

LATVIA MISSION TRIP: YOUTH WORK CREW

JULY 2010 TRIP SUMMARY

2010 Latvia Youth Mission Trip

Last month I was in Latvia for the 22nd time! In 2002 I brought a group of students to Latvia, none of which were my own. It was a great blessing to bring four students from St. John's in Beaver Dam on a work crew mission trip, along with Janet Anderson, who is mid-20's and a former president of our congregation. (Janet also spent four months in Spain while in college, so she was an amazing chaperon to have along.)

In 2002 the two staffers and I discovered that of our 9 students, 7 had come from the same church in Minnesota, and none of them had been regular in church attendance since their confirmation. The selection of the four students from St. John's was based upon their participation in not only the worship but also the life of St. John's since their confirmations: 3 young women and one young man.

We originally billed the trip through Youth Encounter's Side by Side again, but I was saddened to learn that as of May, no other churches had signed on for the trip and not even any individual students felt led to go and serve in Latvia. So in consultation with YE SXS we determined to take charge of the trip ourselves and make it a St. John's trip. The director of SXS was great and helped us get "missionary insurance" for our trip, which, thank God (and I do) we did not need.

In the past I have done my summaries for you by topic or heading, but this time, since I was with my students the entire time, I think it would be best to summarize our trip chronologically as we experienced it together.

ARRIVAL AND FIRST DAYS: Our trip got off to an inauspicious start after landing in Stockholm for our five-hour layover. There was a mechanical issue with the old beater propeller plane, and it ended up being almost 10 hours from the time we arrived to the time we finally took off for Riga. (It was a first for the students to ride on a prop. LOL.) Poor Mara had to wait almost 3 hours at the Riga airport before we finally landed and got our bags.

But then our trip took a turn for the better right away. Mara had arranged for us a nice flat (apartment) around the corner from The Lutheran Consistory Building (national offices) right in Old Riga at a VERY reasonable cost. That meant we were able to have a home base to leave our stuff where it was safe as we traveled all over Latvia. And travel all over we did.

That evening we met the planner for the Summer Bible Camp where we would be serving on the west coast. We met at TGIFridays for dinner. Vieturs would not eat, saying that the heat stole his appetite. (I think he did not want to order a meal on us at such an expensive place.) He told us we would be traveling to Vainode on Thursday so we had time to see Old Riga the next day. He arranged a van for us so that we would not have to take the public bus to get there.

Our first full day in Latvia we took a tour of Old Riga together. Oh yea ...the heat. Latvia broke 100-year-old records for temperature and longevity (and I would bet for humidity as well). It was at least 90 degrees with 90% humidity almost every day. (The days we worked outside the heat let up for a few days, thankfully.) As C. S. Lewis wrote in one of his novels, I despair of being able to convey the constant stress the heat and humidity put on us, taking its toll throughout. (I found out later the heat wave hit all of Europe and people were dying! And yes, I know it was that hot here, but there was no AC around there except in a few public places. After preaching at Sloka the last Sunday a member drove me halfway from church to Sunday school building. I announced when I got there that I had been in air-conditioning for 2 ½ minutes!) Part of our day was buying pots and pans for the flat to

cook with and donate upon leaving AND TWO FANS! That night we went to Forums Cinema and watched "Robin Hood" (air-conditioning!).

The next day it was off to Vainode for the Summer Bible Camp. The camp was held at a residential middle school, so that meant that because I am old and decrepit we got to stay in the dorms rather than tents. This part of the trip was hard because we got split up among six groups with the assurance that there would be an English speaker in each group. Wrong. Serving without a translator is both challenging and frustrating, and for the only time I can remember frustration won out, though only briefly. We shared the songs they had learned in Latvian. And on the last night we were there the leader had us do a skit for the group. It was great because it was mimed and we held cards with words, so no speaking. It was a great skit. (Michael played Jesus.) It was a great ending to our stay. Then on Saturday our last day there we helped with a trek that ended with a water fight! Then group photo with all students and staff, and jump on a public bus back to Riga to meet the youth of New St. Gertrude's Church. The national director of Sunday schools was at the Camp. I got an e-mail from Mara this week in which she passed along the national director's thanks and appreciation. She wanted to make sure our youth knew how much she appreciated the work done by our youth at the camp, and how glad she was that she had extended the invitation to us to participate.

