

God's mission is progressing in the economically deprived but enjoying the religious freedom Baltic nations. The Baptists of Latvia have adopted the goal of planting 100 new congregations by 2020. They virtually utilize the great advantage of independence that the Latvian people have enjoyed during the last two decades.



Introduction to Latvia

The Latvian population is about 2,3 million. More than 60% speak Latvian language, however Russian is still quite popular. Latvian is rare in Europe – it is derived from an ancient Baltic language and much favored in the nation. Latvia is now one of the smallest nations in the European Union. The confessional structure of this Baltic State is composed of Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox and Baptists.

Baptist Union of Latvia

The history of the Latvian Baptists goes back to the second half of the 19th century when some groups of indigenous people were not satisfied with the teaching of the state church and started to read their Bibles. The first baptisms took place on September 9, 1860 when several Latvian believers were baptized in Memele, now Klaipeda, Lithuania. This date the Latvian Baptists consider the beginning of their movement. Since then many indigenous congregations were established and chapels erected.

The Soviet period brought very dark changes into the lives of Baptist people of Latvia. Thousands of believers and hundreds of leaders were deported and murdered in the communist labor camps. The church buildings were confiscated and many congregations were closed down. But even despite the difficulties lectures in theology were being offered (unofficially), illegal youth and Sunday school work was taking place, and many hundreds of books were being multiplied on simple typewriters and similar equipment by the devoted Christians.

The Latvian Baptists regained long desired freedom after the fall of Soviet Union and started to reclaim their property which had been earlier taken away by communist state. A Seminary, Latvian Christian Radio, Publishing House and Union Offices as well as a Christian Bookstore found their location in the reclaimed historic building which serves now as the Baptist Center in Riga. There are altogether 88 churches with a total membership of about 6600.

Baptist Church Planting in Latvia

The Baptist movement in Latvia has been active in church planting from the very beginning, except for the period of the communist repression and indoctrination.

Pastor Peteris Sprogis, the bishop of Latvian Baptist Union says: *“In recent years the leaders of our union discovered the need to give more attention to church planting. Thus we have adopted the goal to plant 100 new churches by 2020. The Baltic Pastoral Institute has initiated the appropriate training for future pastors and church planters. We recognize that church planting must be at the top of our denominational agenda. This requires us to pray and think clearly about the development of a master plan that will release the potential of churches and individuals in missional activities and particularly in church planting. Our desire is to see more and more people come to know God and experience His transforming power.”*



Leadership of Baptist Union in Latvia in 2011

Among Indigenous Church Planters

Pastor Kaspars Sterns is the right hand of bishop Sprogis as he coordinates the church planting movement in Latvia. He explains the vision of mission work which in practice overlaps with the church planting program. He particularly emphasizes the coaching structure that is closely related to church planting. The whole program is called “M4” as it consists of 4 modules of teaching which is regularly offered to leaders. The acronym M4 stands for: Master, Mission, Multiplication and Movement.



Indigenous church planter Ilvars and his mission team

Indigenous missionary Ilvars is the church planter in Ropazi. He is 32 years old, married and has 3 small sons. The church planting started from a concert which

Ilvars' mother church - Mathew's from Riga had organized about two years ago. Ilvars has been the leader of this new project in Ropazi since. He took me to a local school where during the week there was a meeting with a group of young people.

The vision is to reach out to numerous people but the young people have been most receptive so far. Currently the fellowship is comprised of about 20 persons. They do an Alpha course and are involved in Bible study groups. The congregation meets in a Baptist owned camp site complex. In summer different churches from all over Latvia organize camps there.

I also had an occasion to attend a conference for Latvian church planters. About 100 people came to a weekend long retreat center located on the Baltic Sea shore. The conference offered a few sessions for everybody. The participants later divided in 2 groups. The more advanced leaders were considered those who have been able to organize church planting teams and the beginners listened to lectures in order to learn the basic M4 principles. The M4 teaching emphasized the basics of discipleship, multiplication of discipleship, prayer, fasting and expectation of radical change.



Conference for Latvian church planters in November 2011

The advanced group shared their practical reports from activities in church planting. They were asked to share about 4 aspects: opportunities, challenges, achievements and weaknesses. Ilvars and his wife as well as another team member from Ropazi, Yanis were in that group. The whole group of advanced church planters counted about two dozen and all seemed to know each other well and they evidently enjoyed being together.

I was greatly impressed by the large number of participants and effective organization of this conference. The vibrant worship, interesting teaching and most of all the passionate participants made it really eventful. Being there I couldn't resist a

reflection in my mind that there is a good future for the Baptists in Latvia...and important strategic changes are taking place. There and now!

Prayer requests:

1. The growth of new church plants and further multiplication.
2. Development of the program for training indigenous leaders.
3. Efficient use of new opportunities that come to Latvia, and strength to overcome new challenges.

In Christ,

Daniel Trusiewicz
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To help planting reproducing churches!

To help growing healthy churches!

For the glory of God!

PS.

I wish to remind again our readers about the annual Incarnate Church Planters' Gathering planned for March 20-22, 2012 in Derbyshire, England. It is a great opportunity to mix with a wide range of church planters, pioneers, overseers and those wondering if this could be their future.

For more info and registration visit: www.incarnate-network.eu