

Thoughts of Faith



Merry Christmas

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

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.

A Little Story About a Big Family

December 2009

In This Issue:

Page 2

Thoughts of Gift Giving

Page 3

Latvia

- A Heartfelt Week in Latvia

Page 4

Ukraine

- Celebrating the 100th Birthday of Hanna Simenko

Page 5

Ukraine

- Problems? Opportunities?

Page 6

Czech Republic

- A Cane Sparks a Sermon

Ukraine

- Greetings from the ULC

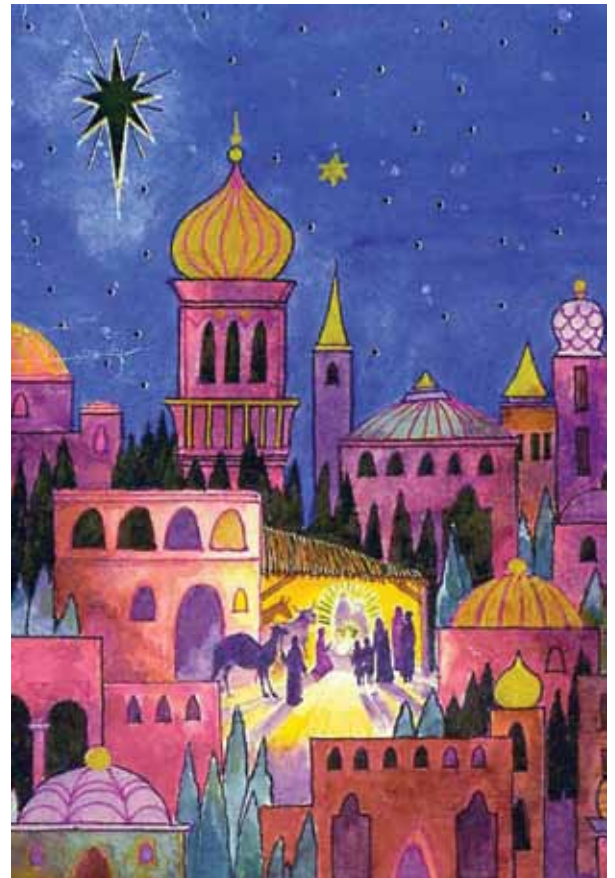


Donations for the Lord's work in Ukraine, Czech Republic and Latvia may be sent directly to Thoughts of Faith. Please see the enclosed envelope to donate by check or by credit card.

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:30-33)

Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth, is almost synonymous with family. Christians ponder a little family around the manger on that first Christmas morning. The idea of being home for Christmas -- with the family all back together again -- is a pleasing thought. Families are a blessing, and big families can be a big blessing. We have been blessed over and over and over again!

By definition, families also include those of a common affiliation. Our Redeemer, a WELS congregation in Madison, Wis., has through the years been our church family. When, more than 15 years ago, we moved far away, our physical and church families moved with us -- in spirit. A new family emerged after arriving in Africa -- the Lutheran Mobile Clinic and the WELS missionaries. Africa was a rough and tumble existence, with real live legends, hard work and unbelievable experiences in an exotic place. The gospel mission became like surrogate parents, the Central Africa Medical Mission -- siblings, and the Lutheran Mobile Clinic staff -- dear children. When leaving Africa a new family was found with Christian Life Resources (CLR). Here was a transparent family strong with the pro-life cause and becoming part of it was a privilege. Adopted by CLR, we took a post in Eastern Europe directing Gift of Life in Ukraine, where opportunities for the Ukrainian Lutheran Church to proclaim God's word are provided. This ministry advocates Christian love and a wholesome life for the people of Ukraine, includ-



A Ukrainian graphic depicts the manger in Bethlehem.

Continued on page 2

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

Thoughts of Gift-Giving

Approaching Christmas, thoughts turn toward gift-giving. In our churches we prepare to celebrate the gift God gave the world – his Son, a Savior in a manger, the God-Man who would live a perfect life to share righteousness with us, who would die on the cross to win forgiveness for our sins, who would rise from the dead to prove that God will welcome us to heaven someday. May God grant you and your family a blessed celebration of this supreme gift of divine love this Christmas season!

