

Riga First UMC
Ministry overview after FOL 2016

I would like to mention two particular things regarding summer of 2016, that took place besides the usual church life activities. Firstly, with pride and joy I look back to the teen and children summer camps at Camp Wesley, where all of our Sunday school teachers and the youth leader took active part, they all served at camp during their vacation time – Austra Peltmane, Gaida Sēle, Laura Krūmiņa, Ilze Apine, Atis Baumanis and helper Ilze Lasmane. There were around ten teenage participants through Riga First church at the teen camp, but at the children' camp – 20 children from Riga, Ropazhi and Aloja. Church supported financially 15 participants. We are grateful to God and the teachers for the continued Sunday school ministry, same as before.

The second important event for the congregation last summer was the Annual District Conference of UMC in Latvia, where together with Bishop and other Methodists we reflected on how Christians were setting an example for others. The farewell night for Gita Mednis and the cooperation of the people in church preparing events at the freshly redecorated sanctuary and the basement hall of future hopes were both unforgettable.

We began the autumn season with reflection about the future of our congregation and its role in society. Several issues became clear:

- 1) A need to strengthen the congregation, also involving people from outside of church. Therefore we decided to not only continue the existing small groups, but to also form new ones (currently we have 2 stable and 2 freshly started groups) and some special interest groups (for example, a group for parents on psychology and raising children); also, we continue organizing common events for the church on regular basis, for example, historical nights about the history of the congregation, trips together and fundraising events.
- 2) A need to take care of the legislative and technical issues regarding the church building, as well – administrative and financial issues of the congregation. We continue working on these issues and plan to carry on with this work, as there are lots of challenges to solve.

The end of the year was filled with varied activities. All Advent season was very rich musically, because there were 5 concerts held at our church in December, but about the charitable work our church's lay leader Gita Bināne has more to say: „To share our joy and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, we decided to organize a fund raising concert to help fund the hot meals for Liepa afterschool program, host the families living in the welfare apartments in Ropazhi at our concert, continue to participate in filling shoe-box gifts for the Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon in camps, as well as a free holiday concert to bring joy into the lives of local families. Congregation members picked names of Liepa's afterschool program kids and bought each one a special present for Christmas. Many of them get no presents and for the last few years our presents are eagerly anticipated.“

We continue close collaboration with Social Center in Ropazhi as our social outreach. Our diaconal director Ērika Simsone is coordinating the donated things, clothes and humanitarian aid from Denmark, sending them forward to Ropazhi people on regular basis. In January, a group of people visited Ropazhi bringing the Good News, encouraging conversations, musical performances and over 4,000 pounds of wood pellets for heating that were bought for the money raised at the fundraising concert.

Together with Ērika Simsone and Gita Bināne we are all thankful to God for the first remodeled room in the basement, which was officially opened on January 29. Looking into the future, we are working so that it would one day be used as an active social outreach center.

After Christmas we hosted about 100 Taize pilgrims for 3 days. Congregation members hosted 35 in their homes. Each morning started with a breakfast served in our church or home and then a worship service in church at 8:30am. The group staying in our church were mainly from Sweden, in homes we had young adults from Poland and Ukraine. Taize is an ecumenical movement of young adults who gather from all of the world on Dec. 28 and spend their days in worship, prayer and workshops on how to work together to change our world.

New Year's Eve all 15,000 gathered in their host churches and worshiped and prayed for world peace. Some of our congregation joined them and so it was with prayers for world peace, that we started 2017! What a special blessing this was for Riga and for us at Riga First. Some of us attended the worship events and I must admit that I was overtaken with new hope for the world. It was incredibly powerful to be in worship with so many faithful young adults who chose to spend their free days in this gathering. Each worship service, Bible readings, songs and prayers were read and shared in the varied languages. All joined in one voice and prayer praising God!

Our beautiful building now is a host for 5 denomination congregations, because in autumn the Seventh Day Adventist Fifth congregation joined our fellowship officially. We would like to continue our successful ecumenical cooperation in the future also, while organizing devotions, charities, spiritual support events, for example, support for people who suffer from cancer, and other events. It is a joy to be able to experience mutual unity and respect between Christians this way, which is important to do, especially at the current times when empathy and tolerance are missing in society as a whole.

On the first days of February, the UMC in Latvia weekend teen camp was held at our congregation which inspired and „shook up“ our youth. We supported this events with active assistance in preparation, as well covering the participation for 4 of the teens from needy families. We are thankful to Anna Dobele and all of the supporters of teen ministry in the US. This ministry is necessary and crucial for our future, but we see that without an outside support it is not easy. In the future, we must work on preparation of the next generation of young leaders from our congregation, however, judging by the traumatic life experiences of many of our teens and the introvert character of Latvians, this task is a great challenge.

Our future forms today, it begins happening through us at this moment. Therefore, it is of great need to take the first real steps in succession area today, to awaken the spiritually asleep church members, renew the „deceased“ ministries, for example, the musical ministry etc. But, above all of that, one important thing has to happen with each one of us right at this moment, without it nothing will carry out from what we talked about earlier – we have to daily experience unceasing touch of the living God, His presence and burning love for Christ in our hearts, right where we are and as we are. I remember, when I was asked what was the one thing that lacked our people to be able to spread the Good News, I had to admit – personal experience of God. In the future, that is – now, it has to become a continuous personal and congregation's priority. How far or close from that are we? How can we as a congregation and individuals live deeper and deeper in experiencing God and His guidance?

Thank you, dear brothers and sisters, for the support of God experienced through you, presence and inspiration received together with you and through you! Thank you also for everything that will take place in the future by God's will and inspiration!

Pastor Astra Dannenfelte