taken and given or sold to others without compensation to their rightful owners. In the 90's, the new constitution was passed and yet personal property was virtually not recoverable. The real property was intended to be returned to its rightful owners. And such is the situation in more than a dozen churches and particularly in the church partnering with ITEM, the Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church Teaching Center, overseen by Rev. Algimantas Kvedaravicius. The denomination of Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania was established in 1547.

Since the mid 90's the Institute and the church sanctuary, as well as the adjoining buildings, classrooms and offices, have been privatized and sold by the government to those who had no legal right to buy or to keep the property. Of the 17 churches in the denomination, most have similar problems. In this instance, there is an additional problem: a seeming imposter has filed documents with the government which appear to be questionable as to truthfulness of their contents – even the procedural mechanical parts of the interloper do not comply with those of the ERCL – they claim to represent

pastor Algimantas' church to the contrary of substantial evidence. The war is fought, but, seldom won, in the trenches, but it seems to be where this imposter has forced us to follow.

We seek to be God's stewards of God's property and we need your help:

1. We need your prayers in general;
2. And we need your prayers that the government officials read and understand the information given to them and act on it appropriately;
3. We need you to write letters addressed to the Lithuanian officials telling them that you join us in good stewardship with brothers and sisters and help with the courses, travel and telephone expenses.

How long, O Lord? Not long!

Dr. R. David Ludwick, August 2007

In this issue of newsletter ITEM is drawing your attention to Lithuania/Latvia in a new partnership in theological education.

Several years ago ITEM, through the good offices of four Latvian men and Dr. and Mrs. Van Groningen, secured the favorable position of the people in the faculty at the State University of Latvia in Riga where the exchange students are permitted to enroll and graduate from it. Changes in EU policy resulted in doing away with the Masters Degree, while retaining only the Bachelor and Doctor Degrees. This was not just another lost opportunity, however. ITEM saw this as a good opportunity to move the program to Lithuania, still remaining a good steward for our investment in the sound theological education in the Baltics.

Surely, gaining of the Masters Degree in Lithuania means that we have accomplished much and next year we can focus in Poland and, in the years to follow, in Ukraine, bringing victory after victory to the Lord's throne and reports of good stewardship to our faithful supporters.

Inside this Issue

- 1 HOW LONG, O LORD?
- 2 SHEEP IN DESPERATE NEED OF INSTRUCTION IN GOD'S WORD
- 3 THE FUTURE OF SPIRITUALITY IN LATVIA
- 4 DISCOVERING THE TREASURES OF THE BIBLE
- 5 IRISH?

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SHEEP IN DESPERATE NEED OF INSTRUCTION IN GOD'S WORD

By John Lewis, Esq., ITEM Professor and elder of Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA)

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." So says Solomon in the first chapter of Proverbs.

The three million Lithuanians who were freed from Soviet domination in the early 1990's are now part of the European Union. The population in major cities such as Vilnius is young, for the most part, and eager to work and earn money for their future. Twenty-first century style materialism has replaced Communism as the overarching framework for the country, and young people are buying attractive clothes, cell phones, televisions and modest homes and new condos. Their lives are filled with activities primarily related to their work and, as a result, there are many dysfunctional families. Satisfying one's immediate personal needs, whether in glittering possessions, or increased power and success, is a strong motivating force for them today, as it was for King Solomon.

Solomon's conclusion from his denying himself nothing his eyes desired was that such materialism was meaningless. [Eccl. 2:10-11].

Who will open the eyes of the Lithuanians and others formerly living under Soviet domination to the truth that to fear God is to gain knowledge and that meaninglessness is the ultimate end of pursuing materialism?

The Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania was a vibrant church of some 15,000 souls worshipping in fourteen churches across Lithuania in the late 1930's. The German invasion, the fighting of World War II, the subsequent occupation of the Soviets and associated dedication to destroy Christianity wherever it could be found, has since scattered the church. Church buildings were tom down, altars and organs destroyed and cemeteries bulldozed with fragments of grave markers used to pave streets.