Of course, the retail world around us also prompts thoughts of gift-giving. Though we might grumble about the artificial nature of commercial influences, what a joy it is to have another excuse to brighten a child's day with a shiny toy or to show appreciation to a family member or colleague with a special gift.

Thoughts of Faith has been blessed with gifts from many people over the years. Think of the ground-breaking work of Rev. John Shep several decades ago when this ministry began. Think of the faithful service of Thoughts of Faith staff members like Kermit Traska, who served on the board of directors from 1995 to 2001 and as executive director from 2001 to 2009. Think of the WELS and ELS volunteers and employees who today serve as missionaries, pastors, professors and administrators in Ukraine, Latvia and the Czech

Republic. Out of love for the Savior and for the souls of mankind, so many have given so much.

We thank them all! And we thank the loyal friends of Thoughts of Faith for generous contributions provided over the years. Help is needed now more than ever – so please know that we appreciate support for vital ministries such as Gift of Life in Ukraine, the pastoral ministry in Latvia and Martin Luther School in the Czech Republic. May God's gift of eternal life in Christ, which he grants freely to each of us, cheer our hearts at Christmas and move us to share our blessings so others may know his love.



Rev. Steven Petersen

*Rev. Steven Petersen
Administrator
Thoughts of Faith*

Gift of Life–Ukraine

Continued from page 1

ing the unborn, and especially for the family of believers.

Four full years later another family unit was joined when Thoughts of Faith (ToF) assumed the Gift of Life ministry directly. At ToF the gospel mission in Eastern Europe was promoted by some of the warmest, fair-minded, passionate, hard-working, fun-loving, humorous and just plain interesting people, ever. Now, our big family has gotten bigger still as Gift of Life and Thoughts of Faith became one with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) under the Board for World Outreach. Getting to know the friendly, gentle, calm, careful people who comprise the ELS, many of whom are Norwegians, is an ongoing pleasure.

Some family members will never be seen again in this world because they have already gone to their heavenly home. Other family is so far flung that they will remain only as memories. The family of believers are those who trust solely in Christ for forgiveness of their sins. Our final family destination is – the holy Christian church – the church invisible – the communion of saints triumphant!

Khrystos narodyvsia! Slavimo Yoho! Christ is born! Let us rejoice and be glad! This is our Christmas greeting with appreciation and thanks to all who keep Gift of Life alive with prayer and financial support.



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

A new Gift of Life DVD is available. Contact Rev. Paul Fries at blcpastor@iw.net or Pam Schultz at pamtrof@blc.edu

A Heartfelt Week in Latvia

Rev. John A. Moldstad, president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, visited the Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia (CLCL) during the last week of October. During his stay, Rev. Moldstad visited congregations in Ozolnieki and Jelgava. In Ozolnieki the new church building was erected with generous donations by Thoughts of Faith (ToF). In Jelgava sizable donations by ToF were a great help in converting an old house obtained from the city council into the parish church. As it was Reformation season, Rev. Moldstad preached on John 8:31–36 “. . . if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” noting Martin Luther’s struggles with guilt and sin and how he was set free from anguish after discovering the liberating gospel of Christ. It still does save us from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ in whom we enjoy the bounty of God’s riches, both spiritually and in day-to-day temporal life.

President Moldstad spent much of his time with CLCL pastors on exegetical studies of the first epistle of Peter. This was very much enjoyed by all the participants. The pastors of CLCL meet monthly to talk about our church life and to devote ourselves to studies of the Word. Lately, we are concentrating on homiletics. Each time someone prepares a sermon that is analyzed by colleagues. Then we study a thesis of C. W. F. Walther’s “Law and Gospel.” These five days of studies of Peter led by President Moldstad were refreshing and built up our exegetical skills as well as our spirits. The studies once more proved that the Word of God works mightily on its own power.

First Peter was a timely choice as well because one of its main themes is hope – a highly necessary quality during these times of crisis and hardships. Surveys show that the world economic crisis affects Latvia more than any other European nation. The unemployment rate is above 19 percent and during the winter the situation will get worse. Our pastors not only have to deal with hardships suffered by parish members but have difficulties of our own. Previously, we mostly earned our living thanks to several projects conducted by the Augsburg Institute (such as the widely popular newspaper “Latvian Lutheran”) and sponsored by ToF. Now the situation has changed and we have to find secular occupations in a tough job market while keeping our pastoral standards high.

