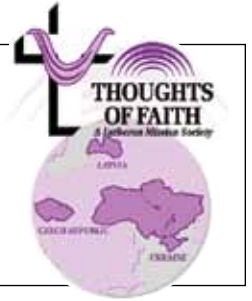


# Thoughts of Faith

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.



August 2010  
In This Issue:

**Page 2**

**From the ELS**

- The Reason for Mission Work

**Gift of Life – Ukraine**

- A Child is God's Reward

**Page 3**

**Ukraine**

- Would You Like to Help?

**Page 5**

**Czech Republic**

- Fire Brigades Blessed to Serve

## Latvian Lutherans Use Midsummer Night Celebration to Point to Christ



*Latvian girls wear wreaths of meadow flowers as part of the midsummer night celebration.*



Donations for the Lord's work in Ukraine, Czech Republic and Latvia may be sent directly to Thoughts of Faith. Please see the enclosed envelope to donate by check or by credit card.

The most important Latvian holiday is the summer solstice, or the so called "Jāni" festival, which is celebrated on the midsummer night of June 23. Farms are bedecked with garlands of oak and birch branches and meadow flowers. Nearly everyone leaves the city for the country and the shortest night of the year is spent in the merry company of friends. Campfires are lit, folk songs are sung and dancing is a universal element. Traditional caraway seed cheese, grilled meat and beer are on the menu.

There are many beautiful traditions about this festival. Most activities are outdoors and center around a huge bonfire. Girls pick meadow flowers to make wreaths for their hair, while men named Jānis get a bushy crown of oak leaves around their heads. Jānis is the most popular male name in Latvia and comparable to "John."

*Continued on page 6*

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## The Reason for Mission Work

Why do Christians do mission work? Why does Thoughts of Faith labor to support churches in Ukraine, Latvia and the Czech Republic? Why do people like you pray for and contribute toward those churches?

Well, we do these things so that other people can know what we know and possess what we possess. We know God's grace in Christ for the whole world and we possess personally the forgiveness of our sins through our faith in Christ. These great and undeserved blessings in our own lives stir up gratitude toward God for his gifts and move us to share them with others.

An Arab proverb illustrates the point: "What is the greatest crime in the desert? Finding water and keeping silent." Jesus came to give *living water*. (John 4:10) That's his love and mercy for sinners like us. And when Peter and John were ordered to keep silent about the Savior, they said, *We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*. (Acts 4:20) We can't help speaking about the Savior either!

So, in Latvia bi-vocational pastors share the Gospel with the people they meet and the congregations they serve. In the Czech Republic, St. Paul's Lutheran Church conducts its worship in the chapel of Martin Luther School, its pastors pouring out living water for students and their families. In Ukraine, Medical Clinics On Wheels bring dental care and public health services to villages -- along with the message of Christ. Gift of Life counselors encourage mothers to carry their pregnancies to term -- and many babies are baptized each year. At St. Sophia Seminary, men from Eastern European countries are trained to *speak about what they have seen and heard* about the Savior.

From many miles away, you are involved in these ministries. You may not personally bear *living water* to thirsty souls and you may not personally speak about the Savior to those who don't yet know him. But, thankful for God's rich blessings in your own life, your prayers and contributions in support of Thoughts of Faith ministries enable others to preach the Gospel. We sincerely appreciate your help!



Rev. Steven P. Petersen

Rev. Steven P. Petersen  
Administrator  
Thoughts of Faith

## Gift of Life — Ukraine

### A Child Is God's Reward

***Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. (Psalm 127:3)***

It is often difficult to take an unplanned pregnancy as something good. It is even more difficult when conditions such as poverty, an unstable life, age, adultery, health problems and responsibility for older children tell you that it is one more burden that you will not be able to bear. Only through the eyes of trust in our heavenly father can one see that the child sent by him is a gift, a blessing and a reward.

When Ivanna saw the two stripes on her pregnancy test she almost lost her composure. "What will I do with this child? I am more than 40 years old. I will not be able to bear this child because of health problems," she said. The doctors added to her dilemma by saying that there was a threat of having a disabled child. Ivanna began to feel a conflict between her heart and her mind. She visited several doctors and began to pray. She visited the Gift of Life center here often to find support and make sure that God was with her. *Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. (Psalm 68:19)*

It did not take long for the reward. Ivanna not only successfully carried her child, but gave life to a healthy boy. God blessed this baby with mother's milk as well as with many other things. Ivanna was as happy as a child when the other women who attended Bible studies at the life center gave her a baby carriage and the Gift of Life counselor gave her clothing and toys sent by American sisters in Christ. Now, little Andrii is blessed with his grandparents' love and the care from his grown-up sister. In the end, Ivanna realized that "he is God's gift."



