



Thoughts of Faith

February 2026

Ukraine | Czechia | Latvia
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Board for World Outreach

FROM THE ELS



Hello, Again!

Rev. Jay Webber
ELS World Outreach Administrator

The adjacent photo was taken in Ukraine in 2002, while I was serving there as the rector of the theological seminary of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church in Ternopil'. I was a called missionary of the Thoughts of Faith mission society, when it was a church-related organization of the Evangelical

Lutheran Synod. During the eight years I was living and working in Ukraine, I also had occasion more than once to visit Czechia (then the Czech Republic) and Latvia, where Thoughts of Faith was also working. I accepted a call to a congregation in the United States in 2005, and I have not been back to Europe since then. But that will soon change, because I have now begun my service as the new World Outreach Administrator for the ELS – which includes responsibility also for the Thoughts of Faith mission fields.

I look quite a bit different now, compared to how I looked in 2002. My hair is a bit thinner and grayer, and my girth is a bit wider. I do hope that my old friends in Ukraine, Latvia, and Czechia will still recognize me. And I also look forward to meeting new coworkers in those lands, as we all move forward together in the work that the Lord of the church entrusted to his disciples. He told them – he told us – “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, ESV).

Our divine-human Savior is with us always in his Word and Sacrament, and by the gracious presence of his life-giving Spirit. He is with us when we face the ordinary challenges that are always posed to the church by the world, the flesh, and the devil. And he is with us when we face extraordinary challenges, such as being in a nation that is at war, with many people suffering, grieving, and being displaced from their homes. Jesus is with us always, even and especially in those tough times. And as he helps and guides us, we in his name are with those who need the comfort of his gospel, and the compassion that God's people are able to show to the lost and the hurting.

I look forward to working with our brothers and sisters in these and other places that are served by the ELS Board for World Outreach. And I look forward to getting acquainted with those in the United States who support this work. I am open to invitations to speak in congregations and in other venues, to share information about the work that is being done on your behalf around the globe. ■



GIFT OF
LIFE —
UKRAINE

Reflections on 2025

Serving Life and Hope in the Midst of War

Dmytro Maksymenko, Gift of Life Director

The year 2025 was marked by severe trials for Ukraine and for the ministry of Gift of Life. Attacks on energy and civilian infrastructure intensified, the war did not end as many had hoped, and the number of refugees continued to grow. Yet even in these dark circumstances, we witnessed again the truth of God's promise: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Throughout the year, our four Life Centers in Kyiv, Ternopil', and Kremenets', functioned as full humanitarian hubs. **Alongside our core mission of supporting women with crisis pregnancies and protecting unborn life, we extended help to all in need,** especially internally displaced persons from eastern and southern regions most affected by the war. Special attention was given to the elderly, children with special needs (including autism and cerebral palsy), and their families.

Our team regularly visited shelters for elderly people who had lost everything and were evacuated to western Ukraine. We provided food and personal hygiene supplies, but above all spiritual care: distributing Bibles, New Testaments, pocket Gospels, Luther's Small Catechism, and other Christian literature. At our Life Centers, more than 400 Bible classes were held in 2025, gathering

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- els.org/tofdonations



Gift of Life — Ukraine *continued*

about 200 participants, many of them new. Together we studied Holy Scripture and key Lutheran teachings, trusting that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

Our counselors also conducted numerous Christian consultations for women facing crisis pregnancies, abortion pressure, domestic violence, and other hardships. In addition, over 100 educational presentations on the sanctity of human life, healthy living, prenatal development, and Christian values were delivered in schools and medical institutions, reaching nearly 3,000 people.

Another vital ministry is our Mobile Clinic. In 2025, it reached new locations in central Ukraine near the frontline, offering free medical and dental care, children’s Christian lessons, and the Word of God where it is especially needed. Nearly 4,000 people received medical assistance.

In November, Ternopil’ suffered its most devastating missile attack, with over 30 lives lost. The strike occurred only a few hundred meters from our Mobile Clinic base. We ask for your continued prayers for protection and safety for our team.

As we look toward 2026, we plan to expand Mobile Clinic outreach closer to the frontline, where people lack basic medical care and long for true comfort and peace.

At Christmas, we were able to share this hope in a special way. We organized a joyful celebration for about 30 internally displaced children and their families in Ternopil. The children received gifts and Christian literature, enjoyed laughter, games, cheerful animators, and traditional Ukrainian Christmas carols. We believe that sharing Christmas joy with our neighbors gives strength to endure this war, for the true source of joy is the newborn Christ: “For to you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). ■
[See our photos, on the right and below.]

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LATVIA One Body, One Spirit *Rev. Uģis Sildegs, pastor, Jelgava congregation*

In the deepening darkness of December, just before the joyous celebration of Christmas, the clergy and theology students of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia gathered for a special time of spiritual refreshment and academic rigor. Before the busy demands of Christmas services took over, we gathered not merely to meet, but to be immersed together in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians.

The joint sessions were led by two faithful servants of the Gospel: Rev. Holger Weiss from our German partner church, and WELS Missionary Luke Wolfgramm. Their combined experience and theological insight guided the group through the rich depths of Paul’s letter, fostering an environment that was both scholarly and deeply pastoral.

For the theology students, this was a vital part of their curriculum — an opportunity to sharpen their grasp of syntax and grammar. Yet, the dynamic in the room was far more than a classroom lecture. As students worked through the technical details of the language, the seasoned pastors alongside them took the opportunity to refresh their own skills, returning to the source of their preaching with renewed focus.

The choice of Ephesians proved to be the perfect anchor for our time together. As we dissected Paul’s soaring rhetoric, the letter’s dominant themes began to mirror our own gathering. Paul writes passionately about the “mystery” of the Gospel — the breaking down of dividing walls (in Paul’s time, between

Jew and Greek) and the creation of one new man in place of the two. Reading these words while sitting in a room with Latvian brothers, a German pastor, and an American missionary was a living testament to that very truth. We were a visible reflection of the “one body and one Spirit.”

The study moved fluidly between the technical and the devotional. We dwelt on the glorious comfort of chapter two — that we are saved by grace through faith, a gift of God apart from works — and found our spirits lifted. We examined the practical instructions for Christian living and the necessity of the “Armor of God,” reminding one another that our ministry is indeed a spiritual battle that requires divine strength.

This shared immersion in the Scriptures cultivated a wonderful atmosphere of fellowship. It was a time of mutual encouragement where the hierarchy of teacher and student often gave way to the shared identity of brothers in Christ. The strength of our communion was palpable, reminding us that no pastor stands alone.

We departed from these days of study not only intellectually sharper but spiritually fortified. Having been built up together in the Word, we return to our congregations and families ready to proclaim the Christmas Gospel with joy and conviction, thankful for the partners in the Gospel God has placed by our side. ■





ninth graders
at the Advent
Market in Plzeň

CZECHIA

The Advent Season in Plzeň

Martin Vršecký, pastor, Martin Luther School

Advent season at the Martin Luther School is traditionally a time for children's singing performances. Thanks to the teachers and mission workers, the children are learning Czech and American carols and Advent hymns. During the Sunday Vespers services and on other days of the week, the school and Kindergarten children praise the Lord with their voices. But before that happens, the children perform their music program for each other during the children's Wednesday chapel services. The parents and other family members are always eager to see this, and to hear the precious message about Christ's birth in Bethlehem.

Besides the singing program, the Advent season at the Martin Luther School includes creative workshops or field trips. For instance, a few ninth graders went together to the **Advent Market**, which is located by the Cathedral of St. Bartholomew at Plzeň's main square.

For the year to come, we hope for peace and joy among all people, and especially for those who suffer. ■