Though it is quite a different suffering from persecutions experienced by early Christians, the suffering is real. It is caused by the same things – by sin, the world and the devil -- and it tries to weaken people in their faith, to lead them into despair and, if possible, into unbelief and damnation. Still very appropriate are St. Peter’s words, “*your adversary*

the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Peter 5:8). This is how we have to view our personal and pastoral situations – with all seriousness and responsibility. Great promises, sure hope and even joy comes with it. “*Rejoice to the extent that you partake of*



Taking a break from their study of Peter are, left to right, Revs. Karlis Buss, Ilars Plume, Didzis Melkis, Uldis Fandejevs, Egons Mudulis, John Moldstad and Ugis Sildegs. Not pictured: Gundars Bakulis and Ivo Sildegs.

Christ’s sufferings, that when his glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:13,14).

Especially during Advent, Peter’s words—“when his glory is revealed” –resonate mightily in our hearts. In Christ there is bold hope and help in our temptations and afflictions and sure promises that await us in our earthly life and even more so in the life eternal if we keep steadfast to God. Whatever trouble you might experience, dear readers of this newsletter, remember the source of it and “*resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.*” (1 Peter 5:9).

May the glory of our coming Savior strengthen and gladden you during the Advent season and throughout the new year!

*On behalf of the CLCL,
Rev. Didzis Melkis*

Celebrating the 100th Birthday of Hanna Simenko

On Nov. 3, 2009, the Lord blessed me with the opportunity to celebrate the birthday of Hanna Mykhaylivna Simenko, a member of our All Saints congregation in Kharkiv. One of the guests said that this was the first time in his life that he was celebrating such a birthday. As it turned out, no one had ever attended a 100th birthday celebration before.

Our sister Hanna was born in the village of Dovhalivka in the Kharkiv region on the picturesque banks of the Siverskyi Donets River. She attended a parochial school of the Orthodox Church as a child. Hanna's relatives, like other families in the village, were believers. When Hanna turned eight, the

October coup (the October Revolution in Russia) took place. So our sister experienced what children read about in history books. After the Revolution of 1917, the First World War and the Civil War continued for a few more years. It was the time when believers remembered the words of Jesus Christ: *"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines." (Mark 13:8); "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:12-13).*

In fact, the temporary German occupation did not cause as many problems as endless transfers of power accompanied by plunders and executions. The village slipped back and forth into the control of the Whites (supporters of the Russian monarchy), anarchists, and the Reds (Communists). Often brothers, fathers and sons had opposite political views. So they were fighting and even killing one another. At the same time epidemics and famine were raging in the country. Finally the Communists came into power, and they had a great hatred towards Christianity. At that time atheist propaganda was actively spread among youth.

However, Hanna's Christian education in early childhood and the patriarchal order of her family (in the good sense of the word) helped her stay connected with the church despite all the hardships. It was difficult to find opportunities to attend church services though. The consequences of the famine-genocide that took place in 1932-1933 were severe for clergy and laymen. Some villages in the Kharkiv region almost vanished. Hanna's family, by standards of that time, did not suffer heavily. All the women lived through the starving winter and spring. "Only" a couple of men died;

they could not abstain from eating the meat of a dead horse. Death as a result of food poisoning was commonplace during the famine-genocide. (Some 7,000,000 Ukrainians died in a famine created by Stalin to kill the farmers so he could collectivize the farms in Ukraine.)

The 1930s were a time of repression against farmers, clergy and church. Many of those who were not strangled by the bony fingers of famine were exiled to Siberia or shot dead. There were a lot of Orthodox priests and pastors of other Christian confessions among these people. For example, Lutheran Pastor Kludt in Kharkiv tried to help farmers

who were dying because of the famine. However, the Soviets cynically condemned him as an agent recruited by German intelligence.

At the same time, despite Soviet propaganda about their care for farmers and workers, the health care situation was in a terrible state, especially in the villages. Two of Hanna's children died during the first months of

life. World War II brought another sorrow. Hanna's husband died during war service. Her youngest child was killed by a splinter from a bomb. When the war was over, another of Hanna's sons died. Hanna was left with only one son. Like other widows she worked on a collective farm for small change doing the heavy work since only a couple of disabled men came back to the village after the war.

