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Latvian Baptists From 1990: New Beginnings

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Latvian Baptist life experienced great changes with the national awakening which started at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s.¹ Baptists had to learn how to live in the new economic, political and religious circumstances. It was a time of looking for a renewed identity and purpose. The new situation is seen in the words of Janis Tervits, who led Latvian Baptist work from 1977 to 1990.² He states that during the Soviet regime he knew how to fight “against” the Communist influence, but he does not know how to fight “for” the Church in the new circumstances. This problem was widely felt among Latvian Baptists. How to communicate the life of the Baptist churches and how to switch from the identity of fighting “against” the external threats to that of fighting “for” the development of the Church in the new circumstances? In addition, historian Valdis Teraudkalns asks the question: ‘Which of their past identities would Latvian Baptists choose to use as a building block for the future?’³

National and religious awakening

In the 1990s, many Latvians, not least Baptists, saw freedom and independence as God’s will and gift.⁴ Many Latvian Baptists, together with other churches, participated actively in the process of liberalisation. In many churches increased numbers of people attended church services and activities as well as evangelistic meetings and concerts.⁵ The old “gods” of one truth – in politics and in any other areas of life – were dethroned. Freedom of speech was a new “god” for society and for the mass media.⁶ This new situation challenged also the Latvian Baptist Churches and the entire religious landscape of Latvia, where new ways of life

¹ Janis Tervits, *Latvijas Baptistu vēsture [The History of Latvian Baptists]* (Rīga: LBDS, 1999), pp.191-92.

² Janis Tervits, *Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienības draudzes pašreiz [The present churches of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches]* (Rīga: Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienība, 1995), p.152.

³ Valdis Teraudkalns, ‘Leaving behind Imagined Uniformity: Changing Identities of Latvian Baptist Churches’ in: Ian M. Randall, Toivo Pilli, Anthony R. Cross (eds.), *Baptist Identities: International Studies from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*. Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Volume 19 (Nottingham: Paternoster, 2006), p.110.

⁴ Arbijs Lauva, ‘Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienības Kongress’ [‘The Congress of the Union of Latvian Baptist Churches’], *Baptistu Draudzēm [To Baptist Churches]*, Nr.3, May, 1993, p.14.

⁵ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.192-194.

⁶ Ringolds Balodis, ‘Church and State in Latvia’, in: Silvio Ferrari, W. Cole Durham Jr. (eds.), *Law and Religion in Post-Communist Europe* (Leuven, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003), p.162.

were sought and old ones were re-evaluated. The question of freedom itself affected Church ministries. For those brought up in the Soviet era, freedom first of all meant opportunity to worship openly. For the newer generation today, it means also different ways of accomplishing the Church's ministry and new opportunities. After 1990, Latvian church's experience of oppression and regulation from the Soviet state⁷ now changed into a new relationship between the churches and state. The questions of church – state relationships took the form of dialogue, in many cases replacing many decades-long monologues from the state. The State guaranteed freedom of conscience and this opened the doors for churches to do their mission in schools, hospitals, orphanages and in National Forces by chaplaincy service. Latvian Baptists, along with other major Christian denominations (Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox), used all these new possibilities offered by the state.⁸ There were also practical issues that needed to be resolved. Much energy was given to reclaim back the properties that the Communist government had seized. In the wave of national and religious awakening, many Baptist meetings were held in public places, such as Culture Clubs.⁹ Christian witness was brought on the streets.¹⁰ In addition, publishing, theological education, international contacts – all these opportunities opened up for Christians, including Baptists. Tremendous work was done bringing humanitarian aid to Latvia from abroad.¹¹ New opportunities arose for the churches to spread the Gospel by means of media and television¹² and these opportunities at some extent were taken up. It was easy in those days to get on prime time, but some years later this situation changed. In 1993 Baptist Bishop Janis Eisans stated that in the past our work had been focused on inward activities because the law prohibited going outside of the church. Now was the time to think how to spread the Gospel outside the church.¹³ Christian organizations like "Campus Crusade for Christ" held evangelistic campaigns in Latvia. Evangelistic enterprises, such as "Hope – 91", "Hope – 92" brought many to Christ.¹⁴ Many people reached by these events later became Baptist Christians. During these events speakers were also able to enter factories and other work places. This, from the perspective of the present day, twenty years later, sounds like a miracle. In addition to changed relationships with the State and new opportunities for different ministries, there was another factor that needed re-evaluation and influenced Baptist practice and identity in longer perspective. This was a need to re-interpret Baptist approach to new religious movements. After the end of the 1980s and especially since the 1990s, many changes have appeared on the religious landscape in Latvia. The spiritual emptiness in the people's lives and their openness to spiritual expressions paved way to new religious movements.¹⁵ Latvia started to become acquainted with the Charismatic Movements,¹⁶ which found good soil among both Latvian church leaders and lay people.¹⁷

⁷ Balodis, 'Church and State in Latvia', pp.148-49.

⁸ Ibid., pp.164-69.

⁹ Modris Ginters, 'Gada lokā' ['In a Year Circle'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.1, January, 1991, p.15.