Pastor Algimantas Kvedaravičius, a brilliant electronics engineer and physicist, who formerly worked on the Soviet space program, faithfully proclaims the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ at the main congregation of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Vilnius. He has rejected a very promising secular career as a leading scientist in order to proclaim God's Word.

In addition to his role as pastor, he has been serving as the General Superintendent of the denomination since June of 2004, and holds many, many responsibilities. He is dedicated to reaching and nurturing the 6,000 or so Lithuanians who have survived the ravages of war and the Soviet occupation and who are still bold enough to say they are believers in the Reformed faith. Most are beyond middle-age and some are elderly, and have modest to few possessions. They have endured much hardship, loneliness and despair. These people are scattered across Lithuania, sheep in desperate need of a shepherd, of instruction in God's word, of pastoral counseling, personal encouragement and prayer.

There are currently seventeen church properties once owned by the Evangelical Reformed Church in the major cities and villages throughout Lithuania. Some are empty lots because the church buildings have been destroyed and most of the other buildings were badly damaged and are only partially usable. Groups of Reformed believers yearn to worship together, but there are only two pastors to serve these groups of believers in these cities. Due to great demands for travel and attention to other church matters, some congregations have formal worship services only once or twice a month.

The Harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few [Luke 10:2].

Praise God with me for Dr. David Ludwick and ITEM who have become actively involved in training lay leaders, equipping the saints here in Lithuania to renew and re-energize the Reformed faith in God's kingdom. Plans are actively in progress to refurbish a large, well constructed building next door to the major church of the denomination in Vilnius. The building has full potential to support formation of a Bible college and seminary. Numerous spacious rooms offer housing for students, faculty and staff offices, classrooms, a library and food preparation areas. Substantial amounts of prayer and financial support are needed to make this a reality. Lithuanians, and the Evangelical Reformed Church, desperately need this teaching. Young pastors, eager to serve the Lord in the fourteen vacant pulpits, and to proclaim the gospel in new churches needed in new areas, must be trained and taught in sound Christian doctrine.

While here for a few short weeks during late July, it was my personal privilege to worship with faithful believers in Kaunas, the former capital of Lithuania, some 60 miles west of Vilnius. The Word of God was preached by Dr. David Ludwick on Peter's encounter with Jesus following his resurrection. After the services, leaders of the church, Dr. Ludwick and I [as an elder of the Covenant Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri] had the privilege

to serve on a commission to examine a young 24 year old man named Jonas Ziauka. He has been trained in biology and awarded a Masters degree, but he has experienced God's having touched his life. ITEM will undertake to train him in the Reformed doctrine, perhaps leading one day to his being a full-time pastor in one of the Reformed churches in Lithuania.

My teaching the book of James and leading a class on Ethics here the past week has been an enormous blessing to me. The students, church leaders and pastors who participated in the classes were eager to study God's word, to grow in their knowledge of Scripture and to fellowship together. We were all challenged to gain wisdom in applying the truths of Scripture to our daily lives. I praise God for the opportunity to serve Him and to help ITEM in this way.

While here during the past week or so, we learned that a very small but powerful group of individuals living in the northern area of Lithuania recently obtained approval from the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice to operate as the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania-Synod, the almost exact same name as the true church which was first established in Lithuania in 1544. We understand these individuals were formerly in high positions of the Lithuanian government during the Soviet occupation and have strong financial backing. They seek to gain legal title to church properties not yet vested in the true church. Because all church properties all across Lithuania were seized and held by the Soviets during their occupation, the formal return of these properties to their rightful owner is still uncertain. A number of the church buildings were destroyed and have become public parks. Some were converted into museums or cinemas, and their return to the true Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania is problematic. Bribery of politicians, government administrators, and judges in the Lithuanian court system is a common problem.

Pray for a mighty outpouring of God's spirit to call young men to the pastorate in Lithuania! Pray for strength and for a vibrant pastor's heart in the two men who faithfully serve under great stress and time demands! Pray for strength and vision for Dr. Ludwick and for resources for ITEM as they build the Bible College and seminary from the ground up!

