

First Timers In Eastern Europe October 2009

1) Riga City mission work

My daughter Hannah and I from New Zealand have had the opportunity recently to join in the work being done by Bro Duncan and Sis Cindy in Latvia. Duncan met us off the plane and we immediately headed off to the church hall to meet Sis Lilya and her friend Vija with whom she had been sharing the gospel. Vija is a fit looking woman of about 40 yrs and lives in the women's shelter and, as many do; has simply 1 shopping bag as her worldly possessions, as the shelter only allows the women to come in at 7 p.m. each day and they must be out by 8 a.m., and can't leave anything there. Duncan talked to Vija about her desire to put on Christ and be baptised. The hall venue now has no hot running water as it is part of a building complex of other tenants who have not paid their water account, and so the hot water has been turned off. Vija has a medical condition and would have had much difficulty in handling a cold water baptism (bear in mind the outside temperature here in Riga is around freezing), so we opted to baptise her at Duncan's apartment in warmer water. It seemed to me to be such a quiet event – unlike baptisms at home which are really a major celebration; to offer some sort of memorial to Vija, I sang: "I have decided to follow Jesus", with Duncan translating into Latvian. At all baptisms I am reminded that the angels in heaven rejoice over 1 sinner that repents. It would be easy to assume that people like Vija in the shelter are down and outs, perhaps "bludgers", but Vija used to be a fitness instructor so is a trained person. We finished the evening with a lovely fellowship tea put on by Cindy, and farewelled Lilya and our new sister Vija at the tram station. On leaving I noted Duncan giving Vija some financial assistance at which she cried – another evidence that Vija and others are not looking for a handout so much as a new hope – a hope in Christ. Pray for the ongoing contact that is made with those who are called and chosen by the Lord for his kingdom.

Photo: Sister Vija on the left



2) Winter Heating distribution to East Latvia

The next day we accompanied Duncan to a region in East Latvia, around 3 – 4 hours drive from Riga, where we met with sisters Aina and Valya in Valya's small apartment. Valya is a retired school teacher, well educated and has an impressive library of Duncan's books on her shelf. Sister Aina told us of her walk to the truth, and had a zeal to want to understand the Bible – a zeal that asked questions in her previous church. The church leader was not happy about this and neither was he happy about her underlining and marking her Bible with notes! However she remained staunch in her quest for understanding, and one day responded to a newspaper ad from Carelinks for literature and received and embraced the Bible Basics teaching of the word. We continued on to see sister Nina, who lives in extremely squalid conditions. This lady is what in my meeting, we had affectionately called "The Potato Lady"; for her growing of subsistence potato crops which have to tide them over through Winter. Sadly, Nina had suffered a stroke since Duncan's last visit, and he was visibly distressed by her condition. Duncan and Cindy and her parents had stayed here a few years ago for a week helping to install an irrigation system for the crops, so knew Nina well. She now is almost deaf, has only sight in 1 eye, and cannot walk easily. Her mind is also failing, but her speech and actions were full of a cry to God for his kingdom to come. Her regular pathetic, and moving refrain was: "Don't forget me

Duncan". She thought my daughter Hannah was her beloved Cindy – we did not try to correct her. All we could do was to offer a hug and a kiss and say – I suppose rather to myself than Nina – as she could not understand: "The kingdom will be better Nina". What a hope the kingdom of God gives us of a time when all mourning shall cease.

We left a large load of firewood for the ensuing minus 20 degrees Winter. We then proceeded to find sister Svetlana whose husband Andris wanted to be baptised. Svetlana is a young woman in her twenties who has had a long contact with Carelinks and was baptised a number of years ago along with her parents. We used a bath in a lodge we stayed at for the baptism, and again I desired to offer another song to mark the event – this time: "Create in me a clean heart" – translated by Duncan. Duncan asked Svetlana if she would like to offer a word of encouragement to Andris at his baptism, and she replied saying that she would like him to take the spiritual lead in the house and be a good spiritual father. Pray for his growth in God. We also gave Winter heating assistance to them too.