¹⁰ Balodis, 'Church and State in Latvia', p.151.

¹¹ Enoks Bikis, 'Dieva svētības Latvijai izlūgties' 'To pray for God's blessings to Latvia'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr. 1, January, 1993, p.9.

¹² Balodis, 'Church and State in Latvia', pp. 161-63.

¹³ Arbijs Lauva, 'Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienības Kongress' ['The Congress of the Union of Latvian Baptist Churches'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, pp.6-7.

¹⁴ Lauva, 'Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, p.7.

¹⁵ Balodis, 'Church and State in Latvia', p.146.

¹⁶ Arturs Skuburs, 'Nekonfesionālās harizmātiskās kustības – kristīgās draudzes svētība vai posts?'

['Nonconfessional charismatic movements – the blessing or curse for Christian churches?'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.9, September, 1998, pp.588-95.

Some new charismatic churches emerged also from Baptist backgrounds, influenced by the Charismatic movement from the West.¹⁸ Some Baptist churches became more charismatic without leaving the Union of Latvian Baptist Churches. However, this was not the case of “Good News” (“Prieka vēsts”) church which split from Riga’s Golgatas congregation.¹⁹ Those who remained in the church saw those who left as led astray by false prophets.²⁰ Some mainline churches looked at newcomers with suspicion, and in some cases with good reasons. However, sometimes rejection was based on superficial evaluation, and judgements revealed “moral panic” rather than careful consideration.²¹ In the second part of the 1990s a movement called the “Faith Movement” or “Word of Faith movement” was widespread. This movement claims that “strong” faith itself will bring physical healing and prosperity. That faith will release tremendous power, which can be used for achieving or changing things.²² These and similar views were spread through radio, television programmes and literature. Seeing in this movement many dangers, some of the Council of ULBC in 1998 worked out a document stating the Baptist positions and warning Latvian Baptists not to fall into these teachings.²³ Besides this, in 1999 there was a series of articles in the magazine *Baptist Herald*. One of the series was entitled “Faith Movement: triple blessing or double curse?” Janis Tervits recommended Baptist churches not to make hasty contacts with organisations abroad, but always to ask ULBC for advice, or to work only with those who had been recommended by ULBC.²⁴ Despite such advice, the new religious movements spread quickly in Latvia, challenging the work and message of longstanding Christian churches.²⁵ Articles published in Latvian Baptist magazines give evidence that there were strong tensions among believers over foreign influences. The situation changed when an organization from the USA entitled “Bridge Builders International” took the initiative to help Latvian Baptist Churches to establish trustful relationships with churches in the USA. Similar organization “Partneri” also played an important role in alleviating tensions.²⁶ The new beginnings in the context of religious liberalisation offered Latvian Baptists amazing new freedoms and open doors, as well as many new problems. The Baptists took advantage only in a partial way of the new freedom, and in many cases were not united. As a result, despite the efforts made, there were missed opportunities to engage in relevant mission.

¹⁷ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.196.

¹⁸ Arturs Skuburs, ‘Nonconfesional charismatic movements – the blessing or curse for Christian churches?’, pp.589-90.

¹⁹ Arbijs Lauva, ‘Rīgas Golgātas baptistu draudzes 80 gadu gaita’ [‘Rigas Calvary Church’s 80 years flow’], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.1, January, 1991, p.27.

²⁰ Dzidra Darzniece, ‘Golgātas Baptistu draudzes 78.gadasvētku dievkalpojums 1990.gada 28.oktobrī’ [‘The 78th annual celebration of Golgatas Baptist Church in 28th of October, 1990’], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.1, January, 1991, p.8.

²¹ Valdis Teraudkalns, ‘Moral panic and the New Religious Movements’, *Baptist Herald*, Nr.3, March, 1999, pp. 90-91.

²² Aigars Jecis, ‘Ticības kustība: trīskārša svētība vai divkāršs lāsts?’ [‘Faith Movement: triple blessing or double curse?’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.3, March, 1999, p.107.

²³ ‘LBDS padomes Deklarācija attiecībā uz „Labklājības Teoloģiju” jeb „Ticības Vārda” kustību’ [‘The declaration of ULBC concerning Theology of prosperity’ or “Word of Faith” movement’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.9, September, 1998, p.567.

²⁴ Tervits, *The present churches of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches*, p.132.

²⁵ Janis Eisans, ‘Laikiem mainoties’ [‘In Change of Era’], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.4, July, 1993, p.6.

²⁶ Zetche Kellijs, *Surprised by the Fathers Plan*, pp.215-29.

