DECEMBER 2026
Thoughts of Faith
Ukraine | Czechia | Latvia
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Board for World Outreach



FROM THE ELS

Familiar Places & Familiar Faces

Rev. Jay Webber
ELS World Outreach Administrator

In October and November Pastor Steven Sparley and I visited the fields in Europe where Thoughts of Faith works: Latvia, Ukraine, and Czechia. These were familiar places for us. Many years ago Pastor Sparley served as a ToF missionary in Plzen, in Czechia, and many years ago I served as a ToF missionary in Ternopil', Ukraine, where I worked in the area of theological education. Sparley has visited Plzeň in recent years on behalf of ToF and the ELS Board for World Outreach, but this is the first time I have been back in Ukraine since I left in 2005. I had the opportunity to visit with former students, with former staff at the seminary where I was rector, and with other friends. And in particular, we spent time with Dmytro Maksymenko, the administrator of the "Gift of Life" organization, and we visited several locations where this ToF-sponsored humanitarian agency carries out its important work.

The reality of the Russo-Ukrainian War was never far from our minds, and this was brought home to us in an especially sad way when we learned that a former Ukrainian Lutheran pastor and personal friend, who was drafted into the army, has been missing in action for several months. We were also present for a Bible study at Gift of Life's Ternopil' Life Center, attended largely by internally displaced persons from the war zones in eastern and southern Ukraine who are now being helped by Gift of Life in the relative safety of western Ukraine. They were eagerly listening to God's Word and were assured of God's love and comfort even in the midst of great trials.

In Latvia Pastor Sparley and I taught in the seminary program of our sister church there. We also preached in two congregations: he in Ozolnieki and I in Kekava.

In Plzeň, in Czechia, we discussed with Martin Versecky, the chief administrator of the Martin Luther School, our plans for the revitalization of the St. Paul's congregation which is attached to the school. The board of directors of Thoughts of Faith (the ELS Board for World Outreach) is in the process of calling a full-time residential missionary to serve there as pastor.

In Europe, and indeed throughout the world, God's people in all circumstances are preparing now for the celebration of the birth of humanity's Savior. We join in this joy, and pray with all of God's people for the peace that only Jesus can give. He gives us this assurance: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27, ESV). ■





▲ Gift of Life— dental clinic staff with S. Sparley, D. Maksymenko, and J. Webber

◄ Gift of Life— Medical Clinic on Wheels in Ternopil, Ukraine; S. Sparley, J. Webber, D. Maksymenko L. Voychunas

1

Thoughts of Faith is a confessional Lutheran mission society dedicated to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to Ukraine, Czechia, and Latvia through printed materials and personal ministry.

2

We are a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization. All donations are tax deductible to the extent of applicable law. Please check with your tax consultant on your specific situation.

3

jay.webber@blc.edu; 602-616-4357
Thoughts of Faith
6 Browns Ct, Mankato, MN 56001
scan QR code
els.org/tofdonations

30th Anniversary

Rev. Ilars Plume, Confessional Lutheran Church in Latvia

On Sunday, November 1 (observed as Reformation Sunday), the Kekava Lutheran Congregation of the Augsburg Confession observed the thirtieth anniversary of its organization. The founding of the congregation and the first service took place on Reformation Day, October 31, 1996. The primary reason for the congregation's establishment was the desire to profess the faith as taught in the Augsburg Confession—the foundational document of the Lutheran Church. Hence the congregation bears the name "Congregation of the Augsburg Confession." A few years later, it joined a fellowship of Confessional Lutherans in Latvia in helping to form a new church body: the Confessional Lutheran Church (KLB). Shortly thereafter the KLB was admitted as a member-church of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, an organization comprised of Confessional Lutheran churches from many countries around the world.



▲ Kekava church

Over the years, the Kekava congregation has grown, with its membership more than doubling since its founding. In 2002 the congregation completed the construction of its own church building, which now stands proudly atop Odukalns—the highest hill in the vicinity of Riga.

