

Equipping reliable leaders in sound doctrine for the sake and hope of gospel-needy cultures

Van Groningen conducts inaugural lectures for Latvian seminary

Teaching six class hours per day, Dr. Gerard Van Groningen, along with his wife, Harriet, inaugurated the ministry of *ITEM/Christ for Latvia* during their visit September 12-25 to the Baltic state of Latvia.

Dr. Van Groningen taught the first official course in the curriculum of a new reformed pastoral training program begun through a partnership with the Reformed Bible Fellowship Church of Riga, the country's capital city. In July, 1997, Rev. Alvis Sauka visited the United States seeking assistance with such a project. In February 1998 Dr. Van Groningen conducted a preliminary fact-finding and lecture trip to investigate the feasibility of such a partnership.

The Church has established an education committee and is endeavoring to develop a Reformed seminary with the goal of raising up theologically sound leaders for all spheres of society in Latvia and the former Soviet Union. Demonstrating the hunger of Latvians for sound biblical teaching, this young church has grown in the last few years from a cold church plant to a vibrant fellowship of some 350 regular worshippers. Plans have already begun for a second church.

Dr. Van Groningen lectured daily to two groups. One was a group of ten students at the Riga International Bible Institute, a broadly evangelical school providing basic training in support of various denominations in Riga. "The educational level of most of the students was not far above first year college," Dr. Van Groningen said. "I had to keep that in mind. The students seemed quite eager to listen. Some took extensive notes."

The students at the Reformed training program – the central focus of the lecture trip – were on a much different level, according to Dr. Van Groningen. Most have had university training and are involved in a variety of professional and business

vocations, he said.

"The average attendance was 28 per evening. At the initial session they were informed of the various degrees that could be achieved in time. Fifteen indicated that they were intending to work for one of the master's degrees," he said.

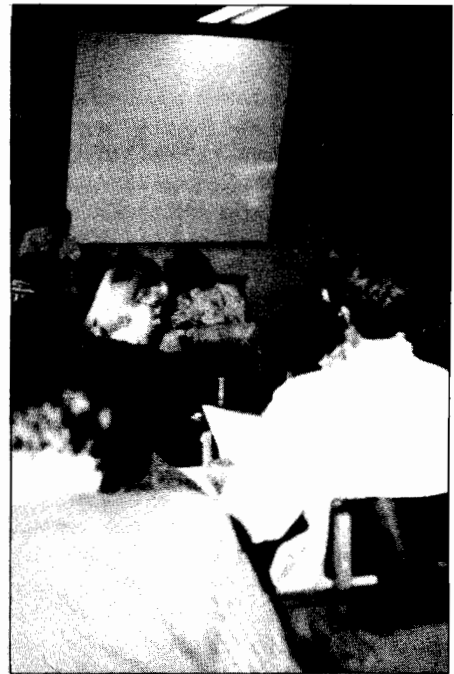
The two groups were taught separately because of the desire of one to be taught in Russian and of the other to be taught in Latvian. All teaching was accomplished through translators. According to Dr. Van Groningen, the Russian translators were not as proficient as the Latvian translator. "[Latvian translator] Maira, who is a professional translator, did have some difficulty with some theological terms – due mostly, I was told, to the paucity of theological terminology in the Latvian language," Dr. Van Groningen said.

Due to the availability of technical equipment, the Latvian lectures were conducted using simultaneous translation – a fact that multiplied the amount of material Dr. Van Groningen was able to cover.

Because of the central role of the Reformed Fellowship Bible Church in the project, Dr. and Mrs. Van Groningen spent many hours in worship and fellowship with church members. Mrs. Van Groningen ministered directly on two occasions during the visit. Together with her husband, Mrs. Van Groningen met with some 20 church members after worship to discuss family issues. Later, on September 23, Mrs. Van Groningen met privately with ten young mothers.

"Meeting with these moms told me of the need and challenges to strengthen their Bible knowledge, to help them in sharing their faith with unbelieving moms and to help them learn and share a knowledge of such things as nutrition and pre-natal care," said Mrs. Van Groningen.