Photo: Andris' baptism



Photos: Buying and then distributing firewood; Nina



3) Refugee Camp

We also visited the refugee prison from where Bro R has been released. It is an old Soviet era punishment camp – partially refurbished for use now as a refugee prison and holds about 30 refugees. We broke bread with Bro Walter – from Cameroon, and another brother from Eritrea. Duncan had been able to give him a Bible Basics in his own language. Walter and Rowan (a brother from Australia) gave an exhortation on Luke 19 and the parable of the talents. Walter did a great job and shows an ability that would make a good teacher of the word. Pray for him and Eusay – that they will find strength from day to day to fight the good fight of faith; and also for God's will as to their release. There's a video of brother Walter's exhortation to us about the parable at <http://aletheiacollege.net/walter.html> . Brother Martin Rozestraten from Holland was also with us.



4) Bible Weekend

We attended the Bible weekend in Northern Latvia where Carelinks has wonderfully restored an old storage barn into a large house, meeting hall and dormitory block. About 50 people attended from several hours drive away – most having to get there by bus. Brother Martin from Holland had also come over to attend and also Bro Rowan from Australia, who is a medical

student here in Riga. It is difficult to summarise what a great time of fellowship with the saints was had. Fortunately for us, a number spoke enough English for us to have some great conversations, and to hear wonderful testimonies of God's working and calling. One in particular was a sister Irma – a women in her 70's who grew up in the Soviet era with atheist parents, but with a quest to have a Bible. She was not able to purchase one until 1992 after Latvia gained independence. She discovered Carelinks around the year 2000 and was baptised. She is a trained English teacher, and now translates Carelinks books. When I said to her that she must be happy to be of service to God in this work, her response was to say: "No, I am honoured that God has allowed me to do it – to me it is not a service". I also had opportunity to share with Bro R, our brother who has recently miraculously been released from the refugee camp after 2 years' detention. Pray for him – his continued growth in the Lord (he freely talks about his new life in Christ and his new hope), and his perpetual freedom – as even now there is no guarantee from the authorities of his position.

Photo: Br Robert in the audience with sis Dzena



We enjoyed rich exhortation from Bro Duncan in the daily readings from John's gospel. One point in particular which is worthy of noting among the many is that the parables of Jesus always contain an element of "unreality". The parables are "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning", but it is that element of exaggeration that is a beacon in the story that demands our attention – so look for that as you read through the parables!

I gave 3 lectures on Saturday morning talking about the subject of "Biblical Praise" showing by power point presentation that the true meaning of Praise is more richly understood when we discover that a number of different Hebrew and Greek words in the original text, have totally different meanings, and have only been broadly translated "praise" in our Bibles. The lectures were translated by Bro Janis – a university student - into Latvian and by sister Dzena into Russian also. Dzena is the lawyer who has been lobbying for the refugees, and was baptised herself recently. There was much note taking by the brothers and sisters which was encouraging for any speaker:



On Saturday afternoon, we witnessed the baptism of sister Ina – a woman in her 70's who decided at the Bible school for baptism. The house does not have a bath, so the options were to arrange a portable pool and do our best to heat some water for it; or to baptise in the river that runs close by. Ina was insistent that she wanted to be baptised in the river, because Jesus had been – no compromise here! So with an outside temperature of around freezing, she was baptised by Bro Duncan in the river, and as the video footage shows, without 1 shriek or

complaint about the cold!



Another feature of the Bible school was a series of musical items performed with guitars, violins and piano. This accentuated the lecture subject of praise, and I was able to make an effort to sing “As the Deer pants for the Water” (based on Ps 42 v 1) in Latvian. Hannah and myself from NZ, Rowan from Australia, Sisters Dace, Daiga and Ieva (3 young ladies with whom my 15 year old Hannah enjoyed good fellowship) from Latvia, joined to play and sing a number of spiritual songs.



It was sad to leave, but I am sure that all of the brothers and sisters that attended will take away much, in exhortation and encouragement to continue the road of endurance.

As for us from New Zealand, it is humbling and exciting to see God at work everywhere – in all corners of the globe. Truly he is calling out a people for his name from all kindreds and tongues.

Bro John Aldersley