Re-establishing and developing the Union of Latvian Baptist Churches

The Union of Latvian Baptist Churches (ULBC) was re-established in 1990.²⁷ In the year 1996, finishing his ministry as Bishop, Janis Eisans, listed all the work which developed from 1990 to 1996. He listed publishing work, evangelization, children's ministry, theological education, youth ministry, Sunday School ministry, music ministry, Christian physicians' ministry, women's ministry and pastoral ministry.²⁸ Later, Latvian Baptists defined more clearly the area of social work. However, the union and local churches also had to cope with problems: the lack of pastors, co-workers and proper buildings, as well as the limited financial resources.²⁹ Sometimes there was lack of spiritual insight. There was a need to clarify priorities, there was growing materialism which affected the consciousness people, including Christians; and there was lack of reaction to growing social problems, such as alcoholism, prostitution, abortion rates and adultery. Looking back, Bishop Janis Eisans reported at the Congress of 1996: "There was a need to see and understand the changes which were taking place, and in time, to see those as God's open doors through which we, Baptists, need to enter to reach the nation with the message of Christ."³⁰ Freedom brought an open question about the goals and directions in which Baptists would expand their ministry. This determined the structure of Baptist work. From reading Baptist official publications one can see several goals of ULBC since 1991: re-gaining Latvian Baptist properties, which had been seized during the Soviet time; developing the structure of the ULBC, so that it could effectively support and develop different ministries among churches; strengthening existing churches, and establishing new ones; the training of new pastors; widely developed mission, including social mission. There were also some structural and formal changes: in 2002 general secretary's office was renamed executive director's office. It was understood that the ULBC should coordinate the work of all local Baptist churches and help them to achieve common goals and carry out projects which could not be carried out by separate churches, like major evangelization events, Baptist song festivals and other projects. The union also helped the local churches in their relationships with the State. But, here we need to take into consideration that the ULBC as an institution had one view of goals and methods, and the local churches often had another view.³¹ Their aims and practices did not always go hand in hand. The ULBC faced difficulties both on a relationship level and on a resource level. There were times when the churches were not able to support all the work done in the Union building, and there were also examples of lack of information about the use of resources. Bishop Peteris Sprogis, who started his ministry as bishop in 2006, had to deal with this situation. Some parts of the Union House were rented to companies and organizations; business peoples' donations were raised; new partnerships started. By the mid-1990s and later, people in local churches started to ask questions about the role of the Union in their life and work.³² All this was influenced by the rapid changes in society, and actually, in most

²⁷ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.192.

²⁸ Janis Eisans, 'Bīskapa Jāņa Eisāna darba pārskats' ['Report of the ministry of bishop Janis Eisans'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.3, May, 1996, pp.332-36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.334.

³⁰ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.193.

³¹ Peteris Sprogis, 'Vai Rietumu metodes der Latvijā?' ['Do Western methods work in Latvia?'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.6, June, 1998, pp.454-56.

³² Janis Tervits, 'Būt Baptistu draudzes loceklim' ['To be a member of a Baptist church'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.8, August, 1998, p.533. Theme 'To be a member of a Baptist church' was covered in *Baptist Herald* from July, 1998, to February, 1999, pp.493-94.

cases, neither the churches nor the ULBC were ready to respond to these changes. These years after 1990 brought more changes to church life than the whole Soviet time did. The question is still there among the Latvian Baptist churches: how to proclaim the unchangeable truth to an ever changing society.³³ This challenge was, however, a propellant force to develop church ministry. By the early years of the new millennium the ULBC began to re-examine its foundations and had to find new ways of being an effective union, which could accomplish the goals formulated at the beginning of the 1990s. Starting his ministry as Bishop of the ULBC in 2006, Peteris Sprogis actively undertook to accomplish a number of developments which had become hindered due to the problems that existed in the relationships between local churches and the ULBC.³⁴

Different ministries

I will take a closer look at some ministries that developed in the 1990s. These ministries include evangelism and mission, youth and children's work, theological education, publishing and cooperation with Russian-speaking Baptists in Latvia. There is no doubt that mission and evangelisation became priority as soon as freedom came. Bishop Janis Eisans said that Latvia needed evangelism as much as the country needed daily bread.³⁵ It was a time of sizeable evangelistic enterprises. In May 1991 "Hope – 91" took place in the Sports Arena in Riga. This was done with the cooperation of missionaries from International Mission Board, under the leadership of Ben Meet,³⁶ who was leading the work of "International Crusades". There were similar events that followed "Hope – 91". In 1999 the main speaker was the world renowned evangelist Luis Palau, and then 150 churches were involved and more than 48,000 people attended the series of services in Riga and elsewhere.³⁷ In November 2010 in Riga there was Festival Hope with Franklin Graham as main preacher. These events attended about 38,000 people. Almers Ludviks who led the evangelization work of the ULBC (1995-2001), observed that in the mid 1990s evangelistic enterprises seemed to decline in the union, though many local churches hold different type of evangelism events. Perhaps any decline was due to lack of professionalism and understanding of how to do effective evangelistic work. Also, believers relied too much on "imported" evangelists who often were not well aware of Latvian context or culture. The ULBC in 1994 made the decision not to invite missionaries from abroad any longer but to do this on their own. 1996 was declared the year of evangelization.³⁸ However, soon Latvian Baptists were again looking for support from abroad. Besides evangelistic events in Latvia, believers became more aware of international mission opportunities. In 1993 people from several Latvian Baptist Churches began mission work in Turkmenistan. Pastor Almers Ludviks took the key role in promoting "foreign" mission in the union. New churches were established in Turkmenistan.³⁹ At the beginning of the new millennium Latvian Baptists participated in mission work in Bashkortostan, Russia, though this ministry was organized by the Latvian Evangelical Alliance with financial support from abroad. Pastor Peteris Eisans, as well as many others, had a commitment to these

³³ Sprogis, 'Do Western methods work in Latvia?', p.455.