Above all, pray that Lithuanians will come to understand the fear of the Lord and the meaninglessness of materialism!

Elder John Lewis, July 2007

THE FUTURE OF SPIRITUALITY IN LATVIA

By Andre Bouravnev, M. Div, ITEM Media Director

Overview

Latvia may look small on the map, but its culture is rich and multi-dimensional. The people here are very proud of the way it is. For Latvians, culture is the most efficient way of expressing themselves and ensuring their existence. It does not mean that Latvia lives in the past, cherishing only its history and memories. Latvia is a modern country that values the best past and present have to offer. The capital of Latvia, Riga, is sometimes referred to as 'little Paris.' Riga is a full-fledged European city with fascinating cultural life, high educational standards and thoughtful spirituality. Since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Latvia has made great progress in reforming its government and economy.

Latvian people, officially known as the Letts, first inhabited the Latvian region in the 9th century A.D. During the 13th century the Germans reached Latvia and began Christian conversions. From the 1200's to the 1600's, parts of Latvia were controlled by the Order of Teutonic Knights, Poland, and then Sweden. Sweden lost power to the Russians in 1621 and by 1795 the entire Latvian region was a part of the Russian empire.

Serfdom was eliminated by the Russians, which allowed the Letts to work for their independence. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Latvia declared their nation a democratic republic. Communist troops then invaded Latvia but Allied troops forced them to retreat in 1920. In 1939, Latvia signed a treaty of mutual-assistance with the Soviet Union. Soviet troops occupied Latvia in 1940, and subsequent elections held under Soviet auspices resulted in the absorption of Latvia into the USSR as a constituent republic. Latvian campaigns for democracy and independence did not begin again until October 1988, with the formation of the Popular Front of Latvia. Latvians finally won independence in August 1991 after the bloody collapse of the Soviet Union.

After independence, Latvia sought to limit citizenship in favor of Latvians and other Balts over ethnic Russians and other minorities. About a quarter of the population is Russian-speaking and the rights of this section of society have been a thorny issue since independence. In 1998, the laws were eased, granting citizenship to all children born in Latvia after Aug. 21, 1991, and making it easier for Russian-speakers to become naturalized. At the same time government reforms introduced in 2004 to restrict the use of the Russian language in schools remain controversial. Legislation on Latvian language and citizenship has tightened; candidates who fail a Latvian language test three times are denied citizenship. About a fifth of all residents remained noncitizens in 2005, unable to vote or obtain passports.

Slightly more than half of the population consists of Letts and the closely related

Latgians (both widely known as Latvians). About a third are Russian; other minorities included Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Polish. Latvian is the official language; Lithuanian, Russian, and other languages are also spoken. The predominant religions are Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, and the Russian Orthodoxy. In the 10 years since independence Latvia has made a rapid transformation to embrace the free market and membership in the EU.

Religion in Numbers

Christianity spread through Latvia from the 9th through 12th centuries. Russian Orthodoxy is dominant in the east and Roman Catholicism in the west while most people in the cities are Lutheran. There are also small communities of other faiths, such as Baptist, Old Believers, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jewish, and Reformed. As of April 2006, the Board of Religious Affairs had registered 1,174 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (303), Roman Catholic (250), Orthodox (118), Baptist (93), Old Believer, Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (50), Jehovah's Witnesses (13), Methodist (13), Jewish (13), Buddhist (4), Muslim (15), Hare Krishna (11), Mormons (4), Reformed (2) and more than 100 other congregations. Interest in religion increased markedly since the restoration of independence; however, a large percentage of adherents do not regularly practice their faith. A significant portion of the population is atheist.

In 1935, before Latvia's occupation, official statistics indicated a fairly broad spectrum of religious traditions. Evangelical Lutheranism was the single most widespread creed, claiming the attachment of 55.2% of the population and 68.3% of ethnic Latvians. Roman Catholicism was the second most popular choice, preferred by 24.5% of the population. The Orthodox Church of Latvia had a following of 9% of the population, with its greatest concentration among Russians. Old Believers constitute 5.5% of the population. The rest of the pre-World War II population was scattered among an array of Protestant denominations, and Jews.

