



Lithuanian Baptist News



The Baptist Union of
Lithuania

You will know the truth, and
the truth will make you free
John 8:32

September 2002, Issue 2

The Baptist Union of Lithuania
is a member of:

European Baptist Federation



Baptist World Alliance



Dear Readers of *LBN*,

FOR A LONG TIME already has our Baptist Union felt a need of communicating better with our friends and supporters beyond our country. We have been encouraged to develop our web site and provide information about our ministry in other ways. However, our good intentions have been disturbed by such factors as time and money. And our magazine, *Tiesos Draugas* ('A Friend of Truth'), published six times per year in Lithuanian, probably is of little help to you!

Therefore this newsletter, *Lithuanian Baptist News*, is an endeavor to address the issue of steadily informing our readers abroad about our joys and cares in the Lithuanian ministry. Along the way we hope ultimately to develop our web site as well. Much of the information found in this newsletter will also be posted there. However, just as in this age of computers some still long for a good old hardcover instead of the entire library on CD, so we also hope to find the reader for a paper copy of our "messenger."

In this newsletter you will find some information about particular events of the Baptist life in Lithuania as well as regular update on larger long-term projects. *LBN* aims at not only information but also encouragement of those who

- 11th & 12th of October we anticipate our annual conference during which the new Council and the Chairman have to be elected;
- By the end of December three of our Master students at IBTS are expected to graduate (more about this inside the issue).
- 7th through 13th of July the Executive Secretary will be a part in the BWA General

Why *LBN*?

would like to take a part in our ministry in Lithuania.

In each issue we will introduce one of our churches. We will try to show their life as it is, both joyful and difficult—joyful because of God's grace, saving and adding new believers to his people in Lithuania, and difficult, for the tasks churches face in today's post-Communist society are often beyond certainty of the achievable. We invite you to pray with them for courage and God's power in keeping to the narrow path.

In this issue we will present a larger picture of our life. Among these slides you will find some history of the Baptist movement in Lithuania as well as description of a couple of recent projects. Upon your request, we can provide more information on the topics or projects presented in *LBN*.

Finally, last year we celebrated a 160 years jubilee of the first Baptist Church in Lithuania which soon became a rapidly growing and mission-oriented community. These memories give a new impetus to the ministry of Lithuanian Baptists in their struggle for place and identity in the post-Communist currents of Lithuanian society. We are glad to share this vision now and thank our God for giving us the friendship of commit-

This year...next year...

Council

meeting in Seville, Spain;

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Baptist Church in Klaipėda

ON THE SECOND of October, 1841, in the late evening, 16 women were gathered on the bank of the river Danė just outside the modern day city of Klaipėda (then Memel). These women were the first to be baptized by full immersion and constitute the first Baptist church in Lithuania. The next day at the other end of the city, in the Kurisch Lagoon, 9 men were baptized. The baptism was performed by the German Baptist Johann Gerhard Oncken upon the invitation of E. Grimm, a resident of Memel.

Klaipėda, or Memel, is situated in the western part of the country that was under the German rule since the beginning of the 13th century. The majority of the population, however, was a mixture of nationalities and cultures, representing a unique subculture both in the view of Germans and Lithuanians. The national identity of these people was very uncertain until the late 19th century when some important Lithuanian thinkers such as V.Vyduenas started exploring the cultural and national characteristics of the population in this area.

After the baptism of the first ethnical Lithuanian in 1851, the missionary work among the settlements of ethnic Lithuanians began. This work resulted in the establishment of 6 small rural churches most of which disappeared after the WW2. In 1860, the first Latvian Baptists were baptized in the Memel Baptist Church. The first Russian Baptist was baptized in Tiflis by Martin Kalweit, a member of the same church. According to some sources, by the 1875 the Memel Baptist Church had 27 mission points in Latvia only, with the total membership of approximately 2200 members.

In 1889, the first Latvian speaking Baptist Church was established in the land of Lithuania. Unfortunately, because of the

A glimpse to the past

predominantly Roman Catholic background in most of the country, the Memel Baptist Church could not have a more significant influence upon the missionary movement in the rest of the land. Thus missionary work in Lithuania Major was mostly initiated from abroad.

Shortly before two other Latvian-speaking churches were established in 1902 and 1907, the German speaking Baptist Church in Kaunas (former Kovno) was founded in 1889. Later the ministry of this church was also developed in Russian and Lithuanian languages.