³⁴ Peteris Sprogis, 'Mēs varam' ('We can'), *Baptist Herald*, Nr.4, April, 2006, pp.3-6.

³⁵ Janis Eisans, 'In Change of Era', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.4, July, 1993, pp.6-7.

³⁶ 'LBDS Padomes informācija' ['ULBC Council information'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.2, March, 1991, p.21.

³⁷ 'Evangelizācijas uzdevums' ['Evangelization task'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.1. January, 2000, p.25.

³⁸ Janis Eisans, 'Report of the ministry of Bishop Janis Eisans', pp.332-33.

³⁹ Zetche Kellijs, *Surprised by the Fathers Plan*, pp.130-133.

mission trips.⁴⁰ Bashkortostan was chosen because of connections the Latvians have with people who left Latvia to settle there in 19th century. There were also several missionary efforts in other parts of Russia. Some mission trips have been made to Estonia, but also to more distant destinations, such as Papua New Guinea.⁴¹ Another aspect of evangelism and mission is church planting efforts. In 2006 Bishop Pēteris Sprogis announced vision to plant 100 churches in following ten years in Latvia. In the year 2009 ULBC started a special church planting program following the church planting experience from Lutheran Churches in Norway. Today there are several church planting teams participating in this program and practically working in church planting. In the year 2010 there was created new office vice-bishop in church planting issues. So far, the results have been modest, but the awareness of the need for church planting has certainly expanded in the union, which hopefully will give measurable results in the future. Here much hope is on younger generation that has grown up during the last ten-fifteen years. At the beginning of the 1990s Sunday School work grew rapidly. Many new church members came via the Sunday School ministry,⁴² and a number of Sunday School children were the best evangelists Latvian Baptists have ever had. In 1990 there were 30 Sunday Schools with approximately 1500 children, and at the beginning of 1993 there were 54 Sunday schools in churches and 19 in places where churches were not yet established. More than 6,000 children attended these schools with approximately 340 teachers serving in them.⁴³ Only one year later, however, the number of Sunday School children declined to 4,772,⁴⁴ and in 1996 there were 4,120 Sunday School children and 290 teachers.⁴⁵ Those were the years when Sunday School attendance was challenged by other activities in society, for example, sports events and also extra-curricular school activities. Since 1999 Christian children's song festivals take place annually bringing together about 500 kids for fellowship, singing and encouragement.⁴⁶ The Baptist Youth Union was established already in 1989,⁴⁷ and its first president was Almers Ludviks.⁴⁸ The goal of the Youth Union was to unite young people from Baptist churches and to help them to develop youth ministry. The Youth Union organized annual youth congresses and camps throughout the 1990s.⁴⁹ Those camps were usually held during the Latvian National Festival in June. Despite its successful work at the beginning,⁵⁰ youth ministry was one of the least developed ministries in the second half of 1990s, partly because of the frequent change of leadership and partly because of controversies with the ULBC leaders over methods.⁵¹ Before those problems, however, there were optimistic meetings, planning and high expectations to win

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.293.

⁴¹ Olegs Jermolajevs, 'International Crusades Igaunijā' ['International Crusades in Estonia'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.6, June, 2000, pp.232-33; Ilze Janovska, 'Missionāru darbs Āfrikā' ['The work of missionaries in Africa'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.5, May, 1999, p.174.

⁴² Elza Roze, 'Sunday school union in context of reestablished ULBC work', p.64.

⁴³ Lauva, 'Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, p.11.

⁴⁴ Arbijs Lauva, 'Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienības kongress' [The Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1994, p.13.

⁴⁵ Elza Roze, 'Svētdienskola ir draudzes spēks un nākotne' ['Sunday school is the strength and future of Church'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.4, July, 1996, pp.392-93.

⁴⁶ Laima Dravniece, 'Dziesmota Diena' ['Day with Songs'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.6, June, 1999, pp.228-29.

⁴⁷ Without reference to the ULBC. This fact implicitly reveals the relationships between the Youth Union and the ULBC. Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.389.

⁴⁸ Janis Eisans, 'Bīskapa Jāņa Eisāna darba pārskats' ['Report of the ministry of bishop Janis Eisans'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.3, May, 1996, p.334.

⁴⁹ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, pp.389-90.

⁵⁰ Lauva, 'Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, p.11.