Throughout these years we have worked closely with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, whose theologian, Erling Teigen, played a significant role in the rebirth of Confessional Lutheranism in Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is significant that the sermon at the 30th anniversary celebratory service was delivered by ELS World Outreach Administrator Jay Webber. **The theme of the sermon was the very same theme on which Teigen tirelessly preached, and upon which our congregation is founded: the forgiveness of sins solely by the grace of God in Christ.** ■

The theme of the sermon was the very same theme on which [Erling] Teigen tirelessly preached, and upon which our congregation is founded: the forgiveness of sins solely by the grace of God in Christ.



members of Kekava congregation ►

Theological Studies

Juris Matvejs, Theology Student

In late October, we were visited by two experienced theologians from the Evangelical Lutheran Synod: Rev. David Jay Webber and Rev. Steven Sparley. Under their guidance, we had the opportunity to participate in two very different, yet closely interrelated, courses. One was dedicated to Lutheran liturgy and worship, while in the other, we delved into the Book of Exodus.

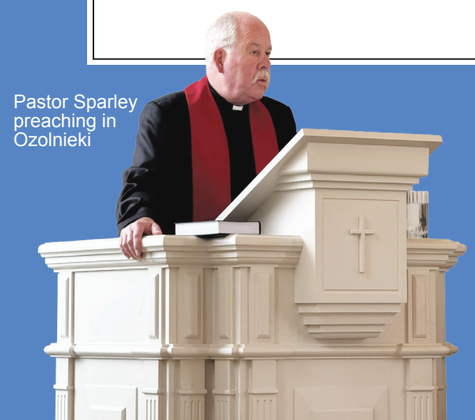
In Webber's liturgy course...we sought to understand "why" the congregation does exactly what it does during the service. Special attention was given to the interconnection between the Word of God and the Sacraments.

In Webber's liturgy course, we did not merely examine the order of worship and its individual components; rather, **we sought to understand "why" the congregation does exactly what it does during the service. Special attention was given to the interconnection between the Word of God and the Sacraments.** In the Lutheran tradition, the sermon and the Holy Eucharist are not two unrelated parts of the worship service. The Gospel is both proclaimed and—in the Sacrament—offered and received. Indeed, this unity of Word and Sacrament is one of the essential characteristics of Lutheran worship. During the Reformation, the Word and the Sacrament were understood as the primary, interconnected elements of the divine service. These insights were explored from various perspectives and left a lasting impression.

Sparley's course took us...to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. The primary task here was to read the biblical text carefully and learn how to understand and interpret it correctly.

Sparley's course took us much further back in time: **to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. The primary task here was to read the biblical text carefully and learn how to understand and interpret it correctly.** The instructor's extensive knowledge of

continued on next page



Pastor Sparley preaching in Ozolnieki



Ozolnieki seminary

Theological Studies continued

ancient languages was particularly helpful in delving into texts where, in a casual reading, we often overlook a great deal. It was especially significant to be able to look at the Ten Commandments with fresh eyes, seeking to understand why Luther interpreted them the way he did. This allowed us to see, anew, that the commandments are given to a people whom God has first liberated from slavery in Egypt: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Only then follow the commands: “You shall…” and “You shall not…”

We also learned to gain a better and deeper understanding of the significance of theological education, which extends far beyond the mere acquisition of new facts or knowledge. Special attention was devoted to the study of the Holy Scriptures, learning to distinguish clearly between the Law and the Gospel, and gaining a better grasp of how the Word of God and the Sacraments serve the congregation. Although the two courses differed significantly in their outward form, they ultimately led to the same goal: that those who serve in the Church may gain an ever-deeper understanding of God’s Word and be able faithfully to pass on what they themselves have received. **Thus, theological studies are not merely preparation for a specific office; they represent a process of continuous learning for the sake of service within the Church of Christ.** ■



members of Ozolnieke congregation