

Reaching the Cities of **New Europe**

The students filed into the room and scattered themselves around the desks as the evening light faded outside. The white board was a muddle of colours and lines from the lecture the previous evening. Riga Bible Institute was in session for the final evening of Malcolm Firth's Bible overview, covering the Old Testament from the Exodus to the exile. Malcolm lectured in English, was translated into Latvian from the front, while a Russian translator murmured into a headset at the back and a handful of Russian speakers listened by radio headset.

The students had come to lectures after a full day's work, listening avidly even though this was the fifth night in a row. Malcolm's teaching was first rate, and lit up the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some of the students come from an Orthodox or Lutheran background, and that was evident in some of the discussions. Talking to them at break time, some were trainee pastors, others were youth leaders, and one or two had no church at all and were living as spiritual gypsies. So this is the need that Malcolm and Ruth Firth are there to reach, a modern European city where young Christians are hungry for truth, but where there is little in the way of solid Bible teaching, and where all kinds of distortions of the truth are on offer, leading the gullible astray. The exhortations of Paul in 2 Timothy about false teachers seemed wonderfully relevant to Riga.

This is a story repeated in many European cities. The old spiritual influences – Catholicism in western Europe, liberal Lutheranism in central Europe, and the Orthodox churches in the East – are all to some extent on the wane. Communism has gone and Capitalism has failed those who trusted it. In that spiritual vacuum young people are looking for truth, but because gospel churches are so thin on the ground, they struggle to find a church that truly teaches the Bible.

In the 1950s John Stott put forward his vision for a Bible teaching church in every town as the best way to evangelise England. Do we have the same vision for the evangelisation of Europe? The cities of 'New Europe' (those that have recently joined the EU) such as Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw, Bratislava, Budapest, and Sofia, are open to the gospel, and now

It is twenty years since the Iron Curtain came down, bringing freedom to the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Many of these countries, known as 'New Europe', have now joined the EU. A new generation are reaching adulthood who have never known Communism. Young people the same age as Jonathan Firth (seen here propping up a piece of the Berlin Wall in the Riga Museum of Occupation) struggle to understand the suffering of a previous generation, yet are disillusioned with the economic failure of capitalism.



Jonathan Firth and the Berlin Wall

allow open access to missionaries who are EU nationals. There are gospel churches in many of these cities, but they are few and often small, in countries where evangelicals are only 1-2% of the population.

The urgent need is for church planters who will plant authentic, indigenous churches both with and for national people. In Riga I was able to visit 'The Church of the Gospel', a church plant among Russian speaking people in Kengarags, pastored by Ervand (a former Social Worker now working full time with some support from Chertsey Street Baptist Church, Guildford). It was good to hear of his ministry on Christian radio, and their outreach to two shelters for homeless people. Malcolm is part of a church planters' network* in Latvia that seeks to encourage men such as Ervand.

Malcolm and Ruth continue to be involved in the International Church in the centre of Riga. The preaching is shared among the elders, so Malcolm preaches once a month. He and Ruth would love to plant a church in their neighbourhood of Mežciems in North East Riga. One of the International Church home groups meets in their flat, and they are keen to gather others with a vision to plant a lively, gospel-centred church among the apartment blocks. Please pray that God will show them the way forward in this coming year, and that the city of Riga will have many more churches where the Bible is faithfully preached in the years to come.

Jim Sayers

*To find out more, visit www.balticchurchplanting.com

An audio documentary programme on Jim's trip to Latvia can be downloaded from the GBM website at www.gbm.org.uk

Students at Riga Bible Institute



Church of the Gospel

Malcolm Firth teaching at Riga Bible Institute

Mežciems - a new church plant