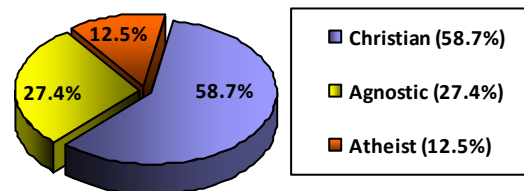
World War II and a half-century of Soviet occupation and persecution of believers fundamentally changed the religious spectrum. During communist rule, every effort was made to curtail the influence of religion. All potential avenues of contact with the population were cut off. Schools, media, books, and workplaces were all off-limits to religious organizations. Even charity work was forbidden. Indeed, the family itself was not at liberty to guide children into active church work until the age of eighteen. Thus, no Sunday schools, religious choirs, or camps were open to young people. Religious publications, with a few exceptions, were limited to yearbooks and song sheets for Sunday services. Regular churchgoers were subject to various pressures, including harassment at work and "comradely" visits by local atheists. Anyone with career ambitions had to forgo visible links with religion. Lutheran church rapidly declined but Roman Catholics gained strength. The state even successfully preempted the most important church ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals by secular ceremonies.

Most Latvian Jews were annihilated by the Nazis during World War II. After the war, a number

of Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union settled in Latvia but many obstacles and Stalinist antireligious campaigns kept the population from reviving religious activity. Most former Latvian synagogues were confiscated and no centers of rabbinical education existed in the Soviet Union. By 1991, only five Jewish congregations remained.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church, with an estimated 600,000 members in 1956, was affected most adversely. An internal document from March 18, 1987, stated active membership had shrunk to 25,000. For centuries Latvian attachment to Lutheranism was rather tepid, in part because this religion had been brought by the Baltic barons and

Major Religious Affiliations



German clergy. During Latvia's earlier independence period (1920-40), efforts were made to "Latvianize" the church. Original Latvian hymns were composed, Latvian clergy became predominant, and the New Testament was translated into modern Latvian. During the tribulations of World War II, Latvians intensified their religiosity, but at the same time the Lutheran Church suffered serious losses. Many of the most religious and talented individuals and clergy fled as refugees to the West or were deported to Siberia. A large number of church buildings were demolished by war action. Despite hardship, Latvian Lutherans provided help to their brethren in other Soviet republics. Lutheran clergy were trained in Latvia for Lithuania.

In 1987, the Lutheran Church experienced a revival pioneered by a group of young, rebellious, and very well-educated clergy who formed the organization called Rebirth and Renewal. With the advent of political plurality, the Lutheran Church was able to expand its role and its activities. Church buildings were refurbished, demolished churches were renewed, Sunday schools were opened, religious education was provided in day schools, and the media reported sermons and religious discussions. For several years after the liberation of church activities, religion became extremely fashionable. Part of this boom, as acknowledged by the Lutheran clergy, was a rebellion against authorities that coincided with the general political effervescence.

The Roman Catholic Church had a much closer historical bonding with its flock, being a regional (Latingale) religion. During the period of national revival through the latter part of the 19th century, the clergy were among the leaders of enlightenment. During the years of communist occupation, the greater commitment demanded by the Roman Catholic Church helped maintain a higher degree of solidarity against atheist incursions. Confession was a useful method for monitoring the mood of the population and organizing initiatives to counter and prevent serious

LATVIA (continued from page 3)

cleavages or even surreptitious activities by the communist leadership. Latvia's Roman Catholic Church received a great moral boost in February 1983 when Bishop Julijans Vaivods, a persistent opponent to oppression, was made a cardinal, the first appointment in the history of Latvia and the first within the Soviet Union. He sent Latvian clergy and trained Soviet nationals as priests to minister in the USSR.

The Roman Catholic Church also went through a process of renewal, but its changes were not as marked since it maintained a strong presence in the population even under the most adverse conditions. Catholics even expanded their sphere of influence by gaining congregations in cities and eastern Latvia. In 1991, the Roman Catholics performed twice as many baptisms than in 1985. Among the Roman Catholics baptized in 1991, only 40 percent had been born in families in which the parents had married in church.