Ivanna with Andrii, God's gift to her.

Nadiya Khominska  
Gift of Life counselor  
Ternopil, Ukraine

## Would You or Your Congregation Like to Help?

Financial difficulties have caused sharp reductions in the support being sent to the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) as well as all other mission projects of the ELS and WELS. As a result, some valuable projects for the future of the church in Eastern Europe have had to be left unfunded. The ELS Board for World Outreach has encouraged that these unfunded -- or underfunded -- projects be made known in hopes that the Lord will move you or your congregation to offer help.

A look ahead to 2011 indicates that a number of projects are likely to go unfunded or underfunded. Money for these projects will not begin until sometime in 2011, but for planning purposes it would be very helpful to know if you are interested and able to help.

### ULC Youth Forum 2011 — \$3,500

The past two years students from St. Sophia Seminary in the western Ukrainian city of Ternopil have conducted a youth forum (i.e. youth rally). Some 73 teens and young adults from 14 congregations across Ukraine gathered beside the Black Sea this past May. The three-day forum included Bible studies, an evangelism project, sightseeing, worship, singing and Christian fellowship. Since many of the congregations are small with only a handful of youth, this event serves the important function of showing the youth that they are not alone, but rather have Christian brothers and sisters across their country. The seminary students, with the help of the local ULC pastor, planned and carried out the entire retreat. Each youth paid a fee that helped with the total cost, but special funding is needed to cover additional costs.

### Reopening of St. Sophia Seminary's theological department — Estimated annual cost is \$37,000

The lack of students and financial considerations led to the suspension of our seminary's theological department in 2010. Meanwhile, the seminary's preparatory department has continued to function using short courses, distance-learning and the Internet. Four students are getting ready to enter the theological department, which we hope to reopen in January 2011. All the laid-off staff of the seminary have indicated that they are willing to return – even with a reduced workload and at reduced pay. In the past the seminary received as much as \$85,000 per year in support. The estimated budget for 2011 is less than half that amount. This amount would include a modest student stipend of about \$100 per month so that the students can move to Ternopil and study full time.

### Support for our Belarusian student — \$3,500

Belarus is considered the most politically repressive country in Europe. The ULC has two legally-registered congregations there. They function under severe restrictions, such as a limit of 19 on the number of people allowed to gather for worship and fellowship. With the pastor there of retirement age, God has provided a man ready to study and then serve



*Rev. John Vogt, left, rector of St. Sophia Seminary, leads the deacon education program at the Sevastopol congregation.*

these Belarusian congregations. He is included in the four men mentioned above. Perhaps the Lord would lead you or your congregation to sponsor his schooling at about \$3,500 per year. This amount will give him a small stipend for living and a monthly trip home. Your assistance here would reduce the operating costs of the seminary.

### Support for a Ukrainian student — \$3,000

The other three students we expect to come to the seminary next year are Ukrainians. It will cost about \$3,000 to give each a stipend so they can study full time. Your assistance in this way would also reduce the operating costs of the seminary.



*This church in Belarus will soon need a pastor trained at St. Sophia Seminary's theological department.*

*Continued on page 4*

# Ukraine

Continued from page 3

## Summer quarter of continuing education for the pastors of Eastern Europe — \$7,000

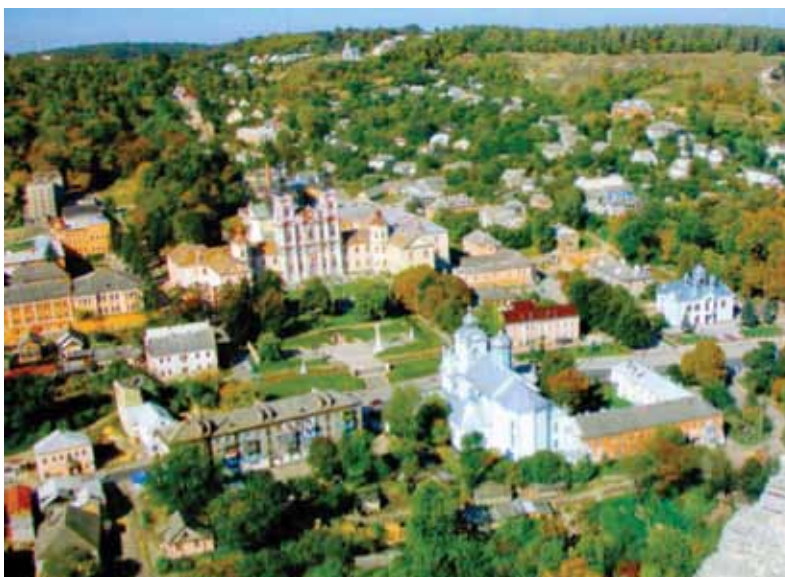
Each June for the past four years pastors of our doctrinal fellowship have gathered from across Europe for two weeks of theological study conducted by guest professors. Pastors have come from Bulgaria, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Latvia, Russia, Sweden, Germany, Norway and Finland, as well as Ukraine. This year Dr. John Brug from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary taught 14 men from five countries. The \$7,000 covers the guest professor's travel and living expenses and travel and food grants for the students, many of whom must take unpaid vacations from their secular jobs to attend.