⁵¹ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.389.

young people for Christ. But by the year 2000 the Youth Union had ceased its activities.⁵² From 2006, the ULBC under the new leadership placed new emphasis on the restoration of youth ministry⁵³ and the centralization of local youth work.⁵⁴ Today also these activities – coordinated by the ULBC – have declined. Youth work is done in local churches. After the closure in 1940 of the Latvian Baptist Seminary, Latvian Baptists lacked systematic theological education and training.⁵⁵ Theological education was prohibited by the state, but was carried out individually by some pastors. Some Latvian Baptists received their theological education in Bible courses in Moscow during 1970s. In the 1980s Bishop Janis Tervits began to run “Preaching lectures”, which continued up to 1989.⁵⁶ Nineteen pastors and church leaders got their basic theological education through these lectures. In summer 1990 Ilmars Hirsch was invited to explore possibilities of re-opening the seminary.⁵⁷ The Theological Seminary of ULBC was re-opened on 31 January, 1991. The first home for the Seminary was in Marupes Street 16 in Riga, a building which had been taken over by the communists and used for television and public school. Later, the seminary moved to the Latvian Baptist Union’s building in Lacplesha Street 37. The Seminary also had a non residential department in Liepaja in 2002-2006. By the year 2005 more that 30% of the pastors were graduates from the Theological Seminary,⁵⁸ almost half of these having entered pastoral ministry since 1990.⁵⁹ By the beginning of the new millennium the Seminary offered only non-residential programme, because of the lack of students. The Seminary Council and the Council of the ULBC came in 2004 to an agreement to continue the work of the Theological Seminary as a Christian Leadership College. It became more and more difficult to continue as an accredited institution, though in 2008 the College was accredited for 2-year period. In the year 2010 College is working on reaccreditation. There has been a lack of pastors in Latvian Baptist churches and the Seminary was blamed for that. At the beginning of the 1990s many placed their hopes in the Theological Seminary, expecting that the growth of Latvian Baptist churches was related only to the preparation of new theologically educated pastors.⁶⁰ During this time the Seminary was somehow made “responsible” for failures in the work of the ULBC. However, not much reflection was given to the question what role does theological education play in the ULBC? In an attempt to counter the issue, the Seminary and then the Christian Leadership College sought to prepare new leaders, and introduce new programmes, such as social aid and business administration. Besides Latvians, some students came from Ukraine, Belorussia and Poland. In the year 2011 College will launch study program in pastoral studies. However, tensions continued. Probably out of these feelings, in 2006, there was introduced an idea of Baltic Pastoral Institute, which officially began its work in January 2008. In December 2010 there was first graduation with 8 graduates. Today the Institute’s 3-year programme does not differ much from the programme of the former Theological Seminary. It is obvious that the work of the Christian

⁵² Arbijs Lauva, ‘Darbinieku sanāksme Rīgā’ [‘Workers meeting in Riga’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.6, June, 2000, p.218.

⁵³ Toms Asnevcis, ‘Jauns sākums’ [‘A New beginning’], <http://www.synergos.lv/E-SYNO/%7Bsakums%7D.html> (21.11.2007.).

⁵⁴ ‘Trauksme’ (‘Alarm’), *Baptist Herald*, June, 2007, p.5.

⁵⁵ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.277.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.284-85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.287.

⁵⁸ Ilmars Hirsch, ‘Teoloģijas semināram -12’ [‘To the Theological Seminary – 12’], in: *Latvijas Baptistu draudžu gadagrāmata 2004 (The Yearbook of the Latvian Baptist Churches 2004)* (Rīga: Amnis, 2004), p.49.

⁵⁹ Andrejs Sterns, ‘Brotherhood of the Pastors during last fifteen years (1990-2004)’, pp.61-62.

⁶⁰ Alfreds Petersons, ‘Pārdomas un vērojumi par mūsu draudzēm sodien un nākotnē’ [‘Thoughts and considerations about our Churches Today and in the Future’], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.9, May, 1992, p.10.

Leadership College, which in a way continues the ethos of the Seminary, is challenged by the recent decisions made by the leadership of the ULBC. The new Baptist leadership is looking towards more informal and practice-based educational structures, like Baltic Pastoral Institute.⁶¹ This shows the crisis inside the present ULBC regarding the concept of theological education. In 1990s, Latvian Baptists actively established publishing work. After many years when publishing work was done underground, Latvian Baptists were finally able to publish their work openly.⁶² One of the major projects of the ULBC was publishing Janis Tervits' book *Latvian Baptist History* in 1999.⁶³ The publishing house Amnis publishes Christian books. Amnis book shop in Riga has grown and developed, having in stock besides books also Christian music. A number of Baptist periodicals were started in 1990s: *To Baptist Churches* (1991-1995), *Baptist Herald* (since 1995), and *Good News* (since 1990). *Good News* was used for mission purposes, but, unfortunately, finished in the year 2002, because the high publishing costs. From the year 2000 it seems that the Latvian Baptist magazines were working with financial deficits.⁶⁴ In the early years the Baptist magazines were produced unprofessionally and with little experience but with a huge amount of enthusiasm. The periodicals, however, did help to strengthen relationships within the Union and with expatriate Latvian Baptists.⁶⁵ The children's magazine "*Light*" (Gaisma, published from 1990)⁶⁶ faced its own kinds of problems. There were debates over minor matters like the art work in this magazine. Instead of solving this problem and changing the artist, the work stopped. Consequently there is a lack of children's literature among Latvian Baptists. The Sunday School Union tried several times to restart this work but with no success. Last but not least area of ministry for Latvian Baptists is cooperation with Russian speaking congregations.⁶⁷ The Russian speaking Baptists in Latvia did not always feel accepted because of language and cultural barriers.⁶⁸ At the annual Congresses, some Latvian Baptists demonstrated their nationalism when Russian representatives spoke in Russian. Sometimes sharp exchange of words followed. Despite this tension, Latvian Baptists and Russian Baptists have, in fact, come closer to each other.⁶⁹ Russian Baptists are now also taking initiatives in building relationships; there is better cooperation, and exchange of important information.⁷⁰ The fact that the Russian Baptist churches are part of the Latvian Baptist Union and have not created their own independent work is a good witness. Despite different languages, ethnic identities and historical sensitivities this shows that Baptists in Latvia are united in one mission.