"Understand well that, speaking in generalities, there are more abortions than



An average of 28 students attended nightly lectures by Dr. Gerard Van Groningen at the new Reformed Seminary in Riga, Latvia. Many used headphones to listen to simultaneous translation of the lectures.

live births in that part of the world. Many people, and doctors, seem shocked when asked if an abortion is the taking away of life," Mrs. Van Groningen said.

The social conditions in Latvia only underscore the vital need for biblically sound churches and pastors, in Latvia as well as all former communist countries. For this reason the ministry vision of the Reformed Fellowship Bible Church – training leaders and planting churches – is strategic.

According to Larry Stout, an American educational missionary serving in Riga, the church calls its vision for ministry the

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Romanian Maranatha Bible College proposed

"The work is not ours, it is God's," says Pastor Vasile Ion who ministers in Câmpina, Romania, located in the center of what is the most populous region of Romania – and the least penetrated by the Gospel. Pastor Vasile (last names come first in Romania) has seen first hand the power of God to accomplish His work.

It was the work of God that allowed Pastor Vasile to receive a seminary education in the first place. In 1987, during the days before the 1989 revolution that swept the oppressive Ceausescu regime from power, only three students per year were allowed to enroll in the Baptist Institute in Bucharest, the country's only accredited seminary established in pre-communist times. That in itself was a demonstration of God's power, but it also added to the suffering for his faith to which Pastor Vasile had become accustomed. As a result of his decision to prepare for ministry, he lost his government-provided apartment and was forced with his wife and four children (they now have six) to move into his in-laws' two-room flat.

In this context Pastor Vasile dared to dream about church planting and leadership training in the gospel-starved southern part of Romania. He is the only seminary-trained pastor in Câmpina, a city of some 40,000 people that is a hub for this populous agricultural and industrial region of the country.

From a human point of view, the work indeed can seem overwhelming. The south-central region of Romania – stretching from Braşov just north of the Carpathian Mountains southward to the capital city of Bucharest – is predominantly Romanian Orthodox with very few evangelical churches. This is where Pastor Vasile lives and works, and it stands in contrast to the northern part of the country where the Hungarian Reformed Church and certain evangelical groups are well established with thriving ministries.

Enrollment in the Baptist Institute in Bucharest, which is attached to the university, is now more open, but the cost is prohibitive to send a student for three years. Even when a group of churches can afford to send a young man for such training, it removes him from active ministry in the church, depriving the church of his needed ministry.

Under Pastor Vasile's ministry, seven churches have been planted and now a plan exists to establish a Bible College to serve the whole region. That plan will be presented to the ITEM board at its November meeting along with plans to support. If the plans are approved, Pastor Vasile estimates 30 students will attend the opening session of Colegiul Biblic Maranatha Câmpina (Maranatha Bible College of Câmpina).

Under the plan, Maranatha Bible College will operate a four-year basic bible curriculum offering two programs of study. One program, a general certificate program, will offer basic bible training for lay people who lead in the church and work at various jobs in society. The second program, a pastoral certificate program, will include additional courses in preaching, pastoral theology, etc. The goal is to develop the college into a degree-granting theological seminary. Lord willing, the first two-week course will be held in September, 1999.

ITEM acknowledges with Pastor Vasile that the work is the Lord's. As he has said, "We want to extend it for His glory. To all this we can only say, 'Amen.'" His "amen" is accompanied by the commitment of the Câmpina area believers to contribute 10% of the churches' income to the school. In a country where the average monthly salary is \$150 (Pastor Vasile's is \$100) and the income



During a summer evangelistic crusade, church pastors, elders and interpreters pause for a group photo with Pastor Vasile Ion (front, left) and Mr. Mark Puckett (front in hat), an American missionary who works with Pastor Ion to train people in evangelism.

tax rate is 40 percent, this is relatively a substantial commitment.

Even so, the commitment of 10 percent will likely only produce \$40 per class session. "From the minute when the ITEM committee will agree [on] the 'Maranatha' project I will try to find future sponsors for the financial sustaining so that we can [give] \$100 per term," Pastor Vasile wrote in an October 10 letter.

