

Melting Divisions in a Cold Land

In Latvia, where ethnic and religious tension has triggered bloodshed in the past, missionaries Bob and Sharon Perry are calling the church to embrace reconciliation.

It is early on a Sunday morning, about an hour before first light. Bob Perry is driving through the Latvian countryside behind the wheel of his white Toyota van affixed with Virginia license plates. As he pulls up to the Lithuanian border, a guard approaches the van and his sleepy passengers pass forward a bewildering array of passports.

Two Lithuanian. Two German. One American. One Swedish.

“This is what I do best,” Perry, an American, says as the sun rises and he speeds on to the port city of Klaipeda, where a small Lithuanian-Russian charismatic congregation is waiting for him and his message of Christian unity.

A day earlier he was eating lunch at a TGI Friday’s in Riga, the Latvian capital, with a Canadian Lutheran, an American Lutheran, a Ukrainian charismatic and his own assistant pastor, who has roots in Soviet Central Asia. Sunday night Perry will eat a salmon dinner with a Swedish-born Milwaukee man of Latvian extraction who shares a similar vision of Christian reconciliation and togetherness.

Sound confusing? Not to Bob Perry. He’s in his element here, preaching unity in the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. These are the three small former Soviet countries wedged between Scandinavia and Russia that this year voted to

join the European Union (EU).

Everywhere he goes Perry talks about bringing Christians of all stripes together. At first glance, he might seem like an unlikely messenger. Viewed from several yards away, before he even begins to speak, Perry is quite obviously not from these parts—not with his cotton chinos, tweed sport coat and broad, frequent smile.

He's fond of quoting the Bible. Jesus pops up frequently in conversation. Sometimes it is hard to find people like this in the West's ecumenical movement, where a premium often is put on avoiding conflict, never straying beyond least-common denominators.

Standing on this Sunday morning before the 60-member congregation of Jesus Christ Is Life Church that's meeting in a rented hall in Klaipeda, Perry urges his rapt listeners to put aside petty differences and age-old prejudices.

"We need more color in this church. We need Gypsies. We need Africans. We need Jews," pleads Perry, listing some of the ethnic groups most despised in this part of the world.

"You can't be afraid of immigrants. The church and the kingdom of God think global.

"Think big. We are a friend of the nations."

Perry goes on to introduce Rosemarie Claussen, 69, a German woman whose father was a Nazi general, whose godfather was Adolf Hitler and who narrowly escaped death as Russian

soldiers swept across Germany in 1945. Like Perry, she preaches about unity but gives the teary-eyed congregation a strong dose of forgiveness, as well.

“I just hated Russians. I was so full of hate and fear. And then, I became a Christian,” Claussen tells the congregants, a mixture of Russians and Lithuanians. “Forgiveness is the key to the kingdom.”

Breaking Ground

Forgiveness, patience, reconciliation, unity: These are some of the watchwords of Perry’s ministry. They help explain how he has not only survived but also flourished in an environment in which Western missionaries typically stay for one tour of duty that lasts three or four years.

Eleven years ago, Perry; his wife, Sharon; and their three children (there are four now) arrived in Latvia from Grace Covenant Church in Herndon, Virginia—a member congregation of Morning Star International, whose stated ministry purpose is “church planting, campus ministry and world missions.” They settled in a then-faded, now-flashy beach resort outside Riga.

After getting the lay of the land, Sharon Perry settled into teaching at the Riga Choreography School, and eventually writing and producing an original ballet dedicated to the Holocaust. The children embarked on a rigorous program of home schooling and extracurricular activities.

Bob Perry got to work by first advising Riga’s fast-growing New Generation Church and then launching what eventually became three Morning Star of Latvia congregations—two Russian-

speaking, one Latvian-speaking. In the coming year they aim to plant another Morning Star church in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, and they currently are grooming a young pastor for the job.

“There was a time of about 18 months in 1993 and 1994 when we baptized about 1,400 people in the Morning Star Church. That was the peak. Since then, we’ve baptized maybe 250 people in total,” says Bob Perry, who, at 46, still looks the part of the high school football captain with his good posture, jagged features and strong jaw.

“But now we are 100 times better,” he adds. “We’re much better equipped. We don’t make the same mistakes. Now we just need Jesus to send the fish again.”

By the yardstick of mass evangelism, the Perrys have not enjoyed stunning success in their work among Latvia’s 2.3 million mostly Christian residents. They don’t lead a megachurch or have a TV show or hold citywide revivals that grab headlines.

“It’s been tough,” Sharon Perry says one evening in her living room. “I think it’s especially tough for Bob—as a man—because he’s been here for 11 years, and there’s not 10,000 people—or 1,000 people. ... Thank God those that support us are not into the numbers game.”

Still, they have survived and learned from their errors and are deeply respected among the local Christian leaders, from Baptists to Roman Catholics, and among indigenous Latvians and Russians alike. This is no small feat in a country where the taciturn Latvians are deeply suspicious of their 30 percent

minority of hot-blooded Russians, and vice versa.

“We would tell people that the Orthodox Church is not teaching right. [We’d say] it was stupid. It gets back to the Orthodox pretty fast. We don’t do that anymore,” recounts Bob Perry while describing Morning Star’s work in a secondary school teaching English and morality classes.

“We don’t need to pick a fight. It’s all about being a little more Christian,” he says.

Building Bridges

A handsome beige clapboard building that was originally built in 1905 as a seaside sanatorium for railroad workers houses the congregations in Jurmala, Latvia.

Inside, a marriage conference led by local and American couples is just finishing. Some of the church leaders gather outside in the sea air to chat with Perry. For Latvia, they are a remarkable mix of nationalities—Indian, Filipino and Russian, as well as Latvian.