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, life in the former Soviet Union improved from a financial standpoint. Although freedom of conscience was a catchword written in the constitution, it was not really permitted. In order to attend a church service, our sister had to travel miles to a different village or town. Therefore, it is not surprising that people would go to church only a couple of times a year on big holidays. Ukrainians like festive church services and appreciate the festive Eastern rite liturgy. Unfortunately, in the Orthodox Church, while the rite is beautiful and festive, the preaching of God's Word often lacks content.

However, the Lord blessed our sister Hanna in a special way. When she moved to live with her relatives in Kharkiv in 2001, she attended worship in the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) for the first time. Even though the leaders of the modern Orthodox Church manipulate with the idea that you cannot be saved outside their church, this humble country woman recognized the ULC to be a true Christian church where God's Word is preached properly (*"but we*

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Centenarian Hanna Simenko (in scarf) attends services at All Saints Congregation.

Continued from page 4

preach Christ crucified," 1 Cor. 1:23), where infant baptism is conducted, and where believers receive the true body and blood of Christ during Communion – all this in the context of the traditional Ukrainian liturgy and with hymns sung using Ukrainian folk melodies. This is especially true during Christmas when we sing traditional carols.

Since 2002, sister Hanna has been a communicant member of our congregation. Until recently, when her eyesight failed, the Holy Bible was the main book that Hanna read. The large-type edition of the Gospels and Psalms issued by the Ukrainian Bible Society was a special blessing for her. During the past two years, Hanna has usually received

Communion at home. Sometimes, however, she has opportunity to attend our worship service, thanks to the automobile that was presented to the congregation by fellow believers in an American congregation.

We ask the readers of this newsletter to pray for sister Hanna and for the generous donors who are a real blessing for our young Ukrainian Lutheran Church! "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 106:1).

Rev. Victor Khaustov,
All Saints Congregation
Kharkiv, Ukraine

Problems? Opportunties?

What can a church body do when its annual help from the United States is reduced nearly 50% (from \$490,000 to \$270,000)? What can a congregation do when its pastor's salary is cut 50% (to a take-home pay of less than \$150 per month)? What can pastors do when their pay is unable to cover the costs of supporting a wife and children? What can the seminary rector/president do when the seminary has no students? Are these problems or opportunities? These are questions being asked in the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) as it prepares to begin 2010.

Seizing the opportunity afforded by the current budgetary reductions, the ULC has launched energetically into a new program of deacon education. The goal is to prepare a corps of committed and well-trained volunteers in each congregation who are ready to assume increased responsibilities. With the pastors forced to supplement their incomes with secular jobs, the members will need to take over much of the congregational work. It is the hope that they will assume leadership, especially in the vital areas of stewardship and evangelism.

Three courses – Christian doctrine, the Christian family and Luther and Lutheranism – are taught by local pastors to their own volunteers. Four courses – ministry, stewardship, evangelism and leadership – are taught by the seminary. Seven congregations are participating, with the first graduations scheduled by Dec. 31. It is especially significant that among the seven congregations are the largest ULC congregations, and so the ones best able to serve as examples for the others.

Fulfilling the seminary's obligations under this new program is keeping me on the road. For example, on Oct. 29 my wife, Sandy, and I set out on a three-week tour of about 2,000 miles

to offer deacon courses in five congregations far removed from our home base in western Ukraine. Fortunately, two other participating congregations are in the Ternopil area, so we do get to spend some nights in our own bed.

The budgetary stringency caused funding for this program to be removed from the seminary's 2010 budget. The \$2,000 needed for deacon education was placed on the unfunded "wish line" in the hope that special funding can be found.

Problem? Opportunity? The answer seems to be: "some of each." With the Lord's blessings, however, the ULC could emerge from this as a stronger church with a much more active laity. We welcome your prayers toward that end.

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



The Vogts, on left, with deacons in training and local pastors in Sevastopol.

A Cane Sparks a Sermon

Our lives don't always run on schedule. While we are preparing to celebrate the humble birth of our dear Lord and Savior in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, there are brothers and sisters here and now who are preparing to meet the same Lord and Savior in the heavenly realm. All the more in these crucial times do they need to be comforted with the meaning of Christmas and the unending joy the angels proclaimed to all the people. This article is about one such sister in Christ. It testifies to the fact that our Lord uses us all, even when we don't always know it, to bless others around us.

