

Churches European Rural Network Visit to Latvia, 5-9 May 2010

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Our visit was organised by Aris Adler of the Rural Forum for Latvia who did a wonderful job on our behalf. We are most grateful to him and his colleagues who gave so freely of their time. Also to Rudi Job who – once again – set up the initial contact and guided us through the programme.

In Riga we visited and heard about Rural Forum Latvia, the Diakonia Centre of the Latvian Lutheran Church and the Latvian YMCA/YWCA. In the area of Sigulda we were deep in the Latvian countryside, and here we met farmers, rural church members and a number of rurally-based voluntary organisations. It was a rich and varied experience. These are my major impressions.

Demography

The total population of Latvia is 2.3 million, of whom 850,000 live in Riga. Up to a half of the population is Russian-speaking. There are approx 1.2 children per family only.

A History of Suffering

The Latvian people have suffered throughout their history. Having been fought over and subjugated for centuries, they finally became an independent nation in 1918. There was an immediate flowering of culture – poetry, novels, dance and above all the sumptuous Art Nouveau architecture of Riga that is probably the finest in the world, along with Napier in New Zealand.

In 1940 the Soviet Union invaded and immediately rounded up all Latvian leaders – pastors, teachers, politicians, even wealthy peasants - and sent them to Siberia. Only 20 per cent ever returned.

In 1941 the Nazis invaded, and for the next four years Latvia formed part of the battle line between the Soviet Union and the Nazis. The level of destruction was terrible.

In 1945 the Soviet troops finally drove out the Nazis. Agriculture was collectivised, industry was run via Party officials, the trademark tower-blocks appeared even in villages, and ethnic Russians were settled in Latvian towns. There was another wave of transportations to Siberia. A full-scale Communist state was established.

In 1991 the Soviet occupation ended, agricultural collectivisation collapsed and in many cases land was returned to original owners. State-owned flats

were handed over to sitting tenants. The transition from a culture of dependency on the state to entrepreneurial capitalism has been extremely painful.

This has been exacerbated by the financial crisis of 2008/9. The government decided not to borrow on the financial markets, but to cut expenditure. People seem to have accepted this and every government employee, from school cleaner to politician, has taken a 50 per cent cut in their salary. Many others, including those who so generously helped us, are only working half-time. Many government services have stopped, or been handed over to volunteer groups with minimal state support (see below). One of the major health insurance providers went bankrupt and was not bailed out by government, so that individual health insurance is virtually unobtainable in Latvia. A number of hospitals have closed.

Yet despite all of this, many people we met were resilient, enthusiastic and positive. I thought they were just amazing and their determination and inventiveness reminded me a little of wartime Britain. With a spirit like theirs they will surely come through.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

An NGO in Latvia is essentially an independent volunteer group with officers paid little more than expenses. It is not an organisation of professionals with paid staff.

We met a group of volunteer activists in the Sigulda area who had 'achieved' no less than 200 projects since 1991 – including rebuilding from the rubble a church, rebuilding from the rubble a splendid secondary school, establishing a library/community centre in a deep rural area and even building their own tarmac road - so many metres a year when they could afford it. The key to the success of this group of 14 'activists' has been their ability to work collaboratively. They have developed a hard-learned experience in completing application forms to draw down grants.

We visited two NGOs which worked for the handicapped (physical and mental). Both had started as very small groups of enthusiasts with a real passion for their cause. They now have two permanent centres which cater for children and their parents, and also prepare teenagers to enter the job market. They have even persuaded the local education authority to open classes for the handicapped in mainstream schools instead of sending them to board away from home. Again, virtually all of this has been achieved with volunteers, and they have become expert at applying for grants.

One spin-off of the economic crisis is that those on unemployment benefit can supplement the very basic payment by working as volunteers (they get an extra £120 a month for this). The inventiveness and variety of activities put on was just amazing. They also welcome young full-time volunteers from other countries such as Germany and Norway.

Another thing that impressed me was the fact that teachers from the teenage centre visited every family involved each year to ask them for their ideas about what else could be done and what ideas they had for improvement.