Local churches: Baptist life and practice

Latvian Baptists, although seemingly internally strong, did actually decrease in numbers under communist regime.⁷¹ On 1 January 1980 there were 5,391 Baptists in Latvia, but on 1

⁶¹ Peteris Sprogis, 'We can', p.6.

⁶² Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.461.

⁶³ Enoks Bikis, 'Grāmatas prezentācija' ['The presentation of Book'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.3, March, 2000, p.103.

⁶⁴ Arbijs Lauva, 'LBDS kongress '2000' [ULBC Congress '2000'], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.4, April, 2000, p.133.

⁶⁵ Rasma Dravniece, 'Sadraudzības un saprašanās tilts' ['The bridge of fellowship and common understanding'], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1991, p.7.

⁶⁶ Lauva, 'Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, p.7.

⁶⁷ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p. 209.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Tervits, *The present churches of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches*, pp.132-33.

⁷⁰ *The Yearbook of Latvian Baptist Churches 2005*, pp.77.-80.

⁷¹ Ainars Bastiks, *Work of Latvian Baptist Church from 1944-1990*, p.42.

January 1990 the number had declined to 4,529.⁷² Since the Second World War Latvian Baptists had declined from 12,000⁷³ members to that number in 1990.⁷⁴ Rapid growth came with the early years of regained independence. In 1993, the union churches baptized 899 people altogether. This was an exceptionally high number of baptisms. Churches were growing faster in urban areas. The reasons for this can be found not only in the church itself, but also in the society. Church growth and new church planting was always related to new ideas, usually in the urban setting.⁷⁵ Also the number of churches grew. At the end of 1991 there were 64⁷⁶ Latvian Baptist churches but at the beginning of year 2005 there were 86 Baptist churches in ULBC.⁷⁷ Among them are also Russian Baptist churches and an International Baptist church. There are also Baptist churches which do not belong to the Latvian Baptist union. However, the number of baptisms gradually slowed down. In 1995 there were 75 churches with 5597 members, and in that year there were 483 baptisms. In 2000 the number of baptisms in the ULBC had declined to 331 people. However, the total number of members and churches had somewhat increased. In 2000 there were 81 Baptist churches in the Union with 6366 church members altogether. Nine years later, in 2009, there were 86 Baptist churches and 6486 members. In that year there were 214 baptisms. In these nine years total growth of the churches was 120 people. It is possible that the year 2010 will show a small decline in total membership. During the 1990s Latvian Baptist church growth was affected by division between traditional churches, representing practices and traditions from Latvian Baptist life during the Soviet period time, and those who were trying to be more contemporary in their worship. It was a question of form and content.⁷⁸ In some churches the forms and traditions of church determined their “content” and in time they were not able to reach out to new people, because they were living in different worlds. Those who saw that the content of the Gospel is priority tried to find new methods to bring the unchangeable truth to society which lives under constant change.⁷⁹ Also geographical location of churches affected church planting. Before the Second World War there were strong churches in both rural and urban areas. When the Soviet period began, many Latvians were sent to Siberia. Some people moved from villages into towns and cities. Many rural churches declined in numbers, were weakened or even disappeared.⁸⁰ This situation was not taken into consideration at the beginning of the 1990s. There was no strategically planned ministry to plant churches in populated locations. Only after 2000 did Latvian Baptists begin to think about this problem.⁸¹ This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Latvian Baptists

⁷² Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p. 177.

⁷³ In 1938 in Latvia there were 109 Baptist churches with over 12,000 active members, 96 pastors and almost the same number of assistant pastors or substitutes. Including the Baptist children and all those who were under the spiritual care of the Baptist churches, the total membership reached 27,000. Augusts Meters, ‘The Baptist work in Latvia’, in: Fridrihs Cukurs (ed.), *Against the Tide. A Short Description of Latvian Baptist Work at Home and in Exile* (Wurzburg: Latvian Baptist Union, 1949), p.15.

⁷⁴ Alfreds Petersons, ‘Thoughts and considerations about our Churches Today and in the Future’, p.9.

⁷⁵ Tervits, *The present churches of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches*, pp.131-32.

⁷⁶ *Latvijas Baptistu draudžu kalendārs 1992 [The Calendar of Latvian Baptist Churches 1992]*, pp.103-16.