In Vilnius (today's capital of Lithuania) the Baptist Church was established in 1912, initially supervised by the duchess V.F.Gagarina. This church was Russian-speaking and worked only among the citizens of Vilnius region as it was occupied by Poland. Thus it did not have an opportunity to join the Baptist movement in the rest of the country. In 1933, the Baptist Union of Lithuania was established in Klaipėda.

After the WW2 Baptist work has slowly renewed. One of the few remaining buildings in Klaipėda after 1945 was the Baptist Church. The congregation, primarily German, had immigrated to Germany. A similar situation happened in Mažeikiai and Kaunas. Because of their foreign roots, most of the Baptist communities simply disappeared and the work these areas was recovered only in a few decades of the post-war period. Some smaller communities were never reestablished.

The Baptist Union of Lithuania was formally reestablished and registered with the Government of Lithuania in 1998. In 2001, we received a status of a State-recognized Religious Association. This new status qualified us for a fairer legal treatment within the country. However, there are many legal issues still to be solved. We still struggle to receive the right to acquire land or have some tax exemption as other nine traditional religions have. Tensions in society brought another concern into the life of Lithuanian Baptists—a need for a clearer identity among other Christian denominations and society at large.

Today there are ten churches belonging to the Baptist Union of Lithuania. They are situated in Klaipėda, Kaunas, Vilnius (2), Šiauliai (2), Ylakai, Mažeikiai, Šilute, and Visaginas, with the total membership of 500 baptized believers. There is also one affiliated church in Šiauliai and several mission points in different parts of the country.

There is also a significant presence of independent Baptist churches, initiated mainly from the US. Regrettably, they have been always shunning the fellowship of the indigenous Baptists.

SOME FACTS

Lithuania is a state in the geographic centre of the Europe, counting 10 years of restored independence. Population is 3,7 mln. About



Baptist Church in Kaunas

80% profess to be Roman Catholic, about 10% Orthodox and Old-believers, and about 4% Protestants: Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, Pentecostals, 7th Day Adventists, Word of Faith, and some others. Since November 1995 Lithuania has adopted the Law of Religious Associations. This Law states that there are nine state-recognized traditional religious communities: Catholic, Orthodox, Old-believers, Lutheran, Reformed, Greek Catholic, Jews, Karaites (about 270 individuals professing a special form of Judaism), Muslims (Sunnites), and, partially, the Baptist Union of Lithuania since July 2001. These communities have more rights than others and may receive financial support from the state (apart from the Baptists). The others are by and large treated as a cult or sect.

Linas Andronovas

NEBI: Non-residential Evangelical Bible Institute

LITHUANIAN Baptists have never had an educational institution of their own. Yet since the regaining of independence in 1991 there have been dreams of creating an educational structure that would enable our people to learn together and share their experience with each other.

Surely the seminary was out of question, at least for the time being. The vision was to have a flexible structure that would be open not only for those few able to devote most of their time for this purpose, but also for 'normal' people with their full time jobs and families—the backbone of the churches. From our experience of organizing occasional seminars, the interest was there, and that encouraged thinking of ways of enlarging this small beginning.

Another burning issue was to finally give a proper attention to the discipleship of believers and not only evangelism, as was the common pattern after 1991. The churches have been growing, but the need of maturity became too obvious to be neglected anymore. So, for example, out of ten churches barely a half can enjoy regular in-depth Bible study times in their gatherings.

Although Lithuanian society considers itself Christian, it is in fact largely illiterate as it concerns the Bible. So, for example, the first Old

Testament version in modern Lithuanian was published only in 1996. The situation bears on our churches as well; the need for more Christian education is obvious. Fellowship and learning with and from each other is not the least in the list of our needs as well. In such a small community, surrounded by the environment of the Roman Catholic Church that is often hostile toward other Christian denominations, it has become an indubitable need.

In this way, the vision of NEBI, a Non-residential Evangelical Bible Institute, was born. Based on seminars and lectures offered

on weekends as well as some longer sessions during the summer time, it will respond to the pressing need of our believers to learn more about the roots and the fruits of their faith and be better equipped to serve in their churches and the world around.

Lina Andronovienė



University of Texas Library

Baptist & Anabaptist Research Centre

THE IDEA of the Baptist and Anabaptist Research Centre (BARC) emerged as a vital part of an evangelistic vision of the Baptist Union of Lithuania.

The common understanding of *Lithuanian being equal to Catholic* was decisive during the crucial times of the shaping of Lithuanian national identity, namely, at the end of the 19th and the beginning 20th century as well as in the time of movement for Lithuanian independence in the years 1988-1991. Nowadays, the lack of historical knowledge and the fear of the 'unknown,' frequent misperceptions about the roots and nature of the Radical Reformation, still are an obstacle for reaching people.

Therefore today information and education specifically in the post-Reformation history and the currents of the Radical movement

became one of the key evangelistic tools. We believe that presenting Baptist and Anabaptist heritage on the public and academic level will contribute to supporting a more open-minded society. In the light of this vision the activities of the centre will focus on two major issues.

First, it will be engaged in the research work for publishing the history of the Baptist and other Radicals' movement in Lithuania, for so far these churches have had access only to the fragments of their history and suffer from the lack of identity in the context of Lithuanian society.

In addition, BARC will serve as an information centre for the edification of the Lithuanian society at large. BARC research will be regularly published in a bi-annual magazine designed both for the scholarly as well as wider circles. Our hope is that BARC will cooperate

with other centres of historical studies in Lithuania and abroad and will work on ecumenical projects to prevent the religious establishment in Lithuania, so often marked by illiteracy in history or manipulation of facts, from oppressively treating the churches of the Radical Reformation as cults.

The Centre will be located in the Klaipeda Baptist Church. Founded in 1841, this church was the 10th Baptist church founded on the European Continent and became a key Baptist mission centre in this part of Europe. Our rich history, as well as an acute need for evangelism and education, has become an inspiration for establishing BARC.

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Prayer requests & other needs

PLEASE PRAY FOR:

- Our Union Youth camp in the first week of July of 2002. This will be the fifth camp since the time we were again able to organize events like these freely. Usually we gather around 60 young people from 16 to 40. Experience of the last years proved that we must carry on with this ministry. Unfortunately, this is the only youth event among the churches in the Union. Please pray that we could expand youth ministries in our country;

- Annual Conference of our Union in October 2002. A new Union Council and Chairman should be appointed;

- From January 2003 we hope to start our Non-residential Evangelical Bible Institute (NEBI). Please pray for a successful beginning and provision of necessary funds that we still lack.

- At the same time we hope to launch the Baptist & Anabaptist Research Centre (BARC). This unique enterprise was designed to fill in the vacuum of historical knowledge about the life of Radical believers in this region.

- Four of eleven congregations have no pastors.

Please pray for the new mission-hearted brothers and sisters to join in the ministry.

OUR NEEDS:

- Scholarships for our students at the Bible Institute (NEBI) are needed. We estimate a minimum need of approximately 3000 US\$ / 3200 Euros per year to run the essential track of this school with approximately 30 students on board;

- We are looking for the help of approximately 1500 US\$/ 1620 Euros for the Union youth camp in 2003;

- Most churches struggle in one way or another with sustaining their ministers. To help these needs we have established a Pastoral Fund to help smaller churches in difficult moments. Currently this fund is not far from the nil.

- We seek for support of our mission in the towns of Kretinga and Palanga. We are trying to start new church in this area and need funds for a Lithuanian missionary family.

LBN

Our Master Students at IBTS, Prague

THIS YEAR has been very special to us. For the first time we have such a crowd—3 Master students— graduating IBTS, one of the top European Baptist educational institutions.

It may look as an insignificant event, but not given the circumstances of the Baptist body in Lithuania. When other two Lithuanian Baptist students also came to IBTS for the Certificate in Applied Theology programme, we found out that at that time the Lithuanian Baptist Union had one percent of its membership there!

On a more serious note, we believe that this is a good investment and a hopeful prospective for the Baptist work in Lithuania. God blessed our community with a number of gifted young people who have vision for the future of the Baptist work in Lithuania.

Rūta Lysenkaitė is a historian. She went through half M.A. of the History of the Baltic Region before realizing how her gifts may be used for the churches in her studying and teaching Baptist and Anabaptist History. She is now in M.Th. Programme in Baptist and Anabaptist Studies at IBTS.

Lina Andronovienė has a double major in English and Theology from Lithuanian Christian College. She is now in the M.Th. in Applied Theology programme, researching the field of Homiletics, Social Ethics, and Practical Theology.

Linas Andronovas is pursuing the same degree as his spouse Lina. He also continues to serve as an Executive Secretary of the Baptist Union. All three of them are expected to graduate at the end this year.

In the picture below you will also see the Rector of IBTS, The Revd. Keith Jones, who has been very supportive of our team at IBTS, encouraging us to see IBTS as a source for education and spiritual renewal of Baptist ministry in Lithuania.

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From left to right: The Revd. Keith Jones, Rūta Lysenkaitė, Lina Andronovienė & Linas Andronovas.