It's been several weeks since I began visiting an elderly woman in the local hospital. She was never a member of our church. Most often she went to a Catholic church in downtown Plzen, but for several years she attended our Christmas Eve service. At one point, she signed up to receive by mail our church newsletter, "Seal of Faith," and sermon copies.

When we recently updated the mailing list, I went to visit the woman to see how she was doing and ask whether the sermons were useful. I didn't find her at home, but a neighbor told me that Mrs. Hrabackova was in the hospital. I found the woman in a hospice-like department of the hospital. She was very happy to see me, although at first I had to help her "put me in the right drawer." I started to visit her two or three times a week, seeing how quickly her health was deteriorating. Whenever I came we talked about sickness, sin, death, resurrection and how it is all related to Jesus. Again and again her eyes smiled at me when I told her about Jesus' love for her which goes beyond the grave. Mrs. Hrabackova was a long-time widow but had a strong desire to be reconciled with her daughter. I was glad I could help as a mediator in this issue so that Mrs. Hrabackova could find peace also with her closest family.

When you bring Gospel comfort and encouragement to people who are dying, the result itself is a reward for you, i.e. the fact that people do get comforted and encouraged while facing the end of their earthly journey, ready to meet their Creator and Savior. Yet the people still want to show their gratitude to you in one way or another. This woman kept complaining that she had nothing to give me in return for my bringing her words of consolation.

Once she offered me her walking cane. She said, "Here, take this cane. I no longer use it since I can only lie in bed now." "And what should I do with it," I asked. "Well, you can chase the sickness out of me." I appreciated that her sense of humor remained. "Well, a cane is not powerful enough for that," I replied, after a short soft laugh. "But the one who forgave you your sins is good and powerful enough to bring you back to life and give you health." She kept saying, "I believe you, but I want to give you something as a thank-you gift."

In the middle of October, my sermon was due to be delivered. The text was Matthew's account of Jesus' forgiving the sins of and curing a paralytic. The son of man, the Savior, has the authority on Earth to forgive sins, was the lesson. I racked my brain to come up with a good introduction. Sometimes ideas come easily and in bunches. Not this time. But after my hospital visit and the "cane story," I had another reason to thank my Lord. Mrs. Hrabackova gave me a gift, though being confined to bed. Her little joke and the lesson from it served well as the sermon's introduction. Jesus indeed came to deal with our sin, and he will return to deal with its consequences – by raising our bodies to everlasting life in joy and perfect health.

Mrs. Hrabackova was helpful in giving me an introduction that caught the attention of the many unbelieving parents who came to our church to hear their children sing a hymn. It gave comfort to our church members, the old and aging as well as the young and middle-aged. And because of the relevancy of the theme to hospital patients, I have printed a dozen copies of the sermon and left them in the hospital's waiting rooms. For God often works in hidden and mysterious ways. I pray that the words about Jesus, introduced by a story of a fellow patient, will bring its fruit in the proper time.

In the meantime we are confident that the Lord will continue to use us to spread his word and his kingdom of grace among all the sick and perishing souls. You can be a part of that "good infection" by supporting the Thoughts of Faith's mission. May the blessings that come to you in the Christmas story overflow you with comforted confidence and joyful generosity.

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

Merry Christmas from Ukraine

ХРИСТОС НАРОДИВСЯ! СЛАВІМО ЙОГО!

KHRYSTOS NARODYVSIA! SLAVIMO YOHO!



The words in Ukrainian letters and their transliteration to English letters are a traditional Ukrainian Christmas greeting and response that mean "Christ is Born! Let Us Praise Him!"

We do have true reasons to greet each other with these words. Since Christ is born for us to become our redeemer and king and since we have forgiveness of sins and eternal life in his name, we rejoice saying this Christmas season, "Khrystos narodyvsia! Slavimo Yoho!" Indeed, let us praise

him throughout the coming year.

Christmas is also a special time for us to thank God for all of you who support the church in Ukraine by your generous donations. Thank you! Christ is born! Let us praise Him!

Rev. V'yacheslav Horpynchuk, Bishop, Ukrainian Lutheran Church