⁷⁷ *The Yearbook of Latvian Baptist Churches 2005*, p.160.

⁷⁸ Peteris Sprogis, ‘Do Western methods work in Latvia?’, p.455.

⁷⁹ Olegs Jermolajevs, ‘Vieta, kur sagatavoties kalpošanai’ [‘A Place to preparing for the ministry’], in: *Latvijas Baptistu draudžu gadagrāmata 2003 [The Yearbook of the Latvian Baptist Churches 2003]* (Rīga: Amnis, 2002), p.53.

⁸⁰ *Politiskā un sociāli ekonomiskā informācija (Political and social economical information)*,

http://www.aic.lv/ENIC/lat/Ino/prof_1997/1.htm (19.11.2007).

⁸¹ Peteris Sprogis, ‘We can’, pp.3-6.

declined in the second part of the 1990s. When national and religious enthusiasm decreased, Baptists were not represented strongly enough in locations where people were living. This will be the challenge for the next years to rethink issues related to Baptist presence in Latvian society. However, there are other issues which require attention, such as worship and church life. Latvian Baptist worship has significantly changed since 1990. During the Soviet time there were more or less common service forms and order,⁸² all part of Latvian Baptist identity.⁸³ Now worship became a question of debate. Local churches started to develop their own church worship order and practice. However, the sermon and the Word of God remained central,⁸⁴ even if music style or other elements changed, often depending on preferences of the local church. On the other hand, people from older generations felt threatened because of these changes, and some believed this may lead to losing our identity.⁸⁵ Partly, this was a matter of a generation gap. Hand in hand with worship in general, Latvian Baptists have developed strong musical traditions. An old custom of Baptist Song Festivals was revived in the 1990s. These festivals have unifying effect, they give visibility to Baptists in wider society and help to affirm the role of music in Baptist life. However, traditional choir music and modern forms of music need to adjust with each other in Baptist context. Youth is a powerful force in this process. Valdis Teraudkalns explains that “this should be seen not as a part of some kind of foreign influence but as adaptation within a local context of modern, globalised youth subcultures”.⁸⁶ Adopting new forms of music, which shaped worship styles, was rapidly expanding in the 1990s. The whole process was in some cases “over-spiritualised”. In this situation Bishop Janis Eisans reminded churches about central characteristics of Baptist identity. In 1995 in his article ‘Let us remain Baptists’ he listed the following: the supreme authority of the Bible; repentance and baptism⁸⁷; the church and its authority; holiness of life and witness about Christ in daily life. Eisans stated: ‘At the present time there are many new movements appearing. Each of them with promises tries to convince people to join them. Also our church members are tempted to join churches, which are “more holy” and “more spiritual”. Therefore it is important to understand the truths on which Baptist churches stand.’⁸⁸ But theological convictions are always accompanied with practices in Baptist life. Certain behavioural requirements and practice of church discipline is not foreign for Latvian Baptists.⁸⁹ Latvian Baptists, for example, have considered themselves as people who abstain from alcohol. In recent years, however, this has been under debate. From an official viewpoint, Latvian Baptists still hold this discipline,⁹⁰ but there is also evidence that newer generation of Latvian Baptists is not

⁸² Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.480.

⁸³ Janis Tervits, ‘To be a member of a Baptist church’, *Baptist Herald*, Nr.8, August, 1998, pp.532-33.

⁸⁴ Valdis Teraudkalns, ‘Baptistu liturģija ekumēniskā un kultūrvēsturiskā kontekstā’ [‘The Baptist liturgics in the ecumenical, cultural and historical context’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.11, November, 1998, p.664.

⁸⁵ ULBC TS archive, *Letter of Arturs Skuburs to the preachers and pastors of ULBC wrote in Liepaja in 25th of November, 1997 wrote in Liepaja*.

⁸⁶ Valdis Teraudkalns, ‘Leaving behind Imagined Uniformity: Changing Identities of Latvian Baptist Churches’, p.120.

⁸⁷ In 2001 debates rose about baptism. The core of discussion was about what to do with those who are willing to join Baptist church from non-Baptist churches. There were several churches who accepted these people without rebaptism by immersion according to their testimony of faith and baptism as believers (even though not be immersion). Since the year 2002 the Council of ULBC started to accept this practice. ‘Informācija’ [‘Information’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.1, January, 2002, p.12.

⁸⁸ Janis Eisans, ‘Let us remain as Baptists’, *Baptist Herald*, Nr.2, March, 1995, pp.43-44.

⁸⁹ Janis Tervits, *Mēs esam baptisti [We are the Baptist]* (Rīga: LBDS Teoloģiskais seminārs, 1990), pp.9-10.

⁹⁰ Janis Tervits, ‘To be a member of a Baptist church’, *Baptist Herald*, Nr.1, January, 1999, pp.14-15.

strict in this question. Valdis Teraudkalns explained: “Some of the young people who joined Baptist churches after the change of the early 1990s did not have a Baptist family background and for them the three ‘Big Baptist Don’t’s (don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t dance) were open to question”.⁹¹ That kind of questions were less discussed during the Soviet time, because churches were quite closed communities and church growth was more dependent on natural growth.⁹² However, Latvian Baptists have advocated abstaining from alcohol because alcoholism has been a deep problem in the society. In this way, according to some believers, abstaining from alcohol becomes a witness to society.⁹³ At the same time, with new freedoms, Baptists were forced to see the whole question of witness on a wider scale.