Grants

Money comes from a variety of sources: Germany, Norway, Sweden and of course the EU. It is helped by the fact that historically Latvia has been a 'cultural colony' of the Baltic 'Empires'. But the key thing is that a number of active groups have recognised the importance of 'professional' applications to grant-making bodies. Interestingly they have set up a 'Riga Development Area' so as to be able to draw down EU money.

Young People in Rural Areas

Latvia has a major demographic problem in that there are only on average 1.2 children per family; a third of young people emigrate, and life in rural areas is not very exciting! There is a real need to keep young people in rural areas and the Sigulda Action Group have tried to tackle the problem by creating an international-standard sports hall at the school, and by setting up an 'extreme sports' centre in the nearby National Park.

Agriculture

Clearly this is in turmoil. Some entrepreneurial 'modern' farmers have been prepared to form collectives and to buy or rent up to 300 hectares of land; and they will survive. We saw a vegetable-producing collective and a large pork unit. But many others are still trying to survive on 2 or 3 hectares using pre-war methods. Clearly many have just given up the unequal struggle, and we saw large tracts of countryside that had been abandoned or only mown once a year for hay. With the collapse of the collective system, a marketing infrastructure for individuals and collectives has to be re-invented.

On the other hand we were told that the number of health food shops is increasing and the culture of 'healthy eating' is growing. In the financial crisis, many are beginning to grow their own vegetables again. Latvians, even in the towns, have a culture of 'going for country walks' with the family at weekends. Ecological education has a great influence on young people. And perhaps most interestingly, a cyber-game called 'Farming' (virtual reality farming) is all the rage. The YMCA has noticed that more young people are now showing an interest in opting for agricultural training.

Tourism

Riga is well set-up for tourism, as is the National Park around Sigulda. This could be a big money-earner.

The Churches

The church in Latvia was more or less rubbed out by the Soviet authorities. Ministers and priests were sent to Siberia or went underground. In 1991 many churches were reopened, but it was a matter of starting again from scratch. Buildings needed to be renewed, there were few priests/ministers (a number came in to help from Sweden), and congregations tended to be old and poor. In some rural parishes the weekly collection often amounts to no more than €10.

In these circumstances it's not surprising that few have yet managed to develop much in the way of proactive community activity. However we met an outstanding 'activity group' based on Allazi Church; the centre for teenage handicapped that we saw is run by a devout Christian on Christian lines; and we spoke with the organisers of the Lutheran Diakonia organisation, based in Riga, with 'officers' throughout the country.

Importantly the German Churches of Lubeck support this extensively (including a seconded minister), and we heard of groups for street children and alcoholics, soup kitchens, support for the jobless in rural areas – and above all a recognition that the Church needs to inspire people to hope in the face of despair.

I got the impression that the churches major on picking up the pieces when life has disintegrated, while Rural Forum Latvia tries to rebuild structures so that people don't fall through the net in the first place.

We also visited a quite remarkable pilgrimage church at Krimulda (the oldest in Latvia) run by a holy and very gifted pastor, Austris Ravins. He told us that young people were coming back to the churches – provided that the church is seen as open to all and can speak to them in the language of their culture.

The Latvian Churches are remarkably ecumenical: they have to be. Numbers are divided equally between Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox. Church life is generally characterised by openness rather than exclusiveness. The Krimulda church we visited was Lutheran, 'felt' Catholic and could be used by Orthodox if requested.

Local churches often own a good deal of land, but this is often not very profitably managed (for many understandable reasons). Their projects are rarely funded by the state and the reason given (which we frequently heard cited) is that they should sell/manage their own land to fund projects. Clearly it is an issue that the Churches need to tackle.

Those who are Left Behind

We saw a real concern shown for the needs of the handicapped: and we saw a real concern shown at Diakonia for those who slip through the net. But we also sensed an attitude that those who won't/can't work and adapt have only themselves to blame and will just have to suffer until they come to their

senses. This was particularly evident in conversations about peasant farmers and flat owners.

Conclusion

Above all I felt humbled to visit a people who have suffered so much and yet not given up. And I think that now I begin to have some understanding of the enormity of the transition from communist collectivism to agricultural capitalism in rural areas. I hope our visit encouraged local people; it certainly enriched me.