The pre-World War II independent Orthodox Church of Latvia was subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate after the war, and its new clergy were trained in seminaries in Russia. It remained a major religious organization in Latvia because of the heavy influx of Russians and other Orthodox Slavs after the war. Only in 1992 did the Orthodox Church of Latvia become administratively independent once again. Its cathedral in the center of Riga had been transformed by the communists into a planetarium with an adjoining coffee shop popularly dubbed "In God's Ear." The cathedral has been in the process of being restored to its original architecture and purpose.

Latvia is and has been a multi-confessional state. Nevertheless, religious institutions have played a very important role in the unification of the Latvian nation itself and the development of one Latvian culture. Up to the Independence of Latvia in 1918, the Lutheran churches were basically in the hands of the German pastors and German aristocrats. The Polish influence was very strong in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church was tied to the Moscow Patriarchate. Religion was a major source of values in society for centuries. According to Latvian philosopher and theologian Visvaldis Klīve, in the '90s "the preservation of Latvian nationality was seen as a Christian religious duty. In Latvia itself membership and participation in church life became to some extent a protest movement against the Soviet authorities. The great interest in ecumenical relations by the Latvian church leaders gave significant visibility to the Latvian nationality in the international organizations at the time when it was not fashionable to talk about Latvia." Religious values have been used for national and political strategies. In this sense the religious institutions which came from the West made the Latvians into a distinct Western rather than Eastern nation.

During the years of Soviet occupation of Latvia, according to Marxist-Leninist ideology, Christianity was to be eradicated from the

people's mind, and the church role in society was to be reduced to nothing. Whole generations grew up with no sense or need for religion. Spirituality was cultivated only in homes of believers and congregations that struggled for survival. Atheism along with materialism and pragmatism, a simplified utopian world view served the purpose of diminishing the church. As the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev once said, atheism was replacing religion, but the phenomenon was merely superficial.

Religious situation in Latvia today

After declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, freedom of religion and worship was restored for the first time since 1941, and several changes were introduced. Potential Lutheran pastors could now receive their training through the nondenominational Faculty of Theology, affiliated with the University of Latvia. Lutherans have also established a seminary in Riga. The Roman Catholics acquired a new, modern seminary, but have had problems recruiting able scholars and teachers as well as students. Roman Catholic seminarians from outside Latvia have returned to their respective republics, and new seminarians are being trained locally. The Orthodox Church also established its own seminary. The new freedoms have allowed many other religious groups to proselytize and recruit members. Under conditions of economic and political uncertainty, their efforts are bearing fruit. Such denominations as the Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-Day Adventists have made significant inroads. Charismatic movements, animists, Hare Krishna, and the Salvation Army have all attempted to fill a void in Latvia's spiritual life. Undoubtedly, there is great interest among Latvians in spiritual matters, but it is difficult to know how much of it is genuine and how much it reflects the ebb and flow of fashion and will be replaced by other trends.

Currently Catholicism is dominant in Latvia numerically, but not spiritually. Intellectual dimension is lacking in Latvian Catholicism, which has been for centuries so powerful in the history of Europe. The Thomas Aquinas' doctrine admitted the decisive role of the mind but it cannot be said of Catholics in Latvia today. There is little dialogue with society, little participation in the cultural life.

Lutheranism could show its connection with society and its ability to attest the values of Protestantism during the years of the Third Awakening (1988-1991). In the late 80's, young priests who had graduated from Latvia University Physics and Mathematics and Chemistry faculties and then turned to religion were extremely popular. They managed to conduct a dialogue with society, attest moral values and could present Lutheran beliefs in a modern context. Their interpretations of Christian values are keen but with a flavor of postmodernism. Young Lutheran priests have many followers, they were shown on TV, interviewed, they published books and work at the Faculty of Theology of University of Latvia as teachers. However, critics have recognized these books as postmodern.

National minorities of Latvia pursue their own religions, mostly formed by Russians, Koreans, Tatars, Armenians, Moldavians, and other minorities. Some of these religious groups originated as a result of missionary activities.

Baptist parishes in Latvia are one of the most active missionary and charity organizations. Religious institutions interact with other spheres of social activity. Some missions do socially important work, such as "Steps." The mission has opened a children's home for children from different confessions. The Salvation Army of Latvia was restored in 1991.

The atheism of Soviet times disappeared with the political changes in 1991 because Marxist ideology had not penetrated the profoundest layers of consciousness and life values. It has created a dangerous tendency of a simplified worldview, materialism and denial of transcendental truth. Religion has been interpreted as a useful phenomenon for human reasons. When religious life revived and obtained a wide cultural, political and economic context in the post-Soviet period, the family values weakened and such secular values as money, power, and social status became dominant. Society was enthused over the wish to regain the lost Christian values, but with time this religious idealism naturally faded away. People discovered the difficulty of cooperation and the discrepancy between romantic religious enthusiasm and reality. For many people who tried to return to religion in the 90's, it became an aesthetic experience and remained a shadow of the real affairs of life. Traditional religions have lost the power to compel or to frighten, gradually turning into a museum of culture rather than a gateway to an everlasting life. This is one of the reasons why different forms of new religiosity appear in Latvia, that give rise to different new forms of religion, including scientology church, Hare Krishna, Baha'i or New Age teaching. In Latvia, just like in all other post-Soviet societies, mysticism and occultism prosper. As old certainties start to crumble, there is a tendency to feel that all views are valid. Spiritual values are no longer highly regarded, people can change their identities, experiment with spirituality, and select an option from a vast cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before. At present the number of adherents to new religious and spiritual minorities is proportionally small - about 1.5% of the population of 2.6 million. At the same time the dynamic development of those religions is evident. The new religions in Latvia are multi-ethnic. The majority of their followers are Russian-speaking people. They include not only Russians but also people of other ethnic minorities plus some Latvians who do not speak Latvian. (Not speaking the Latvian language makes it difficult for people to join some of the traditional Latvian religious groups.) One of the major reasons why people turn to new religions is their search for identity. If they fail to find their place in the current social processes, which in Latvia include, among other things, the realization of the nation-state, they look for their "niche" elsewhere, and sometimes they find it in some non-traditional religions. Another reason is the major changes in the understanding of the essence of religion and its role in the life of people.

The growth in numbers of the different religions is youth. Youth are looking for charismatic leaders. The influence of charismatic congregations on religious life may grow in Latvia in the near future because they compensate for the lack of communicative values that the traditional

LATVIA (continued from page 4)

religions - Catholicism, Lutheranism, and the Orthodox Church-fail to supply. However, these congregations also boost the middle and older generation joining the new religious movements. These are people who, under the communist regime, abandoned or did not acquire any religious beliefs and are now looking for solutions to their religious needs. These people give stability to their congregations, although it sometimes turns into conservatism and routine. To name but a few such charismatic congregations of the "new wave": "Jauna Paaudze" (The New Generation), "Prieka Vests" (Message of Hope), and "Dzīvības Vards" (The Word of Life). It is typical for these congregations to have strong leaders, and that youth makes up a large part of their followers.

Nominally Christian, the New Apostolic Church of North Rhine-Westphalia from Germany is also active in Latvia. Its missionaries appeared in Latvia at the beginning of '90's and have about 800 followers in Latvia. Four Mormon missionaries arrived in Latvia in 1992. As of March 1997, there were 265 members. Now there are 4 congregations. The Jehovah's Witnesses had about 1,643 preachers and 3,956 supporters in 1997. Although this religious minority is not officially registered in Latvia, it presently numbers 13 congregations. The Unification Church, an unregistered denomination, is active in Latvia, carrying out its activities through the mediation of different registered non-governmental organizations, such as Women's Federation for World Peace.

Among the Eastern religions in Latvia Krishna is the largest. It has 3 missions and temples in Latvia. There are altogether 200 consecrated persons plus about 3,000 followers. The dominant view among the public is that this religion is absolutely foreign and unacceptable for most people, but this is changing. There are also the Sri Chinmoy movement, the movement of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the Baha'i faith, Sahaj Marg movement, Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University, a Sukyo Mahikari Center, an Eckankar congregation, the Messianic congregation "Joshua" and other Eastern-oriented religious organizations in Latvia at present.

