

Deaf People Find Jesus in Estonia

Large numbers of the country's deaf are becoming Christians through a ministry launched from a former submarine base

In 1992, as the navy of the former Soviet Union was withdrawing from the Baltic republic of Estonia, Australian missionaries Harry and Jackie Leesment were looking for premises where they could establish a Bible college.

Harry approached the commander of the Suurupi nuclear submarine base located near the capital city of Tallinn, shared the gospel with him for 90 minutes and then audaciously offered to take the base off his hands.

"Take it," the commander said. "We haven't been able to bring peace with guns and soldiers. We're pleased to hand this base over to you. Maybe you can do better."

Through one ministry founded at the Suurupi Bible college, another long-submerged culture is surfacing in the former Soviet Union. The deaf, a people neglected and marginalized by the communists, are coming to Christ in large numbers through the efforts of Australian missionaries.

The Leesments, key figures in the formation of the National Pentecostal Church of Estonia—known by its Estonian initials EKNK—are now back in Australia as Assemblies of God World Missions field leaders for east Europe. They are busy equipping Estonia as the eventual base for a pan-European deaf mission.

The Leesments work closely with deaf Australian missionary Peter Dickens, who is married to an Estonian signing interpreter and based at EKNK in Tallinn. Another team member is Australian pastor Ann Jensen, who visited Russia and Estonia in April.

Jensen, six of whose seven children are hearing impaired, is committed to empowering deaf Christians to form autonomous churches. This model, she explains, arose in Tallinn during the turmoil of post-Soviet reconstruction. Deaf Christians—finding their churches had lost their signing interpreters—organized their own church within EKNK.

“As long as there’s an interpreter there, the deaf remain where they’ve always been, which is to be dependent,” Jensen said. “But when the deaf rise up as leaders they all tend to rise up together, and that’s where it’s most effective.”

She saw the effectiveness of this model vindicated among a group of Russian deaf men who worked as builders’ laborers.

“As soon as they met deaf Christians, they got saved. It’s that easy,” she said. “They’re so receptive—the reason being, they’ve never seen other deaf people who feel useful, who have self-respect, who are happy. The deaf are a very responsive people group at the moment. It really has to be a work of the Holy Spirit, a God thing.”

Ironically, the conditions the deaf suffer, as a legacy of communism, make it easier for evangelists to reach them. The number of deaf in Russia alone stands at 8.5 million.

“The negligence, educationally and medically, is appalling,”

Jensen said.

Deaf Estonian brothers Riho and Raivo Kurg, whom the Leesments disciplined in Tallinn, are now enterprising missionaries who have penetrated deaf communities right across European Russia and into Siberia. Their constant challenge is to find leaders among deaf converts who can head the thriving churches they plant.

“Riho Kurg believes that part of the church’s role is to help lift the people educationally and socially,” Jensen said. “So when they’re teaching people about Jesus they’re also teaching them other things at the same time.”

Jensen said the most flourishing deaf churches surprisingly are in the former Soviet states that have banned or severely restricted Christianity. She is wary of giving details due to what she emphasizes as the dangers missionaries and converts face in some of the regions.

A Muslim man she met in the Russian city of St. Petersburg “still lives in one of the states where you can’t have a public expression of Christianity,” she said. “He was one of five deaf who came to the Lord, and one of them was murdered immediately.”

From June to July last year, the ninth International Conference of Deaf Christians was held in Tallinn, with delegates from 31 countries. Jensen and the Leesments plan to follow up this recognition by founding what they refer to as the European Deaf Bible School in Estonia.

“It’s for deaf people, it’ll be led by deaf pastors and

evangelists, and they're going to be recruiting all over Europe to plant churches that will be led by deaf people," Jensen said. "My main thing at the moment is to raise [up to] \$100,000 to get it up and running.

"The most important message we need to communicate is that it is time for the deaf to lead the deaf."

—Adrian Brookes in Australia