A typical summer quarter class at St. Sophia.

## Deacon education program — \$1,000

Drastic reductions in salaries have forced the pastors of the ULC to seek secular jobs. In order to keep the congregations functioning and growing, an ambitious program of lay-member education has begun. The purpose is to prepare a corps of mature and committed volunteers in each congregation to help the pastor and assume many of the responsibilities that a full-time pastor would be doing. This program involves a yearlong study with some courses taught by the local pastor and some taught by the seminary. One congregation has already completed the program and the first eight diplomas have been awarded. Five other congregations are well along the path to completion. A gift for this purpose would be used to cover travel and lodging expenses of St. Sophia's rector.



The congregation at Kremenets is seeking a parsonage. The church is the white building facing the street on the far right.

## Pastor in the Transnistrian Republic of Moldova — \$3,000

Moldova is considered to be the poorest country in Europe. The Transnistrian Republic, a sliver of land within Moldova, has voted to break away and rejoin Russia. A student from there has now completed four years of study at St. Sophia and also a year of vicar service under the supervision of ULC pastors. He is ready to be ordained and sent home as a pastor to serve the small independent congregation from which he came. The ULC would like to help in his support by paying him the same amount (about \$200 per month before taxes) as ULC pastors and by giving his congregation \$50 per month to rent a place of worship.

## Parsonage purchase — \$15,000

Pastors need to live in the communities they serve if they are going to carry out their ministries well. In most cases this means that an apartment needs to be rented for them,

but apartments are hard to find. As a result our pastors have been forced to move repeatedly, and congregations find rent constantly increasing. One way out is for the congregation to own its parsonage (i.e. apartment for the pastor). With the worldwide economic downturn, suitable apartments can be purchased in Ukraine for as little as \$30,000. The ULC set aside \$15,000 last year for an apartment purchase and selected the Kremenets congregation as the first beneficiary of this project. The idea is that

an apartment be purchased and then that the congregation continue to pay rent on it until the original money has been returned to a revolving fund for future parsonage purchases. An additional \$15,000 is needed to get this plan and perpetual fund started.

Thank you for your consideration of our needs. You or your congregation may be the answer to our prayers by helping with one of the above items. Help of any amount will be sincerely appreciated.

Rev. John Vogt  
Rector of St. Sophia Seminary  
Ternopil, Ukraine

## Czech Volunteer Fire Brigades Blessed to Serve

Volunteer Fire Brigades (VFB) have existed in practically every town and village of the Czech Republic, many of them for more than a century. These voluntary forces have proven to be an indispensable part of the Czech rescue and safety system, closely cooperating with professional firefighters, medical emergency workers and police officers.

The brigade in the village of Tlucna celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2005. It was in 2010, however, that the members decided to officially renew their firefighter vow first made on the founding day of the VFB in 1905. And, as you might not expect in a largely atheistic society, the brigade asked me as pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Tlucna to pronounce a special blessing on the volunteers.

On Saturday, June 26, five other VFB units from nearby communities joined the one from Tlucna to recite their vow. A podium held guests from VFB headquarters and mayors of the villages and towns. They listened to speeches, greetings and congratulations. The vow was declared in unison by the volunteers.

Before the blessing itself, I shared a short devotion, for how often do we have a chance to bring the Word to so many souls who need it? Yet the merciful Lord gives these chances. And you, supporters of the Thoughts of Faith missions, have helped us be on hand when invitations to such occasions come. Indeed, since we know we are blessed by the Father through Jesus, our Savior, we can now be a blessing for others!

Here is an excerpt from the devotion, followed by the words of blessing:

We heard the firefighter vow a short while ago. It was a very noble and honorable vow. We heard words about faithful service to our country, about willing obedience to order and justice, about readiness to help a neighbor, to protect and love him. When I hear the words of this vow it occurs to me: Isn't that, in fact, something that all of us should vow?

Each of us has a share in the way this world looks. However, doesn't the higher power we call God bear part of the responsibility? For instance, isn't fire supposed to help, warm and shine, instead of being a destructive element, burning homes and people? And water, shouldn't it serve, rather than devastate in disastrous flooding? This is also what affects the way our world looks, isn't it?

