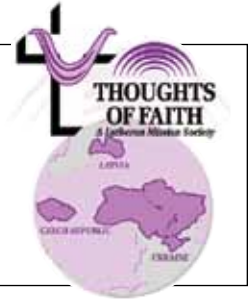


# Thoughts of Faith

Thoughts of Faith is a confessional Lutheran mission society dedicated to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Latvia through printed materials and personal ministry.



April 2010  
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## Celebrating the Risen Christ in Ukraine

Easter is the most celebrated Christian holiday in Ukraine. It has an absolutely logical explanation in the triumph all believers in Christ have, and it is expressively sung in an antiphon of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church – *Christ is risen from the dead. He has overcome our death by his own death and granted life to those who are in tombs.* This antiphon is ancient and loved by every Ukrainian Christian and it is sung in many churches until Ascension Day.

Our churches often have several Easter services stretching through the day. Families come to church dressed in their best clothes, often in Ukrainian national dress or elements of it. They bring baskets containing pascha, a sweet Easter bread; krashankas, colored eggs; and pysankas, painted and decorated eggs. The baskets are usually placed close to the altar as expressions of gratitude to the Lord for all the gifts and especially for the gift of eternal life, won by Jesus. People greet each other with "Khrystos voskre!" and respond with "Voistyno voskres!" which means, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" These greetings are used until Ascension.

*Continued on page 3*



*The Resurrection congregation in Kyiv celebrates Easter.*

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**Thoughts of Faith, Inc.**  
6 Browns Ct. • Mankato, MN 56001  
Phone: 507-344-7354  
pamtof@blc.edu • www.tof.org

## Easter Greetings!

It doesn't happen every year, but in 2010 Lent is observed and Easter is celebrated simultaneously among Western Churches (e.g., our Lutheran synods in the U.S.) and Eastern Churches (such as the Ukrainian Lutheran Church). That means that our brothers and sisters in Christ in Europe will be rejoicing as we do at the Savior's resurrection on April 4. Think of it: As the sun rises and the day progresses across the globe, our fellow believers and we will gather at worship, some at first-light, to marvel at the meaning of the open tomb.

Though some church customs differ from continent to continent (you may read of some in this newsletter), the meaning of Christ's victory is the same the world over. The pastors of the Ukrainian, Latvian and Czech churches supported by Thoughts of Faith will preach the same assurance you and I will hear in our own churches this Easter. They will preach that the resurrection is God's public announcement that Christ's righteous life was accepted by God in place of mankind's sin and that his innocent death at the cross was accepted by God as the punishment for all that is wrong with the entire world.

Do you remember from your catechism instruction the further implications of the resurrection? It proves that:

Jesus is truly God's own Son (the Father welcomes home his sacrificed Son);

God keeps promises (even the stunning ones, like life after death);

Christ's atonement for man's sin is completed (the empty tomb is an exclamation mark); and

We, too, will rise from the dead to live in heaven (we follow after Jesus, whom Paul calls the "firstfruits" of them that sleep).

Is there a message more worthy of our support than Easter's Good News? I can't imagine one. So thank you to all who help our European affiliates carry to their countrymen the comforting story of new life for sinners through Christ's new life after the grave.

Rev. Steven P. Petersen  
Administrator  
Thoughts of Faith



Rev. Steven P. Petersen



*The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."*

-- Matthew 28:5-7

*Continued from page 1*

Easter hymns, mostly ancient Ukrainian songs, begin the worship service, and the Easter antiphon will sound at least five times. The sermon will certainly preach Law and Gospel, the latter being especially sweet at Easter.

After the worship service, a prayer of thanks is usually said in the church yard for the gift of life eternal and gifts that we have received in a particular year. The congregations will often have a presentation or a concert by children and youth groups. Then receptions take place with tables covered with gifts people brought in the baskets. Christians treat each other and also visit hospitals or orphanages in the same week. Easter celebrations are continued at home where families gather at the Easter table.

*Bishop Vyacheslav Horpynchuk  
Ukrainian Lutheran Church*

## New Members and Deacons in Kyiv

With Christmas celebrations on Jan. 7 (the Ukrainian Lutheran Church follows the Julian calendar as most churches in Ukraine do), three more men became communicant members of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Kyiv: Dmytro Bobrynets, Hryhoriy Samoilenko and Oleksiy Boiko (in front, left to right). After catechism studies, examinations and public confession of their faith, they were welcomed into our fellowship. According to tradition, each was presented with a copy of the Ukrainian translation of the Book of Concord, a pin of Luther's seal and a white rose, a symbol of Christ's righteousness.

