

Historic Event Targets Baltic Youth Issues

It's an international event that is ground breaking in so many ways.

But in an area of the world where young people have as much despair as the Baltic region, drastic times demand it.

On the heels of back-to-back-to-back evangelistic Festivals in Estonia (2009), Latvia (2010) and Lithuania (2011), a movement to specifically reach the youth in one of the most depressed regions on Earth has swelled up through the local church. Suicide rates in these three countries are now in the world's top 5.

And the local believers, in partnership with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, are determined to do something about it.

"I think the people here, especially the youth, are looking for answers," said BGEA's Brad Miller by phone from Riga, Latvia. "They're out on the Internet. They're searching for the answer of hope. 'What's going to fill this hole in my heart?' "

On June 9, that "answer of hope" will be presented not just once, but twice at the Baltic Youth Festival at Arena Riga.

It's the clear gospel of Jesus Christ. translated into Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian and Russian.

"So often people look in every other direction," said Miller, who serves as the managing director of administration for Eastern Europe Festivals. "But until they find themselves at the cross, accepting Christ, they're going to stumble along."

The Baltic Youth Festival, by local accounts, is the first

youth-centered evangelistic event in the region, and it's also the first of its kind BGEA has hosted outside of North America.

And with seats already booked to capacity two months in advance, the decision was made to add a second Festival session, each featuring the Parachute Band, Michael W. Smith, the Newsboys, local bands and the preaching of Franklin Graham.

The afternoon Festival, from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., will have a higher concentration of group bookings, busing in people from nearby Lithuania and Estonia. The night Festival, from 8 p.m. to midnight, will be targeted more to Latvian youth.

Wait a minute—8 p.m. to midnight?

With daylight lasting well past 10 p.m., why not?

"Everyone we talk to here says that's when things get going," Miller said.

But getting the economy going is another story altogether. Outside of Greece and Spain, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia claim the worst unemployment rates in all of Europe. And the youth unemployment rates (27.4, 34.3 and 25.1 percent respectively) are also among the most dire.

The economic despair is driving a wedge into already fragile family models.

"The economic recession that everyone is in has hit very hard. So many buildings were just left vacant," Miller said. "There's a large number of people daily leaving Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia."

The impact on the Baltic region's youth has been particularly deep.

"There are families who can't make ends meet here," Miller

said. “So one of the parents leaves to places like the UK or Ireland to pay the bills.

“It’s dividing the family unit, and that puts more strain on the family—not just the adults, but the kids as well.”

And the economic realities are just part of the story.

“There are other things that are pulling them away,” Miller said. “The drugs. The alcohol. The hopelessness. The suicide.”

Which makes the Baltic Youth Festival so vitally important.

“We’re hoping and praying it has a large impact,” Miller said. “Not just a large impact, a lasting impact. That something that will spark and continue to grow long after we’re gone.”

Read the original story at .