A word about Alise. I learned on my very first trip in 1992 that while we have big plans, God sees individual people in need. By the second day at camp I had noticed Alise. She never smiled. She always had a frown on her face. She was in Janet's group so I mentioned her to Janet. (Alise spoke English, so Janet was able to get to know her some during the camp days.) I also mentioned her to Vieturs and he did some checking. Yep. Alise came from a VERY difficult home life, seriously dysfunctional. We have a picture from the craft room after we had made Latvian flag crosses with students. In the photo Alise is smiling. On the last day we were there, after the trek,

the water fight began. Alise had a huge smile on her face as she ran at me with the hose. Then when she turned the hose on Janet she laughed out loud. My journal reads: TODAY ALISE SMILED! TODAY ALISE LAUGHED.

STAGE TWO: New St. Gertrude's Church

No translation problem with the youth of New St. Gertrude's. They all spoke English very well. We met them Saturday night for dinner and a movie: pizza and "Knight and Day" at the Forums Cinema. I took the opportunity to ask the young women (The young man who is also a leader of their youth was working throughout our trip and we never did get to see him.) if they knew what work we would be doing for New St. Gertrude's (NSGs) on Monday. They had no idea, including the pastor's daughter. <sigh> This is definitely a Latvian "thing." I had been pushing for details since last fall – nothing doing. "Bus labi." (Everything will be fine.)

The next morning we attended worship at NSGs. We shared "Gift of Love" and I preached on St. Meinards, who was the monk from Germany who brought The Gospel to Latvia around the year 1000. In August they celebrate St. Meinards' Day. I had written this sermon for the 2002 trip, but it had not been preached at NSGs then, and since Sandra Gintere (the pastor Janis' wife and assistant dean of the Lutheran seminary) has her doctorate degree in historical missiology, she thought it would be fine. Their daughter Sarma, who grew up at Ft. Wayne, IN translated and did very well. Then we took a BIG cab together with Janis and the youth to BIG LIDO, which is a huge cafeteria-style restaurant with traditional Latvian food along with a very wide assortment. So our youth again got to eat and fellowship with their youth over a meal.

On Monday we showed up relatively bright and early at NSGs to work side by side with their youth. We mopped floors, moved books from boxes to shelving, and organized musical instruments. One of our students said afterward during debriefing that it seemed like busy-work, and I had to

agree. But we had just seen "Knight and Day" together, and there is a line that "someday" really means "never." These were things that had probably been waiting to be done for a very long time and there was just never the energy or priority to get them done. "Someday." "What day is it today?" "It's someday, Roy." The students had a really good attitude about the work. The next day we met at an outdoor museum where the upkeep is managed by a member of NSGs. It is a cultural museum, like Old World Wisconsin. The old stick fences needed replacing so we helped with that for a couple hours. One thing the students mentioned in their debriefing was how considerate our hosts were about working in the heat (though it was not as hot these three days). After two or three hours it would be, "Ok, that's enough for now." And throughout they understood our need for water to stay hydrated. (I have thought for years that Latvians maintain themselves at a more or less constant state of dehydration. So this was something they could easily have overlooked in addressing our need for constant water intake, but they did not, keeping bottled water readily available for us.)

After our work session we were left to tour the outdoor cultural museum.

Wednesday: Day 3 of work crew: We met a NSGs student and headed to the beach region of Jurmala to work on a house the church had purchased to be used as a congregation house / youth house sometime in the future. We arrived late because I missed the train stop and we got off at the wrong one. <Typical Bob> As it turned out, it did not matter much, though, because when we got to the house site there was nothing really for us to do. (This is what I was mentioning up above. No plan.) The property chair cleared the area around the house with a power trimmer and the women raked up the material to be burned. Meanwhile Michael noticed that the paint on the house was atrocious. At some point they were going to have to repaint. There was no work for us inside because a team was working to renovate the inside. But when I asked the team if they had scrapers, they handed Michael a scraper and me a wire brush and we scraped the front and sides of

the house as high as we could reach without a ladder to make it ready for painting. Well done. Then it was off to the beach to swim and play in the sun – their first of two opportunities to swim in the Gulf of Riga.

