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In Latvia, in Salisbury: On the Way to Faith in Christ

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The Aim, Background and Method of this Study¹

There is a partnership link between the diocese of Salisbury and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. In Salisbury, as elsewhere, we are concerned about ways in which the Church can welcome those enquiring into the Christian faith and accompany them on the way to a thoughtful and lively faith in Christ. The link with the Lutheran Church of Latvia provided us with the opportunity to study how a Church in a historical and cultural context very different from that of England approaches this task, with all the opportunity this gives for stimulating new insights.

The aim of the project was thus to enable the churches in the Salisbury diocese and the churches in Latvia to learn from each other. Part of the reason for thinking that this might be possible is that the churches in the two places are beginning to experience a situation with elements familiar to the other.

For several generations the assumption in England has been that people have learned the basic elements of the Christian faith as children. Preaching of the Gospel has often taken the form of calling people back to a faith with which they were already familiar. In the past this was generally a fair assumption. To an increasing extent it is ceasing to be true. Forty years ago 50 per cent of children in England had some active involvement in the Christian Church, in worship, Sunday school, children's church and other church organisations. The proportion today is only 14 per cent, only one in seven. Increasingly, then, those enquiring into the Christian faith have little or no clear previous knowