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Life Stories of Latvian Lutheran Pastors[1]

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I have interviewed leading Latvian pastors and present here a series of autobiographical tributes in grateful recognition of their work.

When I look at the typed pages on my table, it seems strange to me that it could all fit on a few sheets of paper: the pain, the suffering, the love and the victory, many victories. These pages are the fruit of long conversations with people I had known for many years – now I think I had not really known them before. Their deepest thoughts and longings had been hidden from the casual enquirer. For the first time in my life I have played the part of the journalist, one who enquires with the purpose of understanding and communicating this knowledge to others. A mysterious, even sacramental world has revealed itself to me: the world of the human soul, the world of a pastor's soul as he leads his flock through vicissitudes to the green pastures of heavenly life here on earth. I asked myself whether the pastors had always known the way, whether they had always seen the mighty hand of God in action. I was reminded that these people are our neighbours too; that as human beings it is they who sometimes need our help.

The Latvian people owe their freedom to their pastors. I would like this brief collection to be a gesture of thanks to all the other pastors whose stories have not been told.

Roberts Akmentiņš

I was born on 27 January 1910 in a peasant family in the northern part of Latvia. There were eight of us children. One of my brothers died as a small boy. Today there are only four of us left; the Second World War took away the others.

I had a very good father. He always kept reminding me that I should study as much as possible, because nobody can take away another person's knowledge. As a child I had to herd the cows in summer. It was a hard but wonderful time. I always had books with me. My special interest was history. Our farmhouse stood on the banks of the River Palsa. In spring all the children gathered on the banks to watch the ice breaking, the waters roaring and dragging the trees along. What a mighty power! Where did it have its origin? I often pondered on this but could not find the answer.

We had a very intelligent teacher of religion at primary school, Atis Jaunzems, son of the famous Latvian writer Apsīšu Jēkabs; he was later shot by the Bolsheviks. A brilliant orator, Jaunzems often dwelt on themes that interested me so very much, such as the mysteries of the Beginning and the End.

The First World War left a significant imprint on my childhood memories. I

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remember troops moving along the Vidzeme road in the direction of Riga. The soldiers were very kind to us children maybe because they remembered their own children at home. They were marching and marching, all kinds of them: Russians, Germans, Bolsheviks, the Latvian Riflemen. After a while many of them were moving back, exhausted, defeated. I saw the Finns too. They had moved up to the Gauja Bridge and were shooting at the Russians.

During confirmation classes we discussed the life of Jesus and the meaning of the cross. This was also the theme of my diploma paper at university: various forms of the cross, the theme of the cross in art, especially in the paintings of the old Dutch masters. The cross has been a great challenge to me.

I took up theological studies without any specific aim of becoming a pastor. My interest lay in solving existential problems. After graduation I continued to study philosophy and education. I wanted to get to the ultimate truth, to answer for myself the questions 'where from?' and 'where to?' 'how and why?'

While I was still a student I was sent to Rauna to help the local pastor. I had heard that the people of Rauna knew where the River Palsa began. They said its source was Lake Paplakšu in Jaunrauna from where a tiny stream flowed, the beginning of the river.

While I was still a theology student I also worked as a teacher in Jēkabpils. Groups of pupils used to go with their teachers on hiking trips to learn more about their native land. On one such hike a group visited the area around the church of Krustpils. The others had gone on and I was standing alone near a small stream flowing into the River Daugava. Suddenly I noticed something greenish, like copper, in the water. I stooped down and picked up a small Orthodox cross which I recognised as an ancient one from Jersika. I seemed symbolic that I should meet a cross once more.

I enjoyed my job as a teacher in Jēkabpils but it was very difficult to combine it with my studies at the University of Latvia in Riga. It was a privilege to study there under such capable, vivid, talented professors as Kundziņš, Maldonis and Adamovičs at a time of such rapid development. When I tried to find a new post in Riga the archbishop promised to take me on at the new church school. Before I arrived, however, the vacancy had already been filled. The archbishop seemed to be very unhappy, apologising that he had completely forgotten about me. I was shocked and angry. But this was the way things had to be, because otherwise I would never have met my wife, Lidija, to whom I have been married for more than fifty years now. Ultimately everything works out as it should.

All the various aspects of human existence have always been as one whole to me: theology, philosophy, education and literature. I had a wonderful teacher of education who lectured using the works of Ibsen, Hamsun and even Nietzsche. These lectures were like a work of art and helped me to understand the unity of the world. There were others too who convinced me that all sciences lead towards religion, towards God. I am happy that I have been a philosopher, a teacher and a theologian. To me the world and human existence are united, whole, inseparable.

During the Second World War we left Jēkabpils and fled to Kurzeme. The pastor of an army division, Verners Voitkus, had been wounded and they needed a pastor. I had to decide. It was a time of contemplation for me, until I understood that Christ was calling me to his ministry. I had a vision in the night, a spiritual experience, and I knew I was ready to accept it.

During the war there were many people who consciously took the risk of remaining in Latvia. I was one of them. Many of my friends and colleagues urged me to go with them when the opportunity arose. But I knew I had to remain. My people,

my parishioners were here in Latvia; I had to be here too. Kurzeme was empty. All the doctors and pastors had left. I could not go. The brains had left but the blood remained. Life remained.

After the war several small congregations were entrusted to me. I had to gather the scattered sheep. The churches had been destroyed, and so had the people's houses. They were pulling down the army bunkers and building new houses. I was nicknamed 'the bunker-pastor'.

In 1949 the deportations began. I was warned in advance. We gathered the most necessary things and waited. Those were terrible nights at the end of March. Dogs were barking and engines running throughout the whole night. We would lie awake wondering if it was our turn yet. One night I heard a lorry and saw lights just outside our window. But they stopped at our neighbour's, the forestkeeper's house. They had six children. The little daughter was ill with a fever. They begged the soldiers to let her stay but they would not listen. So they were all packed into the lorry and taken away. We could not prevent it, we were helpless. A week passed and I received a letter from an orphanage in Daugavpils. The elder son of the forestkeeper's family wrote to me saying that they had been left behind after all, because of the girl who was ill. The parents had been kept on the train. The children were orphans. He said they had no relatives and asked me to send a letter to the director of the orphanage so that they could be allowed to return home. In one day our family grew from four to ten members. We did find some relatives later and the children were divided among them, but the girl who had been ill stayed with us, and we have brought her up as our own child. My family, two sons and a daughter, have always been a support to me, even in the hardest times.

I knew I was being watched. I was renting a flat in a private house. My wife was working as a teacher. Later she was fired; the only reason was because I was a pastor. They called various commissions to examine her work and find fault with her. They found nothing. Then they offered her a divorce from me, promising her a splendid career. She refused. They threatened her: 'You'll be coming back to us begging us to give you any sort of job, but there won't be anything for you.' After I was ridiculed and slandered in the local newspaper she was given notice. The only job she could get then was on a chicken farm. I went to Riga and appealed to the KGB official responsible for religious affairs about the lies published in the newspaper. He promised to come to Saldus and settle the case. He did so. He called a meeting: I was accused of using donations for my personal needs. They even tried to prove that I had a 'special friend', a woman who was collecting money for me. I was able to show that all these accusations were lies; but to no avail. I got a job as storekeeper on a collective farm thanks to the kindness of the director. (Later he had to suffer for it.)

I was always being challenged about my beliefs, especially at funerals. Once during a funeral meal I was sitting next to the first secretary of the local Communist Party. 'May I ask you a question, pastor?' 'By all means.' The other guests were smiling, expecting some fun. 'When was God created?' 'I'll answer your question with another one', I replied, 'and when you've answered that you'll have the answer to your question too. Are you a materialist?' 'Hundred per cent!' 'So you think matter is the only objective reality. When, where and why was it created?' The secretary looked at me, then picked up his glass of cognac. 'Today's a sad occasion; we shouldn't be arguing. Let's drink a toast!' Everyone burst out laughing.

We have to go through what is destined for us. Old age is no excuse. I am a Latvian. We have the endurance of sand, as our poet A. Saulietis puts it. I know that I have to go directly through everything that comes my way. But the KGB never

managed to force me to say that white is black and black is white.

(Roberts Alementiņš died in 1994.)

Roberts Feldmanis

I was born on 4 August 1910. My father worked as a bookkeeper in the railway department in Vilnius, Lithuania. When the First World War started the office he worked in was evacuated and we went to Russia. Though we had little contact with the other Latvian refugees we never forgot our Latvian language and identity. We had taken hardly any Latvian books with us so my first books were in Russian: beautiful volumes, fine Russian poetry, no sign of those bloodthirsty revolutionary songs. We travelled all over Russia, experiencing all the horrors and dangers of both revolutions. When everything was destroyed and my father's office was also closed down, we decided to return to Latvia. It was a hard and dangerous journey. I remember us crossing front lines when they started closing in on us. At last, in 1919, we reached Vilnius. The Poles had driven the Bolsheviks out and I started to attend a Polish school. I grew very fond of my Polish teacher and when at last we were able to return to Latvia I went to say goodbye to her with a small booklet I had compiled as a gift for her. She seemed to be very moved and gave me a book in return. It was a theological book – the first pointer in the direction I would choose years later.

In 1921 we returned to Latvia, to the city of Jelgava. It was strange to attend my first Latvian primary school with the books in my native language. I remember a book of religious instruction called *Gaismas Avots* (*The Sources of Light*).

People sometimes ask me 'When did you say "Yes" to Christ?' I cannot remember anything definite. One significant influence on my religious development was the way my Latvian primary school headmistress taught us religion. In the upper classes she gave us lectures on religion as if we were students. At home we had to write essays; on Sundays we had to attend church – any church – observe everything carefully and write about everything we had seen and heard. During the next lesson it was read and analysed. On one occasion I wrote something about the frescoes in the church of St Anna and the teacher explained their origin. There were also tests, one of which I rediscovered after I had lost all my other belongings. It seemed significant that it should have been on the missionary work of the Apostle Paul when the mission field turned out to be my first area of work after ordination.

By contrast the subject of religion was neglected when I was a student at the teachers' training college, and the effects show even today. The young pastor who was supposed to teach us apparently had nothing to say, much to the scorn of the left-wing young men on our course, some of whom occupied important posts after 1940. I felt very hurt, but this was the atmosphere in which a whole generation of pastors was educated – the atmosphere of liberal theology.

While at the training college I decided that I did not want to become a teacher; I wanted to study theology. I used to take a train to Riga to attend lectures on theology there, returning late at night dead tired.

A person who left an overwhelming impression on me was Pastor Edgars Rumba who came to Jelgava as a youth pastor when he was still a student. He was a person of extraordinary charisma; he had a strong and clear Christian faith and the ability to express it in a unique way. Later, when I was a third-year student, he invited me to come to Riga to work as a vicar in the Church of Christ and organise a Sunday School there. What he meant to my life as a Christian I am not able to put into words.

His personality has always had a special place in my life and memory.

Another source of my religious experience was the Christian Student Movement. We often had guests from abroad. I was amazed by the way they treated theological problems – this was quite different from the liberal theology we were taught at the Faculty and it was a revelation to me. Theologians from Finland, Sweden, France and Germany had the message of the living Christ.

I was ordained in 1935 in the town of Alūksne near the Estonian border. The outbreak of the Second World War put an end to church activities. In 1939 I had just returned from a missionary trip to India, where I had visited missionary stations set up by Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Scandinavian Americans as well as the Latvian missionary station in the land of the Tamils.

When the German army invaded Latvia I was vicar of the city of Riga and also the mission secretary. As mission work was completely paralysed my services were not needed, though I still continued travelling and delivering lectures on mission in local congregations. When the Russian army invaded Latvia for the second time the pastors of many big congregations fled abroad, including some who had sworn to remain. I cannot accept that they were 'exiles', as they were described. They were emigrants. Exiles were those captured and taken abroad against their will.

Acting Archbishop Irbe found himself in a challenging situation: he had to find pastors for the vacant parishes. He entrusted me with the congregation of St John's Church. However, the previous pastor of my new parish, who had gone to Kurzeme in western Latvia, returned when the ashes of the city of Riga had cooled to demand his congregation back, saying he had nothing to live on. The acting archbishop was not impressed; but of course there was plenty of work for everybody. He got his parish back and I was sent to be the pastor of the Jesus Church in 1946. At that time our days were mostly devoted to funeral services; the elderly people, left on their own and disoriented by war, and often living in flats which were occupied by hostile strangers, were dropping like autumn leaves. I worked in the Jesus Church, which had a very good, strong and active congregation and excellent lay workers, until 1950 when, at the end of April, I was arrested. My mother had died two weeks earlier. All the time she had expected this to happen. I was glad she did not live to see it. They wrote down my belongings – a table, some chairs. But nobody wrote down things that would fit into a pocket. I had a very good coin collection, especially silver coins from tsarist Russia, and a stamp collection. It all disappeared into the pockets of the Chekists.

People have often asked me to write about the dangers, torments and difficulties they assume I had to endure. In fact, my experiences were not unbearable. At first I was in Riga, in the cellars of the KGB headquarters. Reading the works of Solzhenitsyn now, I have been shocked about the cruelty and insanity he describes. God kept me away from such things, he carried me on. Of course, the primitive environment, the low quality of human relationships and the lack of suitable clothes and sufficient food made life very hard. I had the advantage of having nothing to hide, because I had never been a member of any political parties or groups. This helped me during interrogations. When Acting Archbishop Irbe was arrested I was called for interrogation. I had nothing to say because I knew nothing. He was a very private person who did not share his thoughts or worries with anyone. I thanked God that he had kept me from any knowledge that by way of a chance remark might have added to his sufferings.

I knew an Orthodox priest who had been deported to Siberia and returned. Some of his colleagues had betrayed him. They had thought he would never come back; but

he did, and when he met them again they asked if he knew who had betrayed him. 'Some of you', he answered. They had to be content with that. Those who had betrayed the acting archbishop were also convinced that he would never return. He was sick and no longer young. The irony of Fate was that he did come back; it was his betrayers who did not live to see that day.

Later, I was taken to Riga Central Prison, from there to St Petersburg, and then to the village of Yertsevo in the region of Archangel'sk. Winter, deep snow, frost. We were tramping along a forest road to the camp, an area enclosed by barbed wire, but I had a feeling of elation, even of freedom, after the long months spent in prison and the seemingly endless journey in a crowded train. I had to spend over four years in the camp – from April 1950 to the end of 1954. I experienced God's guidance and grace through all those years, I was protected by him and held in my Father's arms.

At first we were put into 'quarantine' and not allowed to work. Food was poor but not as bad as during the war when many died of starvation. The director of the camp ignored the rules and sent us out to work all the same. My job was to help the dentist. What did I know about dentistry? It was just a formality.

I met the first Latvians since my arrest and we formed a bond which lasted long beyond our return to Latvia. One of our group of four was a lawyer from Riga who had already spent five years in the camp, and would have starved to death had it not been for his superhuman willpower.

Once in the middle of the night, while I was still in quarantine, a command was given to get up and go to the 'clothing room'. We were given old worn-out clothes to wear. Then at 6 a.m. we were sent out to cut timber, a job which demanded superhuman endurance in the stinging cold of the Siberian winter. I knew I had too little physical strength to master it.

During working hours women prisoners came to work at the rudimentary hospital. There I met a Jewish nurse called Iskra who evidently pitied me. To my surprise, she procured me a sick note which stated that I was unfit for outdoor work and one morning I was withdrawn from the lines of workers and sent to the hospital. I stayed there for some time until I was ordered to take up work in the bookkeeping office of the Division of Material Supplies: my qualification was knowledge of the abacus (which I had used since I was four). I found a way of sorting out the chaos of their existing system, and, as a result I was appointed to do the work of the bookkeeper and even gained a certain status and respect.

Sometimes life was really hard. There were times when I was so emaciated I felt a gust of wind could have blown me away. But I was always provided for. At the most critical moment one of my friends received a parcel from Latvia and gave me a piece of lard – our lifesaver at the camp. It tasted heavenly – I was renewed again.

I returned from the camp on the first Sunday in Advent 1954. I stood on the platform at Riga Central Station wondering where to go. I had no home, no relatives. I went to St John's Church. After the service Pastor Kauliņš invited me to his flat until I found something suitable. That same evening I went to the Church of St Gertrud where Archbishop Turs was holding a service. He welcomed me and encouraged me to start work as a pastor again immediately. I was elated. Turs was a clever man. He did not wait for the Security people to veto me but visited the office for religious and cult affairs personally, proposing me as prospective pastor of the Anglican Church in Riga. However, the functionary he spoke to showed him a letter signed by a person who declared vehemently that the Church did not need former prisoners, traitors of the Soviet state, criminals and so on. The letter had been sent directly to the office for religious affairs, avoiding the archbishop. Turs had never

been as furious as he was then; he never forgot the incident. But I was offered the church at Katlakalns on the outskirts of Riga; later I was also given the church at Olaine. They were both small, sparsely attended churches far off the beaten track. But my work there was richly blessed: we were able to repair the fabric at a time when the Church was persecuted, when churches were nationalised, turned into clubs, storehouses, tractor stations, sports halls. We had no money, no materials, nothing. But we did not give our church away, we did not allow it to be taken. I oppose the assertion that the churches were forcefully nationalised. In eight cases out of ten the pastors and the congregation allowed them to be nationalised. We needed initially to repair the roof of the church at Katlakalns, and then we set about the capital renovation of the whole building. For neither project did we have sufficient funds when the work started, but enough was available in time to pay the bill for the roof without my having even to ask for donations. Nobody could say that sort of thing was not possible. We negotiated a very much reduced advance on the renovation with the workmen from Estonia but by the time we had paid it our cash box was empty. Yet again we were able to pay what was due when it was completed. How? I do not know. I cannot explain. The church had no benefactors from abroad, no wealth either in America or elsewhere. All foreign contacts were forbidden.

I can tell a similar story about the church at Olaine, which had been plundered again and again by local hooligans until only the bare walls were left. The local council ordered the church to be repaired, but it was beyond our means. I knew nothing about building work, yet by an amazing series of wonderful coincidences the first stage of restoration was completed in four months. Cement, for instance. I had heard that it was hard to get, but I remembered seeing some in an open space outside the city. I found the place from memory: it was a big square with a wooden hut in the middle. I told the workmen there that I needed cement. They replied that I could take some as long as I could transport it away that same day. I set off to find a lorry. At the third place I tried a lorry driver agreed to help me and we got our cement. The next time we ran out I went to a completely different place where I hoped to get cement. I got off the bus and saw the same lorry driver standing there. 'Pay me straight away, and I'll start loading,' he said, without a word of greeting, without asking what I needed. It almost seemed as if he had been waiting for me. And so the series of miracles went on. It took me twenty or so trips to Estonia to get enough stone to repair the church. Meanwhile our poor orphan – the church at Olaine – was being robed like a princess.

Miracles continue to the present day. Recently we needed an organ, but we simply had no one to ask. Then the phone rang and a stranger from Sweden offered us an organ. I have seen so many miracles that the hardships of life fade when I think about them. I am used to having no wishes because everything happens in a much better way than I could ever wish.

In 1969 one more church – the Gustav Adolf Church in Mežaparks, a district of Riga – was also entrusted to me. I had the feeling that I could get ready to retire, that no more major tasks lay ahead of me. How wrong I was. At the beginning of the 1980s more and more young people – some of them very odd – started to attend this church. Some of them were quite ignorant about Christianity. After the services they began to ask questions and our discussions gradually turned into a kind of catechism class. Later they wanted to be baptised. We saw the sacrament coming to life, we saw the effect – a complete change of personality, even of physical features. On one occasion a mother came up to me and said that she did not recognise her own son who had changed from a useless tramp to a loving son. She wondered how I had

achieved this transformation. I want to stress from my own experience that the most effective form of evangelisation is the church service if it is the real thing. It is my deepest conviction that every sentence in our Lutheran service book has a deep meaning and cannot be discarded at the pastor's convenience. The pastor must proclaim the word of God and that only. If he is not sure of himself he ought to read a ready-made sermon but not expound his own subjective ideas. If he prays, let it be a prayer to God; if he reads the liturgy, let him speak it not only with his lips but with deep reverence as well. The congregation is a sensitive living organism, and there is no doubt that it senses the attitude of the pastor.

Many young pastors and theology students have come out of the church at Mežaparks, and the trend still continues: the stream is alive, it is in motion. I had never dreamed that I would be part of all this. Our Latvian Church today is badly in need of young people; the older generation is dropping off one by one. We need more theologians – and, I would like to stress, pastors.

Aivars Beimanis

I was born on 30 March 1927 in Riga into a worker's family. My father died before my birth leaving my mother to bring up three sons and a daughter, so we had to start earning money at a tender age. At that time it was common practice for children to work during the summer herding animals on farms. When I was nine years old I began work on a farm in Vidzeme in central Latvia. It was there that I learnt my first bitter lesson in life: that people are treated differently. The son of the farmer always got better food than the herdsman.

Both my mother and my grandmother were practising Christians. I attended a Methodist Sunday School as our local St Paul's Church did not have one. I have believed in God since early childhood and I have never lost my faith. Once at a Christmas celebration at the church I recited a long poem by heart. The lady sitting next to my mother whispered 'I think he will be a pastor!' My mother did not answer because she knew that we were too poor.

In August 1944 I was mobilised into the Air Force auxiliary division. We were posted to Germany. In Stettin a friend and I were arrested by the Germans and interrogated for stealing a parcel. We were put on trial and each received a five-year prison sentence: thus I celebrated my eighteenth birthday in prison. But it was God's way of keeping me safe: I did not have to shoot others and I was not shot at.

When the Russian army occupied Stettin my status automatically changed from that of an ordinary prisoner to that of a prisoner of war and I found myself on the road to Siberia. In Irkutsk we were separated. One group went on further, but I had to stay there. Later it turned out that those who had gone further had had a much harder time than us and had been kept prisoner longer. Though the work was hard, the bread ration was enough to keep us alive.

In spring 1947 I returned to Latvia and started to attend the extra-mural department of high school; it was here that I met my future wife. During the day I had a hard and unhealthy job in a steel foundry. In 1949 my bride and I were both confirmed and married. She was a believer like me who thought that faith was a private and intimate part of one's personality, one which it was not necessary to advertise. But when one is under pressure and clear decisions have to be made then such faith turns out to have little value. Archbishop Matulis used to call people like this 'Lutherans on holiday'. You lead a quiet life as if you were already assured of the Kingdom of God. I personally call this 'the faith of the God-forsaken hole'.

I finished school in 1953. Meanwhile I had been an active member of St Paul's Church, singing in the choir and using every opportunity to be with other Christians. Sometimes I even ventured to deliver a sermon. My friends urged me to become a pastor. Having got my graduation certificate, I opened my Bible and asked God to give me an answer: what should I do? My eyes fell on the place in the Scriptures where it is said that not everybody should strive to become a pastor. I knew that my time had not yet come. My heart was at peace and I applied to study at a school of agriculture since horticulture had always been my hobby. I left the steel foundry and worked part-time as a chimney sweep before securing a job supervising garden design at a musical instrument factory. The following year I entered a competition called 'Landscaping the Grounds of a Factory'. Photographs of my work were shown at the competition, and I won the bronze medal. I did not get the award, however, because the director of the factory had found out by chance that I was a believer. I had once been asked to decorate the rooms of the factory club for the 'Festival of Childhood' (a Soviet substitute for children's baptism). I openly announced that I did not take part in antireligious activity. Soon it was common knowledge at the factory that I was a Christian and the party chief ordered me to be kept an eye on in case I tried to spread Christian propaganda. My religious leanings had also come to the attention of the rector of the school of agriculture. He called me in to see him and gave me a letter signed by 'Observers from the Komosol' alleging that I was an active church member. 'They have observed correctly', I said without hesitation. He was taken aback; he had expected me to deny it. He asked me if I believed in prophets. I told him that he too believed in them in the form of the prophetic words of Lenin; he was quite shocked by this. He warned me that if I advertised my faith my studies could be in jeopardy. I know our discussion had made a great impression on him as year later mutual friends told us so.

At that time it was fashionable to pay great attention to landscaping factory grounds and I received the offer of a job at a newly-built dairy complex. My colleagues at the instrument factory didn't want me to leave, but I accepted it, because of the greater opportunities it offered. At that time I had already moved to Jūrmala and was a member of the Dubulti congregation. I sang in the church choir and served as sexton. I was also building a new house. Today, thinking back to that time, I wonder how I could have found time to do all those things.

As a senior engineer I could choose people for my brigade. Thus it consisted of my acquaintances, all of whom were Christians. We had our own rooms at the factory where we had our lunch. It was quite a paradox that at the height of the Soviet regime we could all begin our meals with a table grace.

It was in autumn 1969 that I suddenly and very distinctly experienced a call from God to cease my worldly activities and devote myself totally to him. Just at the moment when I had achieved a comfortable life which offered many material benefits, when I had a definite status in society and a good income – just then I felt I had to leave it all. My first impulse was to seek a compromise and I asked the director for a part-time job. But he wanted to know the reason why; when I told him the truth he was shocked and unable to take it in. I think he thought I had gone mad. 'Do you really believe in eternal life?' he asked. 'Yes', I replied. 'And you're going to talk about it in public?' 'Yes.' 'I can't believe what I'm hearing!'

He said that he would give me an answer in three days' time; but within three hours it became evident that the director had no real power to decide anything. It was the chairman of the Trade Union who informed him that I would not be allowed to have a part-time job. 'Then I'm leaving.' 'Whenever you like.' I was allowed to go

the very next day without even being asked to pass on a thorough report to my successor, even though my job was a financially responsible one – so dangerous was it to be a Christian at the time. I accepted all this as evidence of the powerful arm of God in action. Nobody in authority asked me anything. My colleagues were at a loss: they could not understand my choice even though they were Christians. They felt abandoned.

The following day I was without work and without savings. When I told my wife of my decision her answer was simple: 'I'm divorcing you.' From the human point of view it was understandable as the future was destined to be dark and gloomy with no opportunities, only restrictions and pressure. My wife's relatives considered it to be not only a thoughtless but also a dangerous step. My wife said that I had destroyed her life and limited her chances for privileges like travel abroad. The only person who supported me was my mother. I felt I had reached a desert in my life: no wife, no money, nothing. What was left? The Bible. Faith, prayer and Jesus Christ. Jesus says: 'Whoever loves his wife more than me is not worthy of me'. To this day, that separation has been the heaviest thing I have had to endure.

I started a course of study at a seminary which I was not to finish until 1981 and took my first service as a pastor on New Year's Eve 1969 in the church at Balvi (in the eastern part of Latvia). Later I was sent to serve in three churches in Kurzeme in the western part of Latvia: Vaiņode, Nīgrande and Krūte. Vaiņode was the biggest of them. Krūte was smaller but Nīgrande had the most serious problems. When I started to serve there it was on the verge of closing down. My first service there fell on the Sunday of Pentecost: six people had come. I could very well imagine how many would be there on an ordinary Sunday. The church was terribly dirty. People had spread out newspapers on the benches. There was a man whom I called the keyholder because he was not a Christian but he held the keys of the church. The church was in the cemetery, and he allowed the coffins of the deceased to be placed in the church; even for the secular burials. It was his way of earning money. 'I used to get along very well with the old pastor', he said to me. 'I wonder how it will be with you?' He was obviously hoping that this advantageous arrangement would continue under my auspices. My first regular service at Nīgrande fell at the Harvest Festival. The bus arrived an hour earlier. Nearing the church I saw that the door was open. I was glad that I was expected, but when I entered the church quite a different picture met my eyes: the interior had been completely smashed up. The pews had been heaped up at the altar to make a fire but they had not yet been burned. There had been a sign over the altar saying 'I am the First, the Last and the Living'. The words 'I am ... the Last' had been taken down and put on the pulpit. Seeing all the destruction, I knelt down and prayed. After praying, I took off my jacket and started to straighten things up. Other people came to help me, and when the service began the church was more or less in order. That time there were eleven people in the congregation. Strange as it may seem this incident lifted me up spiritually.

The church of Nīgrande was in such a bad condition that capital repairs were absolutely necessary. How could I invite people to services in a potato cellar? It was very much like that. I told the congregation that soon we would start repairs. When I met the keyholder he asked me how I planned to get the money for the renovation. 'I have a rich father', I said. 'In America?' he asked. 'No, in Heaven.'

There were no funds at all, but people donated money and their time and little by little we were able to buy the materials and start work. First of all we had to renew the altar, the floor and the balcony. During the war the Russians had kept horses in the church and burnt the balcony down. We covered the ceiling in lacquered veneer

sheets and built a new roof. The local blacksmith made a cockerel for the spire; the old one had completely rusted away. In the end we painted the exterior. An ugly duckling had been transformed into a white swan that could be seen from afar. I would like to stress the fact that we did not get any help from the outside world; everything was done with the material and physical resources of the thirty parishioners over a period of about six years. A small active congregation ready for sacrifices could do a lot.

From the start I felt a striking difference between the attitude of society towards an engineer and its attitude towards a pastor. All doors opened for the engineer but for the pastor all doors were shut. Everybody wanted to keep their distance and I was shunned and looked upon as a menace. When I began my ministry at Vaiņode I had to present myself at the local government office. The chairman's attitude was scornful and hostile. In one of the church buildings there was a flat for the pastor, but the authorities did not want to allow me to occupy it. Nevertheless I did, and a police officer was despatched to draw up a charge against me and impose a fine. Ten years later I had a chance encounter with the wife of the policeman who had told her how hard it had been for him that night to prosecute an honest person. Sometimes we forget that people who wear a uniform and serve a system are also human beings with their own personal opinions and ideas which often remain hidden from outsiders.

In the end, despite all the hostility, they had to give me the flat at Vaiņode. The church at Vaiņode was unusual, being one of only two Lutheran churches built in Latvia after the war; the other was at Jaunjelgava. The church council had got together the building materials for the church, and when it was finished the government was caught unawares: they could not explain how they had overlooked the fact that a church was being built. Since they did not recognise the building as a church, they could not conclude an agreement with the congregation. Consequently the church was as if suspended in mid-air. At a time when congregations had to pay huge taxes, we paid none, for legally we did not exist! The government decided to appropriate the church: they offered our buildings as barracks for the considerable contingent of Russian soldiers in Vaiņode. So two Russian officers came to inspect the church, removing their hats on entering which is more than can be said for the chairman of the local Executive Committee. The army decided not to proceed with the scheme.

Once I was taken by the police to the Executive Committee for a written investigation into where the church building materials had come from. I explained that I was responsible only for the spiritual well-being of the congregation and that the church council was responsible for everything else. I was released, but the news that the police had picked up a pastor spread like wildfire. It was a time of spiritual renewal in the church; people were not scared, they were prayerful. People kept stopping me in the street and telling me how they were praying for me. It was very heartening. Later the communists themselves admitted that they had committed a grave mistake putting such pressure on me because it only increased my popularity and awakened interest in the fate of the church. Later I was also to gain the churches of Gramzda and Priekule.

In 1974 I suddenly lost my voice: I could not sing or speak properly. The doctor told me that I had throat cancer and that I needed immediate surgery. The time had come for me to be put to the test. I had visited many patients, prayed for them, encouraged them: now I was one of them. What should I do? I went home and prayed not for healing but for the Father's will to be done, whatever it might be.

Something very strange happened. During the week I could hardly utter a sound. When my mother, who was sitting in another room, asked me something I had to get up from my desk, go into her room and reply to her standing by her side so that she would not notice anything wrong. But that Sunday, when I had to preach, my voice came back. The same thing happened every week after that until Christmas: from Christmas on I began to feel better and better every day. My voice was restored completely and I could sing again. My throat has not troubled me since. It was a demonstration of God's power and grace. If you leave things completely to him and allow his will to be done, trusting his wisdom and love, then God will show his mercy.

After four years of separation my wife repented and came back to me. 'I had to go down into the darkness in order to see the light', she explained. Before, whenever I had openly given thanks to God for his gifts in a restaurant or cafe, she had been ashamed of me, but now she said: 'Those who don't pray are the ones who ought to be ashamed.' Some say it is fashionable to be a Christian now. I dare not judge. Who can tell? Only God. It is very dangerous to judge other people's attitudes. Everybody will have to answer for himself.

I have had my brushes with the KGB. Once in Jūrmala an amiable character fell into conversation with me. He was in fact a KGB officer. He invited me to co-operate, but I refused. Then he started to threaten me. 'Many pastors don't seem to know what separation of church and state means', he said. 'The state is a power; it can use force. We can make mincemeat of people like you.' 'So when are you going to start?' I asked him. He was quite taken aback. 'You know we've got power over you. We summoned you here and you've come.' 'Yes, but I've got power too; I can keep my mouth shut.' I was surprised by his answer: 'Yes, I suppose you can.'

My activities, however, were being monitored. After I had organised a youth camp for three successive summers they asked me for a list of the participants. The KGB man said he was just asking for the truth. I said Judas had just told the truth as well, and he had betrayed Jesus. 'I see that you're well prepared', he said, having got nowhere. It seemed to me a victory that my opponent acknowledged the reality of the spiritual fight and had to admit that he had lost it. I feel sorry for those pastors who lose that fight, and have to return to their families and congregations as liars and hypocrites while still proclaiming the Word of God.

In 1984 I was elected dean of the district of Grobiņa. My field of service broadened and I was responsible not only for my own activities but also for those of my colleagues. After I held a youth meeting I was summoned to the state Council for Religious Affairs: founding youth organisations was a terrible crime. At the church Consistory my colleagues took issue with me for conducting a service in the open air – as if we didn't have enough churches. All the church authorities were afraid, including the archbishop, who was being accused of losing control over his sub-ordinates. When the Councillor for Religious Affairs could not get any information from me he complained to the archbishop that I had been rude to him. The archbishop in turn sent me back to apologise, but I refused saying that I would be a hypocrite: it was the councillor who had insulted me, not the other way round. After that the archbishop announced that I was being transferred from Vaiņode to Balvi. But it didn't happen: God wanted me to stay, no matter what.

God had not blessed our marriage by giving us our own children, but when I saw children who thirsted for God my heart went out to them. I have 30 godchildren; they all had to become my godchildren because otherwise I would not have been able to help them. When we had a gathering we could invite other children too. Twice a year

– at Christmas and Easter – we had our house full of 60 to 70 children. I saw that the young people also needed a place where they could meet each other. When they came into the church and saw there were only old people there they often turned round and went out again. Every summer, therefore, we organised a youth camp.

In 1987 the movement 'Rebirth and Renewal' was founded. As I was one of the members, Archbishop Mesters dismissed me from the post of district dean and relieved me of my duties as lecturer in Homiletics at the Theological Seminary. Long years of overwork meant that my health had deteriorated. I began to lose my appetite; I had no energy and I felt old and tired. I knew my time was running out. Quietly, I said goodbye to my churches in Kurzeme. During 1988 I occasionally undertook the duties of a colleague who had fallen ill. In 1989 there was a vacancy in the church at Sloka not far from where I lived and it was offered me. At the time I felt a bit better and accepted. Afterwards I nearly regretted it because sometimes I was so weak I could hardly climb the stairs to the pulpit and so prone to a bad asthmatic cough that I was often afraid I might not be able to finish delivering the sermon. I recall the Easter of 1989; after the first service at six o'clock I went home to rest until the next one at ten. That was followed by another one at Sala. I do not know how I managed physically except that God gave me the power to go on through the day. From then on my strength gradually returned and I have never again had similar problems.

When I took up my duties at the church of Sloka there were 169 members. Today there are 700. On 18 April 1989 the Sunday School was opened; 40 children came. I did not know how to organise the first Sunday School class and wondered if the children, who mostly came from atheistic families, would understand the significance of kneeling down before the altar. My fears were groundless for as soon as I uttered the words 'Let us pray' they all fell to their knees. At first we had no experienced teachers, no methodology, no special literature; just hope and prayer and a great love of children which is the main thing.

We once had guests from Sweden who wanted to learn about Christian youth education in Latvia. When I asked one of them how things were in Sweden, she replied that she wished they were more like they were with us in Latvia. I did not understand her until I went to Sweden myself. Swedish children do not seem to have a real thirst for the Word of God, do not feel awe and respect for Him. If a child has never been taught to kneel down before the majesty of God, he or she sees no difference between his or her daily life and the reality of coming before the face of God. Lack of piety hinders children's spiritual development. It is the same everywhere: Latvia, Sweden, Germany. As it says in the Bible, 'the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom'. Nothing that begins in the wrong way will finish well.

When school finished for the summer holidays we were planning to close the Sunday School too, but the children protested. They wanted to go on through the holidays as well. I think God is performing a miracle through our younger generation. More and more parents come to me and explain that they have found God and the Church through their children. There is no mystery about the steadily growing number of children at Sunday School. Children are the best and most enthusiastic missionaries. Most of their friends and neighbours have joined them at church. Today we have 400 at the Sunday School. We have had big problems with the rooms because our church has only one small hall that can hold no more than 80 people. Before the first group has finished the second group is standing outside patiently waiting its turn, come rain or snow. We envisage building a self-contained Sunday School, but it will take time and money. Our partner church in Jakobstaad, Finland, has promised to give us wood-processing machines. We have bought the materials

and hope to start this year (1993). Meanwhile, last year a new kindergarten was built in Sloka and I was asked to bless it. The aim is to make it a Christian school; and we have been offered rooms there for our Sunday School.

I have always enjoyed being with committed Christians who take their faith seriously. One man from whom I have learned a lot and who occupies a definite place in my growth as a Christian is Pastor Jazeps Urdze from Germany. Every meeting with him has been a special occasion. Never did he judge people by outward appearance or conventionally accepted standards. Once I said that a certain person did not deserve a certain gift. He stopped, looked me directly in the eye and said: 'Does anybody deserve anything? All life is a gift.' At that time, he was called a communist in Germany because he often visited the Soviet Union; here, he was considered a spy for the same reason. It did not bother him. He walked his way assured of the mission God had entrusted to him. Meeting people who have a strong religious backbone and who do not bow at every gust of wind is always a great and valuable gift.

Up to now I have been deeply hurt by the indifference of our church leadership towards the work of the Sunday Schools. They have spent nothing on the education of teachers or the equipment of Sunday school classes. The wave of the Sunday School movement is rolling across Latvia and God has entrusted a great and wonderful mission to our Church; should we not do our utmost to encourage and back it up? One of my friends in Norway wrote to me recently saying how wise it is to sow the good seed in the hearts of children before the devil has had the chance to sow the seed of greed. We have an overwhelming responsibility for the task we have been given by God.

A very significant occasion in the life of our Church is about to take place: an extraordinary Synod. My wish would be that the new leader of the Church be a real believer, a man of prayer, one who does not judge people by appearance, one who values not human wisdom but rather the wisdom that Christ alone can give us, which places Christ at the centre. Many people are concerned with the help that is coming from abroad. I hope that our new leader will care more for the help that comes from above.

(Aivars Beimanis still works in the parish of Sloka. He has been elected a member of the Consistory and dean of Riga rural district.)

Guntis Kalme

I was born in 1959 and brought up in Riga in a family that treasured education. My father was an associate dean at Riga Technical University and my mother was a research chemist. There were thousands of books at home. Learning through reading was one of the ways that Latvians resisted spiritually during the Soviet years: you built up your own inner space where the spirit and culture predominated, not communist ideology. Besides, books were cheap then. Ever since my childhood I have had a great respect for them. Our family was religiously neutral. I do not remember anybody ever mentioning the words 'God' or 'Jesus'.

Both my grandfathers were in military service during the brief period of Latvian independence. My maternal grandfather was the head of the presidential bodyguard, and the other was a frontier guard at the time when the Soviet army occupied Latvia in 1940. Both of them suffered under the occupation regime. The former was imprisoned in a Soviet concentration camp for fighting against the communists

during the Second World War, while the latter was imprisoned by the Nazis. Later I became interested in history and military matters. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my grandfathers and become an officer. But the only option available at that time was to become a Soviet officer, and that was a disgusting idea, because almost every Latvian family had suffered from the Soviet deportation policy. I did not want to be associated with them. In any case, it seems that God had decided to make me an officer in His army.

At that time my father suddenly developed an interest in philosophy and I started to explore this field with him. After leaving high school in 1977, with my father's encouragement, I entered the Faculty of Philosophy at Latvia University. I had to work my way through Marxist philosophy: the History of the Communist Party; Dialectical and Historical Maternalism; so-called Scientific Atheism; Communism. That was the price for being interested in philosophy. Only later did I understand the full extent of the lies behind the rhetoric of Marxism, and the fact that it was brainwashing. Other parts of the course were exciting, though: the history of philosophy, art, culture, logic. Several professors tried their best to teach the real issues in philosophy, and we were eager to listen to them as much as possible. The faculty was free-thinking. Several times we got visitors from the Communist Party checking up on how we were being taught. As it turned out, a year after I graduated in 1982 it was closed down because it was not ideological enough.

I spent my first winter holidays as a student in Inčukalns with a family friend of ours, Arnolds Kalniņš, who had been one of my teachers. His personality had a tremendous influence upon me. Conversations with him were special and very revealing: he easily washed away all the effects of the Marxist brainwashing I had received at university. He never mentioned the name of God and it was only later, when I went through his bookshelves, that I started to understand what had shaped his personality. He had even more books than my parents and among them I found many on religion, Christianity, philosophy. I read several of them and they made a great impact upon me. Returning a book on Christ I heard myself telling him 'I wouldn't be surprised if one day I became a pastor.'

When I was a fifth-year student, in 1981, I began work as a lecturer at the Riga medical school, which taught nurses. I lectured on philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. I got hold of the works of such outstanding Latvian philosophers as Zenta Mauriņa, Konstantīns Raudive, Teodors Celms and Pauls Dāle. I was also fascinated by Eastern philosophy, as well as the philosophy of the Russian painter Rerikh and of Russian religious thinkers such as Berdyayev and Florensky. I was influenced by the fact that these philosophical systems were antimaterialistic, and thus in a way anti-communist. They proved that man was not merely a highly sophisticated animal. I could not continue telling my pupils things I did not believe myself, so I decided to change the programme and hence also the examinations. Eventually I eliminated more than half the items which were clearly ideological and propaganda material. When I discovered that I was the only philosophy lecturer in the whole system to have an advanced degree in philosophy I became emboldened in my efforts to infiltrate my ideas into the syllabus. Instead of so-called scientific atheism I lectured on the history and philosophy of religion. I started one lecture on atheism with the question 'Do you know what atheism is?' Of course the students took this to be a rhetorical question; they were expecting to listen to the regular party line. Instead, I briefly explained what the prefix 'a' meant, and since nobody was able to answer my second question, 'what is theism?', I began explaining. After half an hour I saw that the entire class had fallen silent, shocked that a professor was not extolling all the

evils of religion, but instead talking to them about something completely different – about God and Christ. I could feel the tension and understood that if one of the students were to ask me 'Professor, do you yourself believe what you are telling us?', then I would be caught. But they were wise enough not to ask me this question. In those days to know what to say and who to say it to, what to ask and what not to ask, and understanding 'between the lines', was an art form in itself.

This is only half of the story. My subject played a central and decisive role in the educational process because philosophy was considered to be the ideological test of loyalty to the communist state. Only those who passed this test successfully were allowed to take their speciality graduation exams in medicine. There was a practice that those who passed the graduation exams with excellence received the so-called 'red diploma' and were allowed to enter the Medical University without working the mandatory three years after graduation from medical school. Thus if they passed the exam in philosophy with the highest grade there was real hope that they would pass the other ones as well. This practice was crucial for Christians. They were easily discernible because while they were not usually members of the Communist Youth Society they were often excellent students. If they did not receive an 'excellent' mark in philosophy their chances of receiving the 'red diploma' were gone. Teachers of philosophy were supposed to 'understand' the implications and on their own initiative, or by order of the principal of the school, intentionally to lower the grade of Christians. This practice was used in order to avoid rebukes by the Communist Party for giving 'red diplomas' to Christians. I myself was not yet a believer, but I did not like punishing believers for their views. I refused to 'understand'. The most exciting moment was in the mid-1980s when one of the Christians, Dace Vanaga, passed the philosophy exam. She was good enough and as a professor of the subject (and thus the ultimate authority) I pushed the other teachers on the examination committee to grade her 'excellent'. The principal of the school was furious, came to find me in my classroom meeting and showed me the note she had written: 'Dace Vanaga is not to receive "excellent"!' I did not succeed in taking the note from her: if I had done so I could have caused her a good deal of unpleasantness, because it was understood that practices like this were to leave no written trace. I refused to obey, making reference to the provision for religious freedom in the Constitution of the Soviet Union (of course, everybody knew that it was a lie, but nevertheless there was such a provision and that was the right moment to invoke it). She became even more angry – and remember that all this was going on before the eyes of the examination commission and the pupils – and then stormed out of the class.

Later on, after I had become a pastor, I met Dace again. It was one of the happiest days of my life because I could look her in the eyes openly without shame or guilt, which would have been the case if I had yielded to the demands of the principal. By God-incidence we later worked together for years in the Latvian Bible Society.

Of course, the school authorities were aware of my sympathies towards Christians, even if they were not able to prove anything. It was quite a risky game I played. There was a society for the promotion of scientific knowledge among the pupils that I was supposed to lead. Instead of indoctrination in communist ideology I used it for the promotion of philosophy and Christianity. Students were supposed to deliver reports at the end of the session. One of them spoke about Christian philosophy and concluded 'Christ died on the Cross with love for His enemies'. The leader of the Communist Youth Society, who was present at this presentation, said to me openly 'Guntis, you are influencing your pupils in the wrong direction!' I just smiled to myself. The school authorities began looking for an opportunity to subdue me

somehow, and suddenly I found myself being accused of things I had never done. I protested at being accused unfairly. On the other hand, by this time I was looking for ways of freeing myself from this ambiguous situation of having to 'teach between the lines', because by then I was already baptised and confirmed. In protest I handed in my resignation. My departure upset many of my students. They asked me to stay at least to finish their course. It was a welcome surprise to me that they valued so highly what I had to give them. But because the administration did not withdraw its accusations, I did not withdraw my resignation. Thus I left the job and pupils I really loved. Some of them asked me to continue to teach them in a smaller group, which I did. I delivered my lectures underground, now teaching not between the lines but with the full text in front of me. I baptised some of them, and we served for many years in congregations together.

Before the time I am describing I had met up again with a former fellow-student, Jānis Vanags, who told me about his studies at the Theological Seminary. I felt instinctively that this was where the truth was to be found but was afraid of persecution and too proud of my education in philosophy to join the Church right away. But soon I discovered that whenever I was in a spiritual crisis because of my exercises in eastern religious meditation I would meet him by accident. Once after a long discussion when I was leaving his apartment on the second floor he came out to guide me, which was not necessary because I knew the way. I felt something happening to me while I was going down the stairs. I looked up and saw that he was stretching his hands over me. I understood that he was blessing me. A strange peace came over me. I went home thinking that if what he was telling me about the Bible as the word of God was true, then I should somehow get to know this myself. I wondered how I could do so. I had no idea of prayer. I lit some candles and opened the Bible. I tried to cheat God by aiming to open it somewhere in the New Testament, because I thought I would understand it better than the Old Testament. But instead it was a chapter from the prophet Daniel. I did not understand the meaning of the text, but one thing I did understand was that this was the word of God. That was a shock for me because now I needed to think about the implications and consequences. Again by accident I found out that Jānis was going to be ordained. I went to the service. I felt as though his sermon was addressed specifically to me. In a vision I saw myself as a country pastor preaching in almost empty churches, climbing up and fixing the leaking roofs. This was what actually happened to me later on. After the service Jānis invited me to come with him to visit Rev. Roberts Feldmanis for a cup of coffee. Jānis was the only person I knew there. After a while I was thinking of leaving when Jānis suddenly turned to me and asked without any preamble whether I had been baptised. I did not have the slightest idea of what baptism was, only that it was some kind of church ceremony and had something to do with water. I told him I hadn't. 'If you die tonight, you won't see the living God', he said. As a philosopher I was not afraid to die, but I was afraid of not seeing God. That night I did not sleep but thought carefully about my life. I saw that eastern teachings had led me down a dead-end road. I realised now with a shock that for four to five years I had been going in the wrong direction. That was a painful but necessary discovery.

The very next day I went to Rev. Feldmanis and asked to be baptised. Instead of answering, he asked me 'Guntis, would you like to study theology?', which at that time meant studying to be a pastor. Anyone who did so was destined to live a materially and socially miserable life, despised by the Soviet state, with no protection for himself or his family except that provided by the Saviour. I had not expected this sudden challenge; but suddenly I heard myself saying 'yes', because I did not just

want to have the truth, I needed to confess it as well. That was it. My search had ended. There were no particular miracles connected with my call to be a pastor. That was enough. I went to Jānis and said 'It's your fault that I became a believer, and so you can be my Godfather.' (That was the tradition in those days, that a person who led you to Christ became your Godparent, regardless of age; thus, I have a Godfather who is only a year older than myself.)

For some time I deliberately delayed my decision to enter the seminary because I knew that the KGB would soon start being interested in me. Of course, I was afraid. My former colleagues told me in simple Soviet language: 'You will never receive a congregation in Latvia because you are a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy. Thus in the eyes of the Communist Party you have betrayed Soviet ideology, and they will never forgive you. Better get ready for the concentration camp.' I lived for three months in this unpleasant state of mind, but then suddenly I said to my Lord: 'Lord, if you wish that I go to a concentration camp, I will go.' Suddenly the fear disappeared and I was at peace. I entered the seminary in 1986 and worked at a factory as a watchman to provide for myself.

My parents respected my choice but did not understand it. My father was summoned to appear before the local committee of the Communist Party to explain how and why it had happened. My mother was afraid that we would be sent to Siberia as her parents had been. I already knew that the Church was not a 'crystal palace'; it was terribly short of well-educated, well-prepared men; most of the more outstanding members of the clergy had died in the deportations or fled to the West. After my education in the Faculty of Philosophy I found it difficult to listen to clergy and even seminary professors who did not know much about their subject. That was a particular temptation for me. Satan knew his subject well. What is more, the Church was infiltrated by agents and collaborators of the KGB. It was a particular art in those days knowing where to stand in order to avoid hidden microphones. It was an interesting experience to watch this or the other grey-haired clergyman openly taking notes not only during the lectures but also during the breaks, writing down carefully who said what. On the other hand, there were also clergymen who stood straight and never yielded to the demands of the KGB. I still remember with admiration the rector of our seminary, Rev. Dr Roberts Akmentiņš. He was short but with wide shoulders. He had a habit during the lectures of other professors of standing in the doorways observing us, his students, with a strong but caring gaze. We knew that he was guarding us; he would not betray us in spite of all the forces of the Devil (who in those days wore the uniform of the KGB). He was the opposite of the archbishop we had to elect under the guidance of the KGB. He was extremely loyal to the state, and was also short of education. Sometimes this combination led to tragicomic results. It seems he understood the state (KGB) representative to be his boss. Soon it came to the point that several pastors wrote a letter demanding his resignation. They went around looking for more pastors to sign it. At that time (in 1987) I had been ordained just three days and was helping Jānis as assistant pastor with his five congregations. I knew that for me to sign this letter would mean losing that and maybe even more. I also knew that this case was just, and so I signed the letter anyway. Some days later I was called to the Consistory to explain myself. I did not say a word for I did not want to betray anybody and I was still a freshman in the Church and its politics. They told me that I would be transferred from Jānis' congregations to another district. I could have argued with them; but I also knew that Kurzeme district where Jānis served had at that time several good pastors while Vidzeme district had almost none. I understood this to be as a call from God to take

care of a congregation whose pastor had been forced out by the KGB.

In this way the church at Umurga was entrusted to me. I found it typical for those days. The building needed immediate repair, and the congregation was small, consisting of elderly people. I was eager to start the work.

Eighty kilometres away was the church in the village of Ēvele. It was in bad shape, with a leaking roof. I met the parish representative and asked where the congregation was. 'In the graveyard', she replied. The building was already signed over to the state. 'We need to do something about this church', I told the archbishop. 'Well, what can we do? We'll have to close it down.' The next day I talked to Rev. Feldmanis, and he said 'Son,' (and we call him 'Father'), 'if God has given you this pain in your heart for this church, go and ask for the church to be given to you.' This sounded like nonsense: in those days, if any church building was signed over to the state, that was that. Nevertheless, I went to the Consistory and spoke to the archbishop, and to my great surprise he said that I could take it as an experiment for some months. I was too happy to argue that there are no experiments with God. Some friends of mine helped me to get the building materials and we started to fix the roofs of the church building and of the parish hall. The first service took place on 13 September. I took this as a birthday present from God (my birthday is 12 September). Somehow with signs and wonders we got there. It was raining cats and dogs. My congregation numbered two old ladies. At Christmas I was expecting the same two parishioners. Suddenly my friend who was helping me came into the sacristy and said that there were not enough hymn sheets to go round. I went to have a look and stood rooted to the spot. The church was full.

After Christmas I went back to the archbishop and told him about all the people. 'All the same, we'll have to hand the church over,' he said. 'Over my dead body!' I replied. Again I went to see Rev. Feldmanis and asked him to hold a prayer session in his congregation. What I did not know at the time was that the head of the congregation had written a letter to the archbishop expressing her joy at the renewal of life at the church. After that he never mentioned the subject again.

In the spring of 1988 we organised a general cleaning of the church and churchyard. A lot of people came, including some younger people from the nearby town of Burtnieki. I told them that they needed to open their church. At that time saying something like that was just nonsense; everybody knew how things worked with the state authorities. Some weeks later we visited their church building, got inside, and saw the desolation. We stood in prayer and asked God somehow to renew this place for His word. Right after the prayer one of the young men said to me 'Guntis, you are serving nearby, take this church as well.' What a silly suggestion, I thought; and then it struck me that it was what I had said to the people from Burtnieki when they had visited me. I explained that in order to reopen the church for worship, twenty signatures were necessary. Some of the congregation were already leaving, but then suddenly, of one accord, they all turned round and came back. Thus Burtnieki became the first church of the Latvian Lutheran Church to be taken back by its congregation.

There was another closed church in the nearby village of Matīši. It was in a bit better state than some of the other churches because it was used as a museum. After a couple of months people from Matīši came and asked to open their church as well. The dedication service was set for 14 December. For some time I struggled with the idea of taking this as my fourth congregation because I knew that my energy was not infinite, but then I remembered that my baptismal anniversary was on 11 December and I understood the coming dedication as a sign from God to take care of this

congregation as well. Thus I found myself standing in the pulpit praying that God's word would be proclaimed.

This was my fourth congregation. The fifth came in a rather different way. In spring 1989 I found myself talking to a lady from the Society for the Politically Repressed (those who managed to come back alive from deportation to Siberia). She told me that their society was looking for rooms for their activities and that the Soviet city council had offered them the ruined church in the city cemetery. When I heard this I was inspired and said 'If it was a church once it should be a church again, and if we need to have a congregation we will form one!' It only took her a moment to exclaim 'Yes!' The whole thing was sheer irresponsibility, of course: there were no funds available and the building was not much more than ruins; it looked as if it had been bombed. But the project pleased God: as in every case with my other church buildings and congregations He miraculously did everything which was connected with the proclamation of His word. At the next meeting of the society we established a congregation (which was in fact the first newly-established congregation since the Second World War), and we are still repairing the building in 1999.