CONGREGATION DAYS AND SLOKA:

Originally we had been invited to Congregation Days in Daugavpils, which is in the far SE corner of Latvia from Thursday through Saturday. A friend I met years ago through Sandra G., Lauma, asked when we could meet and what we were doing. When she found out about the Congregation Days trip she volunteered to come along as our translator, which was great. Lauma called the woman setting up appointments for us and discovered that the Congregation Days event had been reduced from three days to one, AND it had been moved closer to Riga to a town called Krusspils (Cross Castle). Lauma and I had to laugh (nervously) wondering when anyone was going to tell us this, or were we just going to show up in Daugavpils and get off the train...to...no one? <sigh> Thank you God; and thank you Lauma. So we had a couple days to rest and souvenir shop. Even though congregation days went from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. on Saturday, we would not be able to stay nearly that long as we were meeting the Sloka students at the Sunday school building in Sloka Saturday evening between 6 and 7. We decided to take the train to Krusspils Friday evening, which would allow us to get set up in the church building (where we would be sleeping) and take a tour of the renovated Krusspils Castle (which is actually redundant). The Latvian word for City is "Pilsseta" (the place of the castle). This city is called Cross Castle. It was a very interesting tour complete with headphone descriptions in English. Then crashing at the church and up for morning worship. After worship it was off to an island in the river for the speakers. Janet and the students helped with child-care events while Lauma translated the speaker for me. The translator they had assigned to help us help them was pretty bad, and I thought, "O boy, here we go again." But then a young woman

just out of 8th grade stepped up and introduced herself as our translator. She did wonderfully and helped our students help their workers help children. Her name is Laura and she is on Facebook.

It was amazingly hot! We found out later that it topped 100 that day and just as humid. The lectures started in an open-air amphitheater. Then someone came with an umbrella to put over the speaker (my friend Janis Bitans, who is a charismatic Lutheran pastor and former director of St. Gregor's Bible School). Then they stopped the lecture and moved Janis under a tree as people fled the seats and found shelter under other trees so that the seats were empty and people gathered under the trees for the lecture. Amazing. BTW, it was great for me to be at this event because there were so many people I knew that were there and greeted and welcomed me. One young pastor came up and greeted me, telling me how much he enjoyed sitting in my lectures the past few years on preaching techniques at the seminary. You know how I am with names...but I did remember his face. So it was really fun for me to catch up with so many people. So I was really glad we had come, even though we could only stay a short time. And we survived the heat. Then lunch and off to the train for Riga and then Sloka. The new translator at Sloka is a student of Lauma's, so Lauma called her to make sure we would be met at the train. The train from Krusspils to Riga was a low point of the trip. We felt like we were melting. It was so tempting to stick heads out the windows. All we could do was sip water and survive. The one from Riga to Sloka was better, but three hours on two trains in that horrible heat. I told the young women at Sloka that we felt like mud puddles. We needed to shower before dinner and a movie. Problem. The septic was backed up at the Sunday school building. No showers. But to their credit, they had called the father of one of the students who had gotten on the phone and gotten someone out there RIGHT NOW to pump the septic. So after a bite to eat and devotional singing, and watching "Avatar" together, we got showers before a late-night meal. Then

"mixers" games and off to bed. In the morning it was off to church at Sloka. A word about Sloka. Sloka is my "home" church in Latvia. It was there that Pastor Beimanis (Krustevs = Godfather) ministered in September of 1992. I have been at Sloka every trip – all 22. When Beimanis stepped down his nephew, Mara's brother Janis, became pastor there. Janis is a good friend and the only pastor who would allow me to preach while I was still in seminary before becoming ordained. I have watched the Sunday school children of Sloka grow up and have children of their own. Earlier in the week Mara had shared with me that the church board at Sloka had taken a vote of no confidence against Janis. The vote was 5 to 7, so not enough for removal, but Janis decided that with that big a split he would resign. (He is probably right.) Mara feels betrayed. Janis had vacation coming, so took it before moving on, which meant he would not be presiding when I was there on Sunday. I said to Mara that at least she could transfer to the church her husband Harijs serves (Harry). (She had stayed at Sloka because it is nearby and it is the church she grew up in.) She said that she actually couldn't because her husband had been removed from his call to Pinke, and that he was not available for call at this time. They did not know what they would do. He is very handy at fixing and building, but the unemployment rate is close to 20%, so what would be available. I was very shaken by all of this and shared it with the team. So Sunday at Sloka was "weird" without Janis there