We can expect that new religious movements will continue to enter the religious life of Latvia. Such probable further development of the religious situation is determined by the ethnic, social, cultural, and psychological diversity of society. There is a growing attitude against "sects" or "cults", even among some authorities, similar to movements in Germany and France. However, anti-cult movement in Latvia does not limit its targets to the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology or the Jehovah's Witnesses, but extends against charismatic Christian congregations that have generally not been regarded as "destructive cults" elsewhere.

Religious Freedom

The Latvian constitution guarantees

freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice.

However, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions. There is no state religion, but the government does distinguish between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. It does not require the registration of religious groups, but the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords registered religious organizations certain rights and privileges, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax-deductible donations. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings. In practice, these laws have not resulted in government discrimination against any particular religion.

There are two councils that monitor religious issues: the New Religions Consultative Council, consisting of doctors, academics, and an independent human rights ombudsman; and the Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body organized in 2002 by the prime minister and chaired by either the sitting prime minister or the deputy prime minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers. The Ecclesiastical Council met during the reporting period to discuss a new draft law on traditional confessions (those that existed during the country's first period of independence), and further define the relationship between church and state.

Under current Law on Religious Organizations, traditional religions enjoy certain rights and privileges that nontraditional religions do not. It stipulates that only representatives of the traditional Christian churches (i.e., Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, and Baptist churches) may teach religion to public school students who volunteer to take the classes. The government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations and religions that do not have their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 require foreign religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process, requiring letters of invitation and proof of seminary training, remain cumbersome, although the government generally is cooperative in helping resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers. Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities.

Property restitution has been substantially completed, although most religious groups, continue to wait for the return of some properties, their status being unclear and subject to complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the communities to which properties belonged before the World War II.

Conclusion

What kind of future is forming for the free Latvia? More and more Europe is becoming secular and materialistic. Yet in South America, Africa, and Asia Christianity, reportedly, is growing. Even in Communist China, Christianity is increasing in numbers. Unfortunately, Europe is ailing with atheism and agnosticism. When the U.S. President mentions God, the Europeans roll their eyes, and the enemy is rubbing his hands for the work well done.

Latvia is enjoying its independence, but is it enjoying true freedom? Only faith, a genuine profound faith in Jesus Christ can guarantee this freedom. Yet it is impossible to experience and live it, believing in the true God, if one does not know Him, or even that He is. If one does not know Him, he cannot be grateful either. One needs help if he cannot learn by himself, especially if he is spiritually hungry. Just like in many other countries, many Latvians need help, so that their eyes may see the light and be able to grow spiritually with a new understanding, feeling as if they are being reformed from within. But how can they hear the Good News and mature in their Christian walk if we do not help them? "How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:13-15)

Andre Bouravnev, August 2007



Property restitution has been substantially completed, though status of some is still unclear

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DISCOVERING THE TREASURES OF THE BIBLE

By Nadya Yarmola, a translator and student

I want to apologize in advance, I have never been eloquent, but I wish to share with you one of the greatest memories in my life, about a time when I was studying in Seminary. For me as a one who was born in the former Soviet Union (Ukraine) it is significant. It is not a secret any more that to be a Christian at that tortured, beaten and killed for their belief. By the time when I grew up believers received a freedom to attend a church, but due to the persecution in the past churches were lacking in the people who would be able to feed the souls of people with the healthy food of a solid Bible teaching.