I could go on and on, for those days were full of signs and wonders. They were just part of the way things happened then. Today we have entered a different phase, a phase of hard, regular, everyday work on projects which were just daydreams in those days. For instance, we have a seminary to provide future pastors with much-needed higher academic and practical education, and it so happened that I had a large role to play in setting this up, for which I am very grateful to God.

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Jānis Vanags

I was born in 1958 in the seaport city of Liepāja. My parents were both school teachers and more or less indifferent to religion. They discouraged any ridicule of the Church, but nobody ever told me anything about God. Nevertheless I have always felt the presence of a spiritual world around me.

I had a rather solitary childhood, spending all my summers at my grandparents' farmhouse. Those long, lonely days further developed my sense that there existed a mysterious spiritual world. My first religious experience was very unusual. I had been reading a book on Greek mythology, tales of gods and heroes. I was often scared at night as my room was at the far end of the big house. The height of my fear was the moment when I had to switch off the light. Before I did so on this occasion I found myself praying – to the gods of Mount Olympus.

I don't remember when and how my consciousness was penetrated by Christianity: perhaps it had something to do with the seven churches I had to pass on my way to school. I always felt a desire to enter them. St Joseph's Catholic Church in Liepāja seemed especially inviting to me. I did go into it once: I didn't understand much but I had a sensation of holiness and that something very important was happening to me.

Later, when I was a chemistry student in Riga, this religious consciousness took second place to other interests; but like many of my contemporaries I was attracted to eastern religious thought. Yoga, Buddhism and karate were an important part of my life for years. When I eventually joined the Movement for Krishna Consciousness I thought I had found what I was looking for; but I soon became aware of the fact that

my life did not match the high ethical and moral standards these teachings stood for. On the one hand, I was studying the principles of a pure and holy life, but on the other, though I had never been the traditional bohemian type, I really wasn't practising what I knew theoretically. I asked myself what I should do with all the luggage of sin I was carrying around with me.

My conversion to Christianity was also connected with a question I had asked since childhood. Every child has to face the shocking reality of the imminence of death when he realises that his parents are not going to live forever. From my reading of the Greek myths I had become acquainted with the notion of immortality and experienced a great longing for it. Christianity gave me the answer. My first encounter came as if by chance: my brother invited me to the church at Valtaiķi, which he had started to attend. I enjoyed the walk to church – it had something ritualistic about it. The church had beautiful stained glass windows and the pastor gave a very stimulating sermon. We became regular parishioners and it was here that I was subsequently introduced to Professor Roberts Feldmanis. Another church, the Gustav Adolf Church in Riga, provided me with a great deal of academic information on Christianity.

The most important reason why I stayed with the Christian faith was however the person of Jesus Christ. His personality had always filled me with reverence and awe. Even when as a typical Soviet schoolboy I was throwing stones at the windows of the neighbouring Adventist church my attitude towards Jesus Christ was special. At last the moment came when I understood that he had been with me all the time, waiting for me to stop trifling with oriental religions and the like, and start thinking about him.

At that time there were very few of us young people in the Church, and even fewer with any higher education. I had got to know many pastors and was eventually introduced to the archbishop. My acquaintance with the rector of the Theological Seminary Roberts Akmentiņš turned out to be decisive. Being a good psychologist, he offered to lend me some study materials from the Seminary and said he would allow me to take some exams later, if I wanted, without having to enter the Seminary. From that moment I knew I had found a significant purpose in my life and that I was going to be a theologian. The idea of entering pastoral ministry was a natural consequence.

My period of study at the Seminary turned out to be brief. At that time it was a correspondence course; we all met up for three days each month. Soon I was sent to Aizpute as a pastor's assistant. I gave my first sermons there. In the meantime I had been fired from the school where I had been teaching because I had become a Christian, and had been eking out a living for my family as a sewage operative and window cleaner. This was a blissful feeling: when you are put on the lowest rung of the social ladder you can accept it as a sacrifice to God. In the social conditions of the time it was also a position of freedom. When I had been a teacher I had never been free, because I had had a lot to lose – the possibility of getting a new flat, for example. When I entered the Church I knew that there was no further down to go: I was alive and free to praise God and read theology. My wife, thank God, was on the same road as me, and always had been. We already had two children by then.

Eventually I was told that I would have to give up one of my jobs; the deadline for my decision was 8 December 1985. I was agonising over the choice when I received a letter from the archbishop telling me that I was to be ordained on 1 December, exactly a year and a half after I had first been accepted at the Seminary, and I was to assume the duties of pastor at the two churches in Saldus on 8 December. God had

solved my problem in his own way. I interpreted the coincidence of dates as his sign that this was my vocation, the way he wanted me to go.

Becoming a pastor meant accepting an absolutely unknown and unpredictable future; it meant having only the very basic things in life; it meant being excluded from 'normal' society. At that time it was impossible to see a future for the Church: the idea of growth was simply utopian.

If you wanted to stay within the legal boundaries, being a pastor meant two things: Sunday services and funerals. Today a pastor has a great many more tasks; but I think it was much easier to be a Christian then than now. Every choice or decision you had to make was much more concrete and distinct. The ever-present pressure only made you aware of the gift of God in Jesus Christ. It filled you with spiritual energy.

Today, looking back on the first steps in my ministry, I can see how unprepared I was. I had to look after five congregations. I thank God that he kept me from much greater mistakes than those I could not avoid in the ardour of my youth, in my lack of comprehension and deep insight, when the opinions I held were too radical and all was set against a background of personal problems.

I think the most important task for every Christian in general, and pastors in particular, is to do what Jesus said: to deny oneself and, if necessary, to take up the cross. It is never easy, but God grants us strength to do it whenever we are called. I think that the first part is more difficult than the second. A human being naturally tends to plan his or her life, to think ahead, to dream about prospects. The result is a tangle of lies and bonds that tie us down to the Earth, to all the material things. You dream about a beautiful new house. You build it, furnish it, spend a lot of time and energy on it, and eventually feel bound to it. Then, if your ministry calls you to go somewhere else, you find it difficult.

You also need to be constantly alert about your motivation. Are you preaching, organising Sunday school classes and so on in order simply to be a good and conscientious pastor, or because you love your people and want them to find the Way of Life and salvation from eternal death? Denying oneself, giving oneself over entirely to God's ministry, is a serious task. St Paul says: 'give every thought into the bondage of Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5).

My family has helped me a lot; and I feel that were I not married I would have lacked some important knowledge and experience. But at the same time, because of my family, I have been unable to accomplish a lot of things. A family demands time, thought, energy. I am not completely free for my pastoral ministry. Is a family a burden or a support? I think it is both.

Looking back to the so-called 'years of stagnation', when not a sign of change was to be seen, I think it was much easier to obey Christ then than it is today. The most important thing at that time was the ability to remain unnoticed, to keep 'lower than the grass'. You could then lead a quiet 'stagnated' life, neither rich nor poor, with no special wishes and no special fears. But for Christians, the hidden resistance was always there, like fire under ashes: you couldn't see it, but it was there all the time, burning deep down. Being a Christian was like walking on a razor's edge, so sharp was the feeling of Truth. Threats, sufferings and even persecution were often like oil poured on glowing embers which set them aflame again. They made one's life as a Christian vibrant and lively. Today, though all the external barriers have been removed, much more serious and complicated internal barriers have sprung up. On the one hand, a Christian is tempted to be spiritually lax, as a result of a false feeling of safety. On the other hand, his living spirit is threatened with drowning in a stream

of external activities. Time and time again I long for the sensation of spiritual integrity which was a characteristic of Christianity when it was still an underground phenomenon.

God has delivered me from serious suffering in my life. I have had my share of doubts and fears but I can't say that I have ever felt that life was over for me. I have doubted the Christian faith but never the existence of God. There were periods when I was greatly influenced by Darwinism, and then by eastern philosophy, but testing and reevaluation got me clear of them. I often recall a song: 'We are pilgrims. All that we own on our way is joy and fear. Fear because we are not as good as we should be, and joy because eventually everything is safe in God's hands.' This safety has been very important to me. I have never considered the possibility of leaving Christ because I have always been convinced that all our problems begin at the point where we lose the awareness of the presence of Christ. The bigger the distance, the bigger and more serious the problems.

I have given much thought to my pastoral status. I would have had a quieter and less complicated life as an ordinary member of a congregation. My biggest problem is constant lack of time. I can never manage everything I should. I am longing for the day when pastors have more time for retreat, solitude and meditation. That could not fail to be beneficial for the Church as a whole. Scripture says that it is pastors who will come under the more severe judgment (James 3:1). The sense of responsibility is overwhelming; the possibility that every mistake will become an obstacle to another person's path to God is a heavy burden.

I have closely observed the changes in our Church. Unfortunately, I must say that they have been more quantitive than qualitative. Although nowadays there is plenty of scope for congregations to involve themselves in all kinds of previously prohibited activities I am not sure that this has meant any deepening of their spiritual content. So the changes may not have been so great after all. Undoubtedly, though, they have made me reconsider my former views about the role of the pastor and the congregation. It is now absolutely clear to me that the role of pastor is no longer that of supreme, sole organiser of all church activities but that this must be a shared task. The pastor is not only unable to do everything alone, but he also commits a grave error, robbing himself of many blessings, if he jealously guards his authority in such a way. The joy of being a church member depends on how much he or she is allowed to join in church life, serving God not only in prayer but also in practical church ministry. In this sense the new era has fostered new approaches and a wider outlook for which I am grateful.