Perry revels in the diversity, saying provincial Latvians need role models.

“When you’re in a place like Moscow, it’s an international city. Here in Latvia it is like Alabama—the way people relate to each other,” he cracks.

The Latvians’ September vote to join the EU reflected those

divides as Russians in the country disproportionately voted no. Many Russians who happened to be in Latvia in 1991 when the Soviet Union broke up have yet to be granted citizenship and were not allowed to vote in the referendum.

Extremists on both sides aggravate Latvian-Russian relations. In the fall, the country's culture minister took part in the dedication of a monument to Latvians who served in Hitler's Waffen-SS. A group of Russians are accused of plotting the violent overthrow of the government in hopes of rejoining the world's largest country with Latvia, which is slightly larger in area than West Virginia.

Amid this legacy of centuries of mutual hatred and oppression, Perry says he is doing all he can to put out fires and build coalitions through prayer. His status as an outsider from a "new church" is sometimes helpful, sometimes not, according to other leaders of the Latvian Evangelical Association, where Perry heads the Prayer Work Group.

"People are very suspicious. They look at this guy," says Lutheran pastor Martins Irbe, pointing across the table at Perry, whom he credits as a driving force, "and they say: 'Are you Lutheran or Catholic? No? Then you must be in some sort of sect.'"

The Latvian Evangelical Association, started in 2002, has grown quickly, to the point that 150 pastors attended a prayer leadership summit in March. The association doesn't include Catholics or members of the Russian Orthodox Church, but an informal ecumenical group that sponsors annual prayer summits of top religious leaders does. It was through this group that pastor Irbe's wife, Gunta, encountered Perry's Morning Star Christian Church.

She says the proof of Perry's commitment has been evident from the beginning.

"The first time I met these guys, we were doing the 40 hours of prayer on top of Latvia's highest mountain—or hill, I guess you'd call it. It was January and minus 25. That's cold."

The man who organized that "prayer summit"—and one every year since—is Levi Gaudins, a Stockholm-born, Milwaukee-raised Latvian who shares Perry's vision, especially when it comes to prayer. Gaudins says that before the idea of having 40 consecutive hours of prayer caught on Perry was "the only one who understood the concept" and thus was "invaluable."

"Bob is a very loving person, a man of encouragement," Gaudins notes.

Despite all the accolades, Perry is not universally loved. Three years ago, his religious work in Latvia was thrown into jeopardy when the government's powerful, secretive Constitution Defense Bureau (CDB) ruled that he was a threat to national security. On the advice of the U.S. Embassy, Perry retained a local lawyer who specialized in religious-freedom issues and fought the ruling through the local courts.

The case dragged on until October of last year, shortly after the EU vote, when Perry got a letter that inexplicably reversed the CDB's initial decision. He and his lawyer are at a loss to understand what happened and why.

Senkans offers one explanation of why a man who promotes Christian unity might be a target for expulsion: "People like

Bob Perry are not always welcomed by the traditional churches.”

A Graceful Gospel

American missionary Sharon Perry is using ballet to reach a highly secularized nation.

For the last 11 years while living in Latvia, Sharon Perry has straddled two worlds that don't always get along. As a dance teacher and choreographer at the Riga Choreography School (Mikhail Baryshnikov was one of its graduates), the 46-year-old Perry finds herself immersed in an artistic world where success is everything and dancers smoke to stay slim.

As a mother of four and a leader of the Morning Star Christian Church, Perry is steeped in congregational life centered on Bible-based tradition and values. Despite this friction—or more likely because of it—Perry is thriving, integrating the two worlds. Her crowning achievement came in September 2003 with the premiere of *Voices From the Ground*, a ballet she choreographed about the Holocaust.

Her two daughters danced in the production that was inspired by a family trip to the Auschwitz concentration camp in nearby Poland. Perry teamed with Lithuanian composer Gerald Povilaitis to create the ballet, which she dedicated to the 70,000 Jews who were confined to the ghetto in Riga, the Latvian capital, and marched to their deaths in 1941.

Clara Vesterman, a Riga-born Jew who holds the position of Second Secretary at the capital's Israeli Embassy, was one of

those in attendance on opening night.

“I tried to imagine it: How am I going to feel about something as beautiful as a ballet about something as horrible as the Holocaust?” Vesterman recalls. “I wrote to my office that this was the first time in my life that a ballet made me cry.”

The ballet was not without controversy in a place where, as Vesterman describes it, Latvians were “more than responsible.”

“There were places where they killed Jews even before the Nazis came,” she says.

Perry agrees that the production struck a nerve.

“Some people got upset,” she says. “It is hard to accept that your relatives might have done something like that. But we have to learn a lesson from that so it doesn’t happen again. I think that art has the power to change people’s consciousness.”

Perry would like to choreograph future productions devoted to subjects ranging from U.S. slavery to the plight of Afghan women, but ultimately, she stresses, art and education can bring people only part of the way to understanding the horrors of the past—and neither of them can prevent atrocities from occurring.

For proof of this, she notes the societal setting in which the Holocaust arose.

“[It] happened in educated Europe. Education doesn’t really change the heart of man,” Perry says quietly. “Only God can change the spirit of a person. We need to be changed from within, supernaturally.”

LATVIA

Population: 2.3 million

Year Christianity came to Latvia: circa 1300.

Year Latvia became independent of the Soviet Union: 1991

Percentage of Latvian population exterminated under Stalin’s regime: One-fifth. Also, during World War II, 70,000 Jews were herded into slums in Riga, the capital of Latvia, and later sent to death camps.

Percentage of Latvians who attend church regularly: 2 percent

Percentage of Latvian youth who believe in God: 80 percent, but few of them have ever been introduced to Christ.

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