The supply pastor was very gracious and spoke English well (much better than Janis does) so worship went well on Sunday. We sang "Gift of Love" again, and the students from Sloka were there, all of who speak English, so that was nice. I did my short version of Louie Giglio's "How Great is Our God" sermon with the marble and the picture of laminin. The students passed out one of each to everyone before worship. I had told the Sloka youth that at the end I would be singing the refrain of "How Great is Our God" in Latvian, and would they please join me. (The sermon was in

English with Mara translating.) At the end I sang the refrain. The Sloka students joined in the second time. By the fourth time the whole congregation was singing it, and the fifth time I dropped out and bowed at the altar painting and walked off - a high point for me in the trip.

From the Sunday school building we took the train to Majori and walked the "boardwalk" to the beach, having lunch along the way for our second day of sand and sea (gulf). This time I went in as well. I had not swum in the Gulf of Riga since 1996, so it felt really good. The hard part was that of course we had all our stuff not only from Sloka, but also from Krusspils with us! So we were lugging all that along the boardwalk to the gulf. Mostly I watched the stuff and read my novel. But I did get in the water. It was a good exhausting workout to lug all that back to the train and then lug it again from the Central Station to the flat. But we made it. Our work time was over. It was time to rest and relax and enjoy Latvia heading into the "home stretch."

THE HOME STRETCH: The next day the young women of NSGs joined us again for a trip to the south of Latvia to visit Bauska and the Medieval and Renaissance castles there. It was really nice to have them with us, not only for the company, but the bus connections were more complicated than I had realized and they helped in Latvian. The Rundalspils Castle is a replica of the French Renaissance castles and now an art museum – worth seeing. It was Hannah's birthday and Anna's (NSGs) Name Day. On the way back Anna bought Hannah a birthday cake! So when we hit Riga I bought Anna a flower for her Name Day. And we said goodbye to the young people of NSGs. That night we had an end of trip celebration dinner in Old Riga and I bumped into Pastor Martins Irbe and his wife Gunta celebrating Gunta's birthday. (It seems I usually see Martins or Gunta by bumping into them.) We had a nice chat.

Tuesday, July 27th. Last full day in Latvia. We spent the day souvenir shopping, although we did make to see the inside of the Russian Orthodox

Cathedral. We all were not able to go through though because you are not allowed in with your knees showing (seriously) and for the only time during my entire trip I wore shorts above the knees. Janet, Michael and Alexa went through (They gave Alexa a wrap around skirt.) while the other three of us stood at the entrance and looked in.

We also made a significant gift that day to New St. Gertrude's to help in the building of a lower level prayer chapel.

The trip back on Wednesday was thankfully uneventful. And this time my jet lag from coming west was not nearly as bad as it has been in the past.

CONCLUSION: So I would say it was a very good trip. The students responded very well to difficult circumstances. I was really proud of them and very glad not only that they were there, but also that it had ended up being just "us" of St. John's. God is good.

In June I submitted my application for a Lilly Pastoral Refreshing grant for sabbatical in Latvia next summer for three months: May through July. This month I submit a similar grant request to Louisville Foundation. The Lilly grant is more comprehensive in covering the church expenses at home while I am away. I am praying that God will grant one of these to allow me to go to Latvia for three months next summer. (I have never been in Latvia more than three weeks at one time.)

Because God granted us the fundraising for this trip through a separate fund-raiser at St. John's, I have funds in my account for one more trip (not counting a possible sabbatical which would again be funded separately). After that it is in God's hands. But...of course...it always has been. Dievam un Latvijai (for God and for Latvia!) Bob

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