The negative side of the changes is that as we enter Europe and lose our isolation we are moving from a position of innocence and losing our childlike purity of faith. And we are doing so voluntarily: we have chosen this way, becoming a typical westernised Church, though there must have been other alternatives.

The position of innocence we occupied in communist times was perhaps a more personal existence in faith. We were forced to live like that, because a secularised, liberal faith of the type that resembles a philosophy more than a religion would not have been able to survive in the circumstances. When Latvia came under Soviet rule the churches emptied because all those whose motives were other than faith – all those who went to church to study philosophy or reach higher moral standards, for example – simply fell away: they had no reason to risk their well-being by staying in church. If the Bible is not reliable, as liberal theology tries to convince us, if faith in God is just a trinket decorating one's personality, then in times of persecution the logical question arises: 'Why should I stay in the danger zone?'

Persecution acted as cleansing force on the Church. All that was false, redundant, ballast, fell away. Those who continued practising faith were those for whom it was a question of life or death – the most important issue of all.

Nowadays the circumstances are entirely different. Those who shunned the Church in the old days are now sitting in the front pews. Some of them are genuine believers, but others, for example, think it might be good for their career prospects to show themselves among the Christians. The influence of these people in the Church is growing. In English this is called 'inclusiveness'. In short, the Church is being secularised. This involves a dilution of the standards which the Church itself has set. Let me give just one example. In the old days, if a young pastor or theology student was sent to a small country church which he could reach only by travelling by bus for three hours and then walking ten kilometres, he would never dream of asking for a car. This was a normal situation. Nowadays, however, people expect different circumstances for their ministry.

The main negative feature of the 'Iron Curtain' for church life was that we had very restricted possibilities for getting to know what was happening in the wider world, which led to limitations in thought and practice. We were isolated.

Some time ago I took part in the Second Congress of the World Evangelisation Movement (Lausanne Movement) in the Philippines. My first impressions of that country were shocking. There it became clear to me that in Latvia we have never known what real poverty is. But it was the most wonderful and moving experience of my life to see gathered in one place thousands of missionaries and people who had sacrificed everything in order to preach the Gospel of Christ, to feel that very special atmosphere. My greatest wish is to experience this in our Church too.

A second wonderful experience was a visit I made for a week to the Taizé Community in France. There, I saw something quite different: thousands of neophytes, people who are still seeking God, in all their variety. In the sober, meditative atmosphere of this community of brethren they were feeling their way to God, looking into the deepest levels of spiritual life.

Two outwardly differing but inwardly similar experiences: I would like to see and feel their effects in my Church and in my own spiritual life. My present hopes and dreams for the future are connected with the building of a Bible and Deaconry School in Saldus. I hope that it will be a place where people can learn how to serve God and others, to serve not only by putting energy into tasks but in silence and meditation and prayer. I believe that the mystical experience in silent adoration is very important, and that the potential for it is in everyone. The first time I entered a church as a child I experienced the atmosphere of silent adoration. I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew that I was in the presence of something extraordinary.

When Archbishop Gailītis was called away (in 1992) we were all caught unawares. Talks had started about uniting the churches in Latvia with those abroad, but nobody knew how the process would develop. The new archbishop would need to be a symbol of unity, and this was a role that I did not feel ready to accept. I could also see that to some people my own election might actually be a hindrance to the achievement of unity. So when I was elected I said that I would accept the position of bishop, but not yet that of archbishop. However, this caused legal problems: the Synod had elected an archbishop, and neither I nor anyone else except the Synod itself could change that fact.

Perhaps one weakness in our Church is that many of our pastors are concerned only with their own churches and lead secluded lives with no awareness of the

problems involved in running the Church as a whole. I was very much that type of pastor. I think that the greatest challenge and problem for our Church is how to grow, how to change its identity from a surviving Church to a living and expanding Church. We lack resources: even if our parishioners have the good will, they lack knowledge, experience, means. It is not an enjoyable experience to be the leader of a beggar Church, having constantly to ask for money to do the most basic things. Sometimes the help comes with conditions attached – 'you have to be like us'. In my view the practical business side of church life should be separated from the spiritual side. At the moment the archbishop has to spend a great deal of time dealing with the Church's economic problems, although he has neither the education nor the skills for it. We need to reorganise the Church, gathering all the loose parts into one working mechanism; and here our postwar experience is of no help to us. The world has changed and the Church faces new tasks and challenges. For one thing, we need many more bishops. We have fewer congregations than the Lutheran Churches in Germany or Sweden, but an incomparably larger amount of work to do. I feel very isolated in my post. Just having other bishops to talk to would be a help.

One of my main tasks as a bishop is to preserve the unity of our Church. I constantly have to ask myself how far I may keep to my principles, where I may seek a compromise and where I may not. There are many tendencies in our Church. The basic division would be between 'conservatives' and 'liberals', but this does not reveal the full variety. On the specific question of uniting our Church with the Lutheran Church Outside Latvia, practically no one is against the idea as such, but there are different opinions on how the united Church should be constituted. I think that the unbounded variety of theological opinions is the weakest point in our Church. I doubt if we can even speak of a 'church doctrine' as such. I think that the rector of a Catholic seminary, when asked if he would agree to intercommunion with Lutherans, made a very pertinent point: 'First I need to know what Lutherans are. I know many people who call themselves Lutherans, but they all believe different things.' I think that in contemporary circumstances our Church would gain a great deal if it were able to unite behind a clear doctrine on the major issues. Often when I attend a pastors' conference I have the feeling that I am at an ecumenical assembly rather than at a meeting of our Church.

Comment on the Choice of Jānis Vanags as Archbishop in 1993

(This section was written by Māra Zviedre. It is a summary of the opinions of several people, including herself.)

Jānis Vanags loved his congregation very much. He had great plans for building a Deaconry School in Saldus. By nature he is someone who would never strive for high administrative posts, for fame or popularity. He is in fact quiet and meditative – even withdrawn. I think that he never dreamed of becoming a church leader.

But the situation in our Church after the death of Archbishop Gailītis was rather critical. There were practically no candidates who would suit all requirements. The basic problem was that there were very few middle-aged pastors in our Church. Eighty per cent of pastors were either over 70 or under 40. And according to the pre-war Constitution of our Church any candidate for archbishop must have been ordained for at least ten years. Those who qualified either did not agree to stand or were not proposed.

Meanwhile Latvians from abroad were becoming ever more involved in the life of

our Church. Therefore nobody was surprised when pastor Elmārs E. Rozītis from Germany was nominated a candidate for the election. I know him personally and have nothing but admiration for him. He is a real Christian, sincere and approachable, and also a man of intelligence and great experience in church administration. Moreover, he knows the western situation and has a great number of contacts amongst influential people. Another factor was that he was unmarried, which is unofficially considered a great asset in an archbishop. Everyone understood that no other possible candidate really stood a chance: the election was practically over before it had started.

There was, however, just one objection which could make this perfect candidate unsuitable: he was not one of us. At any other time this might not have been important; but at that particular time it was. We had just emerged from bondage – political, spiritual and mental. Just at that moment we wanted to be 'us', to assure ourselves that we 'Soviet' Latvians were still people who were capable of coping ourselves with the new freedoms, that we were not slaves who when set free start yearning for the old captivity. We wanted to show the world that we not only condemned that past but were also proud of our experience. This is something that no one can understand who has not gone through it. Maybe it was foolish pride, but at that moment it was important for the Lutherans in Latvia to be led by a man who had shared their experiences, 'one who had lived the same "dog's life" as we had', as a popular singer put it.

This was the situation that prompted a group of pastors to visit Vanags and beg him to agreed to stand for election. The first time they did not succeed. The second time he agreed, but said he would ask God for a sign if it were not his will. So there were now two candidates, Rozītis and Vanags: all the others had dropped out.

Both candidates were known as serious Christians, but it was also common knowledge that Vanags was much the more conservative, with 'high-church' leanings and opposed for example to the ordination of women. So the election process came to be seen as a contest between the 'liberals' and the 'conservatives'. This was an oversimplication: some of our 'liberals' are more conservative in some respects than our 'conservatives', and vice versa.

The obvious objection to Vanags was that he did not meet the criterion of ten years since ordination: he had in fact been ordained seven years. This led to discussion on whether the Constitution should be altered. Some argued that it should not be altered just because of Vanags. Others argued that our Church was in a unique situation, short of suitable middle-aged pastors after 50 years of atheist propaganda, and that younger pastors should be given a chance to occupy more senior posts even though this was not common practice in the West. There was a vote; the Constitution was altered.

Both candidates made an election speech. It was obvious that Rozītis had prepared a very detailed programme. Vanags' speech was much less worked out. He urged everyone to think twice before voting for him: he could promise nothing and it might be better if he went back to his congregation in Saldus. Nevertheless he received 54 votes and Rozītis 46. So Jānis Vanags was elected archbishop.

Notes and References

[1] This is an edited version of a text which has also been published in Swedish: Māra Zviedre, *Cerība: Hoppet sjunger i gryningen* (Forsamlingsforbundets Forlags Ab, Helsingfors, 1994).