On the same day, eight ULC members became graduates of the deacon training program that was conducted at Resurrection Church: Anatoliy Dmytrenko, Serhiy Berezin, Dmytro Prokopchuk, Emilia Zinchenko, Anzhela Horpynchuk, Hanna Kuchma, Svitlana Leschenko and Victoria Sukhotska.

They received certificates from St. Sophia Seminary. They now "wait on tables" (See Acts 6:2) in



*Three new members are welcomed to Resurrection.*

order to serve the needy and assist their pastors. Six of them became deacons at the Resurrection congregation and two became deacons at Nativity Lutheran Church, also in Kyiv.

*Vyacheslav Horpynchuk*



*Eight newly graduated deacons display their certificates.*

## The Feast of Pascha – The Resurrection

Velykden, the word for Easter in Ukrainian, literally means “a great day” – a day of joy and gratitude for what our Savior Jesus Christ has done for us through his life, death and resurrection. Traditionally, in western Ukraine, each family takes an Easter basket of food to church for blessing on Easter morning. Pastors of the Ukrainian Lutheran church are careful to emphasize the symbolic nature of the blessing as some mainstream Christian churches here take the blessing as an omen for a good harvest. The contents of the basket are important in their symbolism. The foods consist of eggs, various sausages, meats, cheese, horseradish, salt, butter and pascha (Easter bread), each having its own story.

The egg is likened to the tomb from which Christ arose. Jesus came out of the tomb like a living chick comes out of an egg which looked dead. Its special meaning is of hope, emergence of new life and of the resurrection.

Meats represent animals used in Old Testament sacrifices reminding us of our Savior Jesus Christ who became the Pas-

chal Lamb by whose blood we are saved. Ham is symbolic of freedom from the old law, which did not allow the eating of pork. Since the resurrection, Christians are not bound to Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws, but only to God's unchanging moral law, those laws that are repeated in the New Testament. Sausage represents the links of the chains of death that were broken when Christ rose from the dead.

Dairy products relate to prophecies that told of prosperity and peace of Messianic times symbolic of the special gifts that God gives us. Horseradish represents the bitterness of sin and hardships we must endure in life because of original sin. The horseradish sweetened and colored with red beets reminds us of the bitterness and blood of the passion of Christ which he overcame in glory through his sacrifice and resurrection. And salt is a symbol of fasting and self-denial and a reflection of Christ's words: “You are the salt of the earth . . .”

The pascha bread is symbolic of Jesus Christ, the “Living

Bread” who came down from heaven to give life eternal. The richness of this bread, in its ingredients and decoration, is a reflection of the special meaning it holds. Christ is the pascha, the Paschal Lamb, and he is the sacrifice. His sacrifice is for our salvation.

The pascha basket is never used for any other purpose. The embroidered cover laid over the basket symbolizes the great beauty of the new life given to all believers through Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. As the pastor prepares to bless the basket, a candle in the center of the pascha bread is lit, symbolizing the radiance of the resurrected Christ – the joyful celebration of Christ's defeat of death. Let us rejoice!

“Khrystos Voskre” – Christ is risen!

“Voistyno Voskres” – He is risen indeed!

*Nick and Kerry Laper  
Ternopil, Ukraine*



Rev. Taras Kokovsky of the Ternopil congregation blesses the Easter baskets.

## Googling Easter Customs

Just type “Velikonocni zvyky” (Easter customs) in the Google search engine and you will get a long list of sites that describes what the Czechs used to do at Easter time. I say *used to* because most of these customs sound totally unfamiliar to the average Czech’s ear today. For this reason, many of these Web sites are meant to revive the customs in one form or another. From a well-informed Christian perspective those Easter customs verge on paganism and have a spice of superstition in them. From being originally intended to help people grow a deeper appreciation of our Savior’s victorious struggle on our behalf, they turned into folklore that revered created things – fields, trees, water, food, etc. – instead of the merciful Creator.