My church was in the same situation. So, as soon as I heard about the opportunity to study in Bible College (later Seminary), in a couple of days, I was sitting in one of its halls waiting to be interviewed. What was a joy when I got accepted! Later on my brother and a couple of other people from my town joined me. On the first day of schooling I met with my American teachers (for some of students that was the first communication with an American, also all of us were housed by the different homes, and apartments of the church members. It was very wonderful because the rest of the time after school was spending with people close by Spirit. As well I found good friends, but the most important thing my journey through the Bible had truly begun. The day usually started early in the morning with the prayer hour, a light breakfast after; the rest of the day was filling up by the lecture hours before and after dinner, a few short breaks between them - a time when the students either 'loaded poor professors' with tons of questions or shared various stories. Every other day was not alike. Day to day revealed the depth of God's Word, and every next session had a new course, different professor, and each professor tried to make the course as much interesting and understandable as it only could be. I never ever liked history, but after one Church History course was taught, my mind changed.

Each session was full of new discovering. The study of different subjects helped me to look at the Bible

in a way I have never thought of, and also helped me to explore the variety of God's Word and its wholeness at the same time. As we were passing step by step from one course to another, the pure and perfect Testimony of God began to uncover its beauty page by page. The true Bible teaching edified me and helped me to grow more in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The study of the Bible in Seminary opened my eyes to see clear that...

*"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.
The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward. "*

Ps 19:7-11

If you have your heart in giving people opportunity to discover the hidden treasure of the Bible, fulfill the desire of your heart.

Nadya, Still a student.

This church was nationalized by the communists early in the regime which literally wiped out the pastors for three generations leaving no one with first-hand experience to teach new pastors or the young.

The building you see in the picture was taken from its owners, the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania, held for years and with the fall of Communism the national act was passed whereby the property was to be returned to its rightful owner.

I have been to Latvia and Lithuania for the last two weeks trying to make some sense of how the administration of this new law will take effect. Any of the properties that were taken were not returned to the rightful owners for numerous reasons, not the least of which is the fact that many of the properties were privatized, which is another way of saying they were taken by the Communists and sold to somebody other than the owner.

Algimantas Kvedaravicius, as the General Superintendent of the denomination, acquired back substantial interest in the return of the property. However, as he and his congregation are trying to be stewards they are met with back-biting and misunderstanding.

IRISH?

By Dr. R. David, Ludwick, ITEM President

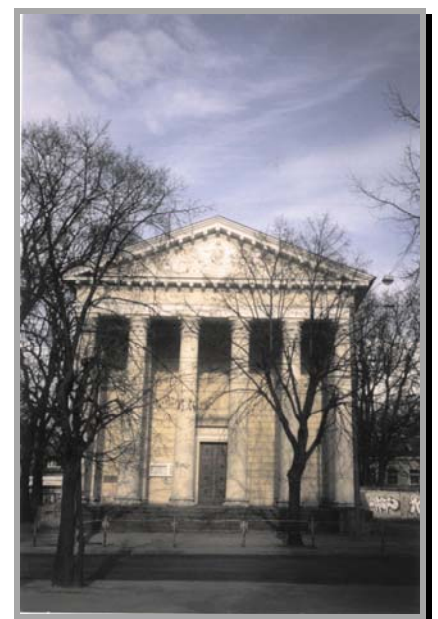
For the better part of the year ITEM has had Irishmen doing the work of mission in the field in conjunction with MTW/PCA activities in Lithuania. Any of you may know Alister, a Westminster East graduate, and his bride Sarah. I applaud them for their perseverance in preparation for working in Russian speaking countries, particularly Ukraine, in what one hopes will be a partnering agreement between MTW/PCA and, in some sense or another, a third party. Our first endeavor was with Rev. Rod Gorter, and it was a resounding success! Rod is now a chaplain at Dort College making impact on the lives and hearts and minds of young people of all walks of life.

Alister Torrens has also participated in Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine, a Ukrainian seminary/college of Reformed education. During my recent visit there I was able to attend Alister's classes, who managed to keep his classes vibrant in spite of adverse circumstances. He used numerous techniques, of which the class was not aware of directly, nonetheless effectual.

Alister's teaching talents using them on one-on-one basis in the classroom reminds us of the Socratic Method. His affinity for searching the students' mind while lecturing is a measure found few and far between.

His first year is nearing completion and we hope to see him in the years to come.

Dr. R. David Ludwick, August 2007



Pastor Algimantas' Reformed Church