

# Daniel S. Johnson

## – Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστος Воскрес!

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Church officials from the Lithuanian, Latvian and Siberian Lutheran churches frequently visit the United States. If you wish to invite one of these church officials to visit your congregation, please contact me at:

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Did you know that 52% of residents of Latvia are Latvian ethnically? They are called Letts. They are ethnically related to Lithuanians, but have their own culture and language. A Latvian may recognize many words which a Lithuanian may speak, but since many of the words have different meaning a Latvian may say, "I recognize the words but I do not understand anything he is saying!"

The Latvian language is one of the oldest in Europe. It is related to Sanskrit, a language of ancient India.

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### Lutheranism in Latvia – a brief history

Did you know that the first Lutheran congregation in Latvia was established as early as 1523? Just a few years after Luther's 95 Theses were posted in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517, Lutherans were settling in Latvia. The congregation was so prominent that a letter was received written by Martin Luther, himself.

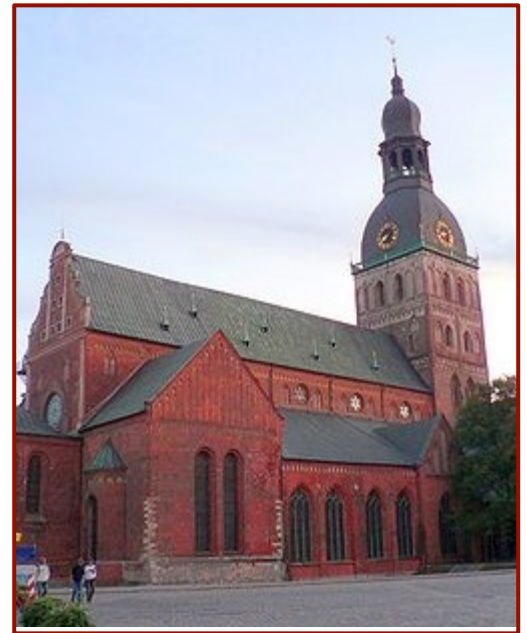
Christians first arrived in the region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when Augustinians from Germany began missionary activity. When Lutherans arrived, their presence was immediately evident. It was through the Lutheran influence that a written language and a grammar were developed. As early as 1525 a Lutheran "Missale" was printed with three parallel texts – one in "ordinary" Livonian, another in Latvian and one in Estonian. In 1586 a translation of Luther's "Mažais Katechisms" (The Little Catechism), together with some church hymns and gospel texts, was published. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Bible, a Lutheran hymnal and a sermon book had been published.

The Lutheran Church in Latvia, from the Reformation until World War I, reflected a predominantly German influence. In 1918 the Republic of Latvia was founded and significant changes in the structure and control of the Latvian Lutheran Church were soon enacted. Shortly after the Reformation, the Lutheran church had become the largest of all confessions in Latvia and dominated religious life during the time of independence. In 1925, Lutherans constituted 57.2 percent of the population of around 2 million

During the Bolshevik Revolution many Latvian pastors were killed, left their parishes or were executed. Due to the low number of pastors available to fill pulpits in the years following 1918, a theology department was opened at the State University of Latvia, in February 1919. By 1928 the number of Latvian pastors had increased to 144. By 1936 the number had grown to 228. Due to this growth, Latvian congregations were beginning to experience their goal. They wanted Latvian congregations served by Latvian pastors. The high degree of cultural influence which German pastors had exercised on the congregations had diminished during these years. The Latvian Lutheran Church was becoming a culturally Latvian Church.

All thoughts of Latvian independence and a culturally Latvian Lutheran Church were soon put aside as Soviet troops marched into Latvia on

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**The Lutheran Cathedral in Riga**





## Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Please pray for the Lutherans in Latvia and those who proclaim the incarnation of Jesus during Epiphany and Lent. Pray that the preached Word is heard and believed.

Many Latvian pastors serve multiple congregation parishes. Pray for safe travel as these dedicated clergy travel to provide care for their parishioners. Also, pray for the laity as they travel to attend liturgy.

Pray for Latvian seminary students, for their formation as faithful servants of Christ.

Pray for the Latvian catechumens as they learn the Christian vocation.

Pray for the faith and perseverance of the Latvian people as they are confronted with the dangers of an increasingly secular culture.

June 17, 1940. Wholesale terror ensued and culminated in a forced deportation of Latvians to Siberia in June of 1941. In this deportation, more than 35,000 Latvians were deported with nearly 1,500 who remained being executed. Many of those numbered among the executed were clergy and church leaders. Of those deported, 2,400 were recorded to be under 10 years old. Every church building was confiscated and many torn down. Liturgical life for the congregations was severely restricted. Tight controls were placed on clergy and church leaders who were spared the holocaust and deportations. Religious instruction and catechesis was removed from the school curriculum.

In late July 1941, the German army drove the hated Soviet army out of Latvia and, although first greeted as “liberators,” soon established a similarly oppressive regime. The Nazis’ intent became immediately clear – regain the Baltics as a German colony. The Nazi occupation confiscated property, terrorized the population and deported over 10,000 Latvians to work in German labor camps. The religious freedom that was anticipated under a German occupier was not realized. The Lutheran Church under the Nazis was severely restricted in her activity among the Latvian people.

The Soviets launched an offensive in 1944. With a double front, (both in the east and the west), the Nazi army could not stave off the advancing Soviets. On May 8, 1945 the German army capitulated Latvia to the Russian army. The Soviet re-occupation only resulted in further terror and repressions. Immediately large-scale deportations ensued, as more Latvians were deported to Siberia and locations in Central Asia. To escape the Soviet invasion, more than 150,000 Latvians left their homeland for asylum in either Sweden or Germany.

Under Stalin, the scourge on Latvian citizens and of the Lutheran Church continued. In March 1949, 42,133 Latvian citizens were deported (more than 2 percent of the Latvian, population) to the Siberian regions of Krasnoyarsk, Amur, Omsk and Novosibirsk. Of those deported, 73 percent were women and underage children (10,990 children under 16 were exiled). With over 50 percent of the population

consisting of Lutherans, it is reasonable to conclude that over half of the exiles under the Soviet regime were confessing Lutherans.

On May 4, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic adopted its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union and was renamed Republic of Latvia. The Church was restored, albeit a much smaller version of her prior size. In 1918 there were approximately 1.293 million Latvian Lutherans. Today the membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL) numbers approximately 400,000

persons. This is approximately one-third the size of what the church was prior to WWI and WWII and the later holocaust under the Soviets. The ELCL presently has about 295 congregations, and numbers about 150 ordained pastors. Today, the greatest threat to the Lutheran Church in Latvia is not from wars or political oppression, but rather from an increasingly growing secular influence. ✠ DSJ



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