Latvian Baptist witness in society

Although Baptists in Latvia are officially recognized as one of the historical and traditional Latvian churches,⁹⁴ in reality they were often seen by society as “fanatical” and considered a sect.⁹⁵ These ideas sprang from history and were based on misunderstandings of Baptist beliefs and practices.⁹⁶ Because of this, it has always been important to explain Baptist beliefs and practices for Latvian society. Even during communism, Baptists held a view that they should be confident members of society and, as Christ’s followers, spread the Good News about the Lord Jesus Christ.⁹⁷ They saw it as their duty to be witnesses to a society in which atheism and secularization were rooted.⁹⁸ In the mid-1990s Baptists emphasised more and more the importance of their witness and message in wider society.⁹⁹ Latvian Baptists, in the years of regained freedom, played an important role in helping to meet the practical needs of many people. Often, this was done with the help of their partners abroad.¹⁰⁰ After new independence, Latvian Baptists spoke moral and social issues, which were essential for new beginnings and for reconciliation in the society. At their congresses, Latvian Baptists prepared declarations which were addressed to the Latvian nation and government. In the 1993, Baptists emphasised the following points in their declaration: it is necessary to include in school programmes non-denominational teaching of Scripture and Christian ethics; school programmes should put less emphasis on sexual education, and rather on mature and strong family life; in questions of abortion the principle of the sanctity of life should be considered; the state should take steps to prohibit the spreading of violence, prostitution, pornography and homosexual practice in the media; the government should prohibit the advertising of alcohol and nicotine and to clamp down on illegal sales. Latvian Baptists declared that they

⁹¹ Valdis Teraudkalns, ‘Leaving behind Imagined Uniformity: Changing Identities of Latvian Baptist Churches’, p.119.

⁹² Haralds Bartkevics, ‘Pastors role in the Church growth Theology’, *Baptist Herald*, Nr.8, August, 1999, p.311.

⁹³ Linda Griva, ‘Aizlūdziet par dievkalpojumiem Salacgrīvā’ [‘Pray for Services in Salacgrīva’], *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.2, March, 1994, p.14.

⁹⁴ Balodis, ‘Church and State in Latvia’, p.144.

⁹⁵ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, p.514.

⁹⁶ Mazis, ‘Latvijas Baptistu atšķirības no baptistiem citur pasaulē’ [‘Differences of Latvian Baptists from Baptists in Other Parts of the World’], *Ceļš (The Way)*, Nr. 56, 2005, p.174.

⁹⁷ Janis Tervits, ‘Pārdomas Laikmetu griežos’ [‘Thoughts at the turn of an age’], *Coworker*, Nr.3, 1991, pp.62-66.

⁹⁸ Lidija Tervite, ‘Bērnu reliģiskā audzināšana’ [‘Religious education of children’], *Coworker*, Nr.4, 1992, pp.29-30.

⁹⁹ Janis Eisans, ‘Latvijas Baptistiem – 135’ [‘Latvian Baptism – 135’], *Baptist Herald*, Nr.5, September, 1995, pp.163-64.

¹⁰⁰ Tervits, *The History of Latvian Baptists*, pp.197-99.

were willing to take part in the nation's moral and ethical renewal. Without moral and ethical standards, the nation's prosperity will suffer.¹⁰¹ Similar statements were made also in the following years.

Conclusion

After 1988 many changes have taken place in Latvian Baptist life, practice and worship. The Baptists have witnessed in post-Soviet Latvia, while searching for their renewed identity in changed context and trying to emphasise uniting elements in churches with different worship styles.¹⁰² Latvian Baptists are willing to work together, but still have a variety of views about ministry in the new circumstances. Latvian Baptists have become more active in missions and church planting. This process can be compared with the words of Jesus Christ about "new wine in new wineskins". There is a need to discern the variable and the constant in Baptist life and ministry. It must be understood that the content of the Gospel is invariable but the forms can and must be variable if we hope to avoid stagnation.

¹⁰¹ Lauva, 'Congress of Union of Latvian Baptist Churches', *To Baptist Churches*, Nr.3, May, 1993, pp.13-14.

¹⁰² It is interesting that Latvian Baptist pastor and historian Janis Rīss somewhere around the middle of 20th century or earlier in his paper 'Baptisma gars mūsu pašreizējā uztverē' points out that there is lack of 'wholeness' among Latvian Baptist churches in their church polity, teaching and leadership. There are both democratic and autocratic ruled churches. This manuscript reveals that this dissertation deals with the same issues of 20th century Latvian Baptist church life. Janis Riss, 'Baptisma gars mūsu pašreizējā uztverē' ['The Spirit of Baptists according our current understanding'], *manuscript*, ULBC TS archive, pp.1-3.