Let me give you a few examples. On Good Friday, the Czech people of old times were not supposed to wash their laundry. The reason? If they had, they thought they would wash it not in water but in the blood of Christ! On Holy Saturday it was customary to bind together two burnt splinters to form little crosses that were buried in the fields to make them fertile. In some places people put cinders on the roof beam to protect the house against fire. (Caution here!) On Easter Sunday people ate special cross-buns that were consecrated and eaten in church or at home and offered to guests.

You can see some rays of biblical light behind many of these traditions. Our laundry, our spiritual robes, were in fact washed and made white in the blood of the Easter Lamb at our Baptism (Rev 7:14). The cross, as an emblem of our Savior’s death for our sins, is truly “buried in the field” of our hearts, making them alive for God and fertile in the fruits of faith. The Gospel message might be likened to a burning cinder that helps protect us from the fear of hellfire. And when we “consecrate” our services, talents and gifts we are indeed setting them apart for our Lord’s praise and our neighbor’s benefit.

It is the task of all Bible-rooted Christians to be on guard against empty ritualism, while being faithful witnesses to the true meaning of Easter. There is a perfect occasion for me to act in accordance with this task. At Rochlov, our newest preaching station, we are planning to celebrate our Lord’s victory over death during an evening Easter service. The owner of the building we use, an old castle, has asked for a “baptism” of the bell he bought for the renovated outdoor chapel.

In our country it is a common practice that when a writer publishes a new book or a singer or musical group records a new CD, they choose a large bookstore or CD store and there they officially and publicly “baptize” their creation. So the idea of the Rochlov castle owner went along the same lines: Why can’t the new chapel bell also be sprinkled with some “holy water”? A chance to explain what the Bible says! Of course, our Czech Lutheran Church will be happy to *dedicate* the bell for a sacred use, namely to call people to come to worship the Savior. No holy water is needed here. A prayer of a child of God, asking for blessings upon



*A Baptism at the teaching station in Rochlov, Czech Republic.*

all who will hear the bell’s sound, is all it takes. But *Baptism* is different: It is administered to sinners for forgiveness of their sins; it is connected with God’s word of promise; it derives its efficacy from the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus on the cross of Calvary; it is confirmed by the glorious resurrection of the same Savior. Indeed, through Baptism, you and I become dedicated to God; we become a new creation, God’s adopted children.

The Lord willing, this wonderful message will again be proclaimed in Rochlov. Many are invited to hear it. A few are called to believe it. Let us give them the chance. We have recently seen a “first swallow” of God’s work in Rochlov in the form of two children of a local family being baptized. There are more souls waiting. For our loving Father they are more precious than many bells.

*Rev. Petr Krakora  
Czech Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Pilsen, Czech Republic*

## The Widows “Might”

Virginia Holst is a pretty, interesting person. Energetic, enthusiastic, full of imagination and inspiration, she is unforgettable to all who meet her. We first met Virginia through our work with the Central Africa Medical Mission in Malawi. Virginia had literally dreamt up an idea to provide Christmas presents for impoverished children living there. It seems that Virginia had attended a mission presentation and that same night, when closing her eyes, pennies began to appear – clouds of pennies. It was a picture that she could not get out of her mind – but why pennies?



*Jacob Wetterstrom helps Virginia's quest for pennies.*

Then it dawned on her: Ask the Ladies Aid (at St. John's in Lake City, Minn.,) to save pennies for the mission. That was 1990. One thing led to another and the women at this WELS congregation saved hundreds, thousands and eventually hundreds of thousands of pennies



*In Ukraine, pennies helped buy Christmas gifts for orphans.*

and other small change. Virginia says “they get a big kick at the bank.” And so, through Virginia it came to be that many children in the African bush receive Christmas gifts.

But it did not stop there. When we began work in Ukraine, Virginia expanded her project to include Gift of Life (GoL) as well. Word of the project continues to spread throughout the area. People from the local Episcopal Church began saving pennies for the cause. The woman who helps 95-year-old Virginia clean her house recently brought her a big bag of pennies. A young friend, Jacob Wetterstrom, age 15, also actively promotes the project and has gotten more and more people

to save pennies. Virginia writes “... Jacob won't let his dad, a Methodist minister, spend a penny!” Virginia just keeps having more and more fun!

Although every penny counts for smaller projects, it takes more than pennies to support an overseas mission like Gift of Life. But at Gift of Life every penny counts and we MAKE them count. GoL's charitable activities assist with medical and dental care, health education, material aid and a pro-life agenda. The clinics focus on health care services for challenged, socially unprotected, impoverished people.

In 2009, a total of 4,849 children and adults were examined by the medical clinic and 4,840 received treatment at the dental clinic. GoL

operates pro-life counseling centers at five locations. The counselors provide Christian counseling, pro-life presentations, pregnancy counseling and humanitarian assistance. Last year: 35,747

attended GoL pro-life presentations at various institutions in Ukraine; 6,056 attended programs conducted at the centers; 1,915 individual counseling sessions were given; plus 3,553 people attended group counseling sessions. The clinics, counseling and material aid continue to provide opportunities for the Ukrainian Lutheran Church to evangelize. All who visit GoL are reached with God's message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

Besides collecting pennies for charity and recently authoring a book – “All Wrapped Up” – about innovative gift wrapping, Virginia is still active at St. John's. Although her husband, Norman, lives with his Lord and Savior



*Virginia Holst has been collecting pennies for mission work for 20 years.*

in heaven, Virginia will tell you that they are still together in spirit. Gift of Life and the people it reaches thank Virginia, young Jacob, the ladies of St. John's and thousands of others who support this mission through prayer and financial assistance. Virginia may not be “superwoman” but by being a “mite-y” woman she certainly has become a “mighty” woman!

Jesus said of the poor widow who gave only two mites, the two smallest coins in use at the time, that she gave more than all the rich with their silver and gold. And this was literally true. Her example has called more pennies out of more pockets in more countries in the last 2,000 years than all the gold



*These children in Malawi, displaying new Frisbees, benefitted from the project.*

of Solomon. Because of her example, millions and millions of people have NOT said “My two cents' worth won't make a difference.” Oh, yes it would! Oh, yes it has! And so will yours!

*Nick and Kerry Laper  
Gift of Life, Ternopil, Ukraine*

## Congregational Life in the ULC

I have just returned “home” to Ternopil after two months in the U.S. followed by two weeks of visiting congregations of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC). Perhaps because my road trip has followed directly on a U.S. stay, some observations have impressed themselves on me. Let me share a few.

Sitting in ULC worship services again has reminded me of differences between worship here and in the U.S. (Remember that differences are not necessarily right or wrong; they’re just different.)

The Ukrainians cross themselves frequently in the service. I lost count on Sunday, but I’m sure that I beat my previous record of 38 times in a service.

In one of the litanies the pastor chants the names of all the congregation members and asks God’s blessing on them.

Each congregation has a small choir, which is a real aid in the worship. Rarely does it sing a “choir number” in the service, but the choir strongly leads the congregation in singing the liturgical responses and hymns.

The congregations “soften” the possible hard feelings of our close communion practice by inviting those who don’t go to communion to come up after the distribution so the pastor can give each a blessing. Usually quite a few come forward, which seems to be a healthy sign that there are a significant number of nonmembers in the service.

The congregations I visited host a fellowship time after worship, for which all seem to stay.

There are virtually no children visible in the congregations. In most cases there also is a shortage of adult males.

The congregations are trying various things to spread the Gospel and build the congregations. In Kharkiv the pastor asked me to conduct an English service after the regular Ukrainian service. He advertised it, and four people came just for that service – plus at least half of those in the Ukrainian service stayed. A couple of weeks earlier, when Vicar Sasha Kulchizkiy from Moldova was there, the congregation had a second service in Russian. Simferopol congregation now records the Sunday sermon and puts it on the Internet. The records indicate that at least 30 people listen to it each week.

In spite of the serious cutbacks in financial support, the congregations I visited displayed a positive attitude and

a determination to survive and grow. While conducting deacon training on this trip, I asked the students to set forth their vision for their congregations 10 years from now. All had big dreams and reflected confidence that the Lord will bless them.

The pastors are continuing to serve their congregations with commitment and a godly spirit despite a 67% cut in pay. The pastors are coping in various ways. One has become a part-time taxi driver; one works with his wife and son in the family souvenir painting business; one is relying on his government pension from his previous job. I don’t want to give the impression that all is rosy, however. One pastor cancelled Vacation Bible School in his congregation, citing “family problems,” undoubtedly complicated by financial stress.

The seven congregations I visited about VBS are ready and eager. All showed enthusiasm for this outreach project and a deep appreciation of the American volunteers who come to help. As a step toward the goal of the Ukrainians taking over VBS, the Ternopil congregation has agreed to run its own program this year without American volunteers. Pray for its success so that others will be encouraged to try it on their own in the future.

When we were in Kharkiv in November, Sandy and I rented an apartment near the train station. After my deacon classes there, the members of the congregation left copies of ULC literature in the living room. When I stayed at that same apartment this past week, the magazines were still there in full view for all renters. Only the Lord knows how many people have picked them up and read! It struck me that this is another example that shows our Ukrainian pastors and people are trying to share the Gospel as best they know how.

This year Ukraine and the U.S. share the same Easter date!

We pray that God blesses your Easter – and that of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters – with a renewed sense of how blessed we are in Christ. We pray that your celebration of Jesus’ resurrection also reminds you of how privileged we are to have a part in sharing the Good News of the victorious Savior with others.

*Sandy and John Vogt  
Ternopil, Ukraine*



*Among the congregations visited by Rev. Vogt was this one in Sevastopol. Vogt is rector of the St. Sophia seminary in Ternopil, Ukraine.*

## The Faithful Work of Ilga Strauta

Heartfelt greetings from the Aloja congregation of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia to our brothers and sisters in the USA! Being pastor of the Aloja congregation, I would like to tell you a story of true and faithful service by our treasurer Ilga Strauta.

When I was called to be pastor of the Aloja congregation of the National Lutheran Church in 1986, I immediately recognized Ilga as a faithful attendee of our services. At the time not too many people dared to participate in the services, thus openly confessing their faith in front of the atheistic Communist government. But Ilga was always there, showing no trace of fear from any kind of persecution. When I got to know her better, I found that due to her strong faith and character she feared nothing. Although she was a devoted churchgoer, she did not have any duties in the congregation.

Many things changed in 1995 when our congregation was exiled from our building and forced to look for other places of worship. In order to protect the congregation from being scattered, she took the initiative and found a place in a private home as a temporary solution. It became our place of worship for two years.

When we finally were recognized by the Ministry of Justice as an autonomous Lutheran congregation of the Augsburg Confession in 1997, she again began searching for a more suitable home for our congregation. A local businessman, Miervaldis Grundmanis, responded to her plea and donated a part of a house he owned and renovated it for our worship needs at his own expense. To this day our congregation is most thankful for such generosity. We are still worshipping at this place, although it is not his property any more. He made a deal with the new owner that this room will remain our place of worship at no cost.

Aloja is a very small town where everybody knows each other. It is impossible to stay unnoticed. Everybody knows what church do you attend and which confession you belong to or if you are an unbeliever. In this small town there is also a National Lutheran Church and a Roman Catholic Church. During the summer there are also representatives of charismatic movements "fishing" for souls, but our people are safe and we have a good place to stay.

It has been a significant part of Ilga Strauta's life to take care of the needs of our congregation. If there are any unexpected expenses that our donations cannot cover, she quietly pays for them from her tiny pension. Sometimes I wonder if she has given all of it away.

Occasionally, she discreetly inquires if I have enough for my everyday needs, because she strongly believes that it is crucial to make sure that the pastor's needs are provided for so God's Word can be preached. She is very thankful to our sister churches in America for providing financial assistance to our pastors and she feels very sorry for not being capable to manage it with our own resources.

Her firm convictions and Christian life are an example and challenge for those outside the Christian community. Her son and grandchildren have become faithful Christians. Not only her immediate family are a part of Confessional Lutheran Church, but also her more distant relatives have joined our congregation. Quite recently grandchildren of her brother were confirmed and we also baptized a baby girl.

Unfortunately, Ilga's son and his family moved from Aloja so they cannot attend our services every Sunday. But when they come to visit Ilga, they are in attendance. Like many other young people, they left Aloja looking for jobs elsewhere in Latvia and abroad during these economically challenging times. Our hope is that one day things will improve and many of them will return to their native Aloja and our numbers will grow.

*Rev. Karlis Buss  
Aloja, Latvia*



*Ilga Strauta is second from the left in the front row in this photo of the Aloja congregation.*