But think about it. Aren't the times of disaster and calamity the moments when our true selves are revealed? Don't we sometimes call misfortune a trial by fire? Aren't such situations lessons that teach us better to see ourselves and the needs of others? It may be that calamities also teach us humbly to admit our own fragility, futility and vulnerability. And maybe that's what the higher power we call God is more concerned with than with our undisturbed comfort.

Volunteer firefighters are among those who don't merely wail and rail over the natural calamities in this world. They have decided to devote their lives, time and abilities to the service and benefit of those who find themselves in distress. Firefighters save our property, our health and our lives in this world. In this respect they act as God's instruments, as

*Continued on page 6*



**Volunteer fire brigades repeat their vow and receive a blessing. Pastor Krakora is in the white robe on the podium.**

## Czech Republic

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*Continued from page 5*

God's extended hand, when they serve us faithfully. Still, they remain humans – they have their fears, they feel exhausted, in haste they make wrong decisions. All the more, therefore, they need our prayers and encouragement and they need God's protection and blessings. All of us need these things. And our merciful God offers them in abundance.

God loves us and feels for us. Therefore, 2000 years ago he walked this Earth as Jesus Christ. He also served, was obedient and ready to help. He even laid down his perfect life as payment for all our failures, offences and weaknesses – for all of our sins. Jesus was God's instrument, his extended hand, by which God came to save us for eternity. Thanks to Jesus we know God is for us and grants us his boundless grace. In Jesus' name lies our hope for now and eternity. In his name we also bless each other. And the Father of all mercies gives power and effect to the blessings we, in fact, only deliver from him. We deliver them now to you also – to you as firefighters collectively and to you as individuals.

The Lord God grant you courage when fear overcomes you.  
The Lord God grant you strength when you feel weak and tired.

The Lord God grant you wisdom when much depends on a quick and correct decision.

The Lord God grant you determination to bear the responsibility entrusted to you.

The Lord God grant you a merciful heart, one like he himself has, so you can perceive the true needs of the people who seek help.

The Lord God grant you unswerving faith that even if you were to lose your life, God remembers you and for his son Jesus' sake he will raise you on the last day to eternal life.

I bless you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Rev. Petr Krakora  
St. Peter's Lutheran Church  
Tlucna, Czech Republic*

## Latvia

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*Continued from page 1*

However, there are some disturbing things which often spoil this festival for Christians, as the midsummer night is also the year's most notable occasion for drunkenness and revelry. Breaking of moral taboos, excessive use of alcohol and various pagan superstitions make Christians uneasy.

The festival is clearly of pagan origin. With the arrival of Christianity in most Western countries, this pagan festival was eliminated or "Christianized," but not in Latvia.

Down to the present day a big part of the population has maintained the folk-pagan view and understanding of nature. Many, for instance, believe that plants have miraculous powers which bring health and good fortune if people pick those plants on the midsummer night.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that Latvia is experiencing a rebirth of paganism and people are drifting back towards pagan magic and nature worship. This kind of neo-paganism creates new obstacles for our Christian mission. It can be very confusing for Christians to live in such an environment. On the one hand, we want to accept and affirm our national culture, everything that is good, true and beautiful in our folk traditions and heritage. On the other hand, we don't want to be part of pagan lifestyles. We want to follow Christ's words that, even living in this world, we are not of this world. We have a higher loyalty than our nation and culture.

Therefore, when the Latvian nation celebrates the midsummer night, it is time for us Latvian Christians to remind ourselves who we are and what our true identity is. When people around us try to find peace, solace and harmony in

transient nature and the physical order of things, we should realize that ultimate salvation and harmony is not to be found in creation, but only in the Creator himself.

Following an ancient tradition, during midsummer time our Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia celebrates the day of St. John the Baptist. The witness of John the Baptist always helps to keep things in the right perspective. He was a voice in the wilderness. John was a prophet of things to come, pointing to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He preached the harsh message of repentance and pointed to the one who takes away all the sin of the world.

It is good for our members to come together during the midsummer festival and enjoy Christian fellowship. This year we had a special service where people from several congregations gathered at the mission station at Saulkrasti, a resort town on the Baltic Sea, and celebrated the day of St. John the Baptist.

Local pastor Didzis Melkis delivered a sermon about the wonderful grace of God, which was proclaimed through John the Baptist, through Old Testament prophets and even before the creation of the world. Our salvation was secured for us through the incarnation of God's son, who suffered and died for us all.

Listening to this precious message and enjoying brotherly fellowship was the best way to spend the midsummer day.

*Rev. Ugis Sildegs  
Riga, Latvia*