ITEM's Christ for Romania ministry group requests your prayers during the planning phase, which will proceed pending approval of the board on November 14. Pray for the recruiting of professors and for fund-raising. The four courses being taught during the fall 1999 (and for which professors are needed) are Biblical Theology Overview, Pentateuch, Old Testament History, and Gospels and Acts.

Pastors who are interested in a challenging, enriching and refreshing 2-week teaching trip are asked to contact ITEM. You can use the envelope provided in this newsletter.

Pécel school opens

This fall the Pécel Bible School near Budapest, Hungary, greeted the first class of students to use its newly renovated facilities (see photo). Operated by the Bible Union, an evangelical renewal movement within the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC), the school teaches a basic bible curriculum with a focus on laypeople and pastors. In fact, some students are opting to enter the Bible School for pastoral preparation rather than the HRC's seminary in Debrecen.

The Bible Union hopes to begin starting new churches as a core piece of its renewal movement. As a result, the Bible School



will offer courses in church planting, says the group's president, Rev. Sipos Almos.

They ask ITEM for student scholarships and professors to teach church planting, an area in which they have little experience. To contribute to scholarships or for more information on teaching, please contact ITEM using the envelope provided.

The "Amber Vision"

by Dr. Gerard Van Groningen

Before my wife, Harriet, and I traveled to Latvia, we had not heard of the Amber Vision. Now that we have experienced it, we are excited and dedicated for this vision to be a greater reality.

The word *amber* refers to a yellow brownish translucent fossil resin found in the Baltic Region. It is used in jewelry and is easily polished. As we walked the streets of various Baltic region cities we repeatedly saw stalls on the sidewalks with beads of amber stones. Most jewelry shops had an array of amber jewels on display. This amber is found in deposits on the Baltic seashore and in alluvial soils near the sea.

A central and strategically important center in the Baltic region is Riga, the capital of Latvia. During the communist era in the Soviet Union, Moscow, an overnight train ride east of Riga, used Riga as one of its most important sea ports. It was open all year, hence, very important to ice-bound Russia in the winter. In short, Riga was and is central in and to the Baltic countries of



Dr. and Mrs. Van Groningen receive flowers at the end of their Riga visit.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and to the whole of western Russia. But Moscow was not first to discover Riga to be a strategic place. The early Vikings used these countries, with Riga in the center, as a launching out point for further conquests in surrounding countries.

Now for the thrilling reality! Riga has discovered a far more precious jewel than amber. I am referring to the Reformed faith and its world and live view. What is more, the leaders of the Reformed Bible Fellowship Church, of recent origin, believe that the Reformed church and the institutions it hopes to establish will become a resource center for that entire region of the world. The Vikings did it! How much more a people – loving the word of the sovereign Lord, accepting the Reformed interpretation and application of the Word – can develop a Reformed resource center in that part of the world.

The educational ministry of ITEM's Christ for Latvia ministry group was begun at the request of Reformed leaders in Riga. An exploratory trip in March 1998, made in response to this request, gave Christ for Latvia workers the certainty that a Reformed Seminary could and should be established. The initial stage has become a reality.

Harriet and I arrived in Riga in mid-September. Students had

been recruited. Eight had definitely signed up for three hours of lectures, from 6:15 to 9:15 p.m. for ten evenings. Six more students had shown some interest. The secretary-administrator of the budding seminary said, "Imagine the surprise when over 30 were in attendance the first night. Forty different attendees audited at least one night of the course. Eventually 15 students registered as full time students for the course." Every other month, for more than three years, a professor is scheduled to travel to Riga and lecture for two weeks, three hours each workday evening.

The students who attended almost all the classes were especially excited. They would meet in cafes after the classes ended and discuss what they had learned. The secretary wrote in his report: "It will be very exciting over the next weeks and months to see how the practice of this theology will filter out into the society at large."

The work has begun. The course has been determined. The Lord was and is truly at work. The Amber Vision is a reality. Three important items must be mentioned. First of all, your prayers are urgently needed. Eight of the professors have expressed readiness to go to Riga to lecture. Dr. William Koopmans is scheduled to teach the last two weeks of November, Dr. Cornelius Venema the last two weeks of January and Professor Rod Gorter the last two weeks of March. Other men are scheduled to teach throughout the year.

Second, your cooperation is vitally needed in getting the story of the Amber Vision out to the public. Amber jewels abound in the Baltics, and the Viking endeavors were successful and reached far and wide, but there is a more precious jewel now uncovered there – a Reformed church, a Reformed seminary, a Reformed witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, we desperately need your financial help. Yes, we know there are many causes and worthy projects that need support, but please do consider our request for help. We need \$5,000 every other month. The Latvia people are beginning to develop a campaign to raise funds for a multipurpose building. Presently they rent space in a technical university. They do not seek funds for lands and buildings. They need help to have lecturers travel there and to provide them a place to stay. Living quarters are very difficult to find and hotels are expensive. Funds are needed to pay for verbal translators of the lectures and for the translation of written materials such as outlines, essays and books.

Yes, we ask you to join in seeing and spreading the Amber Vision. Pray and tell about it. Give for it. Send your gifts to ITEM designated for Christ for Latvia.

Latvia, continued

"Amber Vision." (See accompanying article.)

With friendly economic and immigration policies toward western countries and open borders with its eastern neighbor Russia, Latvia has long been viewed by analysts as strategic in the developing interchange between East and West.

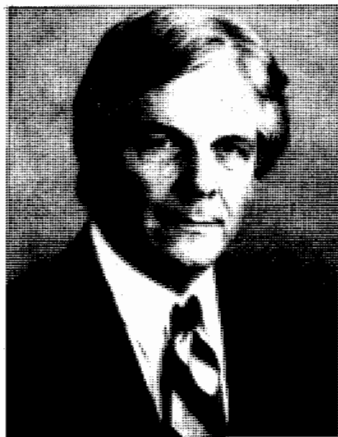
Supporting this point, *ITEM/Christ for Latvia* committee member Kurt Prenzler (who has also served as a tent-making missionary in Latvia) says native Russian speakers accounted for only ten percent of the population before World War II. Because of Latvia's excellent location and ports, that population grew to 45

percent from 1945-1991, making Latvia the most "colonized" of the Baltic States during the Soviet occupation.

Latvia is an ideal staging ground for those with interests in the Baltics and the former Soviet Union as well as a haven when times are bad.

Therefore, in a country where only eight percent of the population attends any form of religious worship during the course of the month, the vision of the Reformed Bible Fellowship Church's members is significant in its goal of reaching not only its own culture but also Russia and its Baltic neighbors.

From the President *R. David Ludwick*



The people come, hungry and thirsty for that which alone satisfies.

Voracious readers, they cry out for Scripture and for books that unfold the Truth. For three generations they have hungered and thirsted, crying out, "How long, O LORD?"

Their heritage is rich in the arts, literature, and life, but these things were taken from them. Communism robbed them of so many of the manifestations of God's grace, things we take for granted and they now seek to reclaim.

And so we have an answer when they cry out, "How Should We Then Live?"

They come when we bring the "Bread of Life," and they eat and drink and come to know.

In knowing, they rejoice to share with their kin and countrymen . . . as no expatriate can.

ITEM takes pastors and other church leaders and equips them to serve, that they may replicate the work over and over among God's people . . . their own people.

And so our prayer is, "Not long".

Will you pray? Pray to end the oppression of atheism, to end religious oppression.

Will you pray to do more . . . for the preparation of the "Bride of Christ, His Church"?

Please help us to be part of the response to their cry, "How Long, O LORD?"

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In obedience to the Great Commission, ITEM exists to serve the churches in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, formerly Soviet Union) and Central Europe in their efforts to train biblically sound pastors and church leaders. To this end, ITEM works to secure prayer, labor, resources and finances 1) to establish seminaries and other pastoral training centers, 2) to assemble theological libraries and 3) to translate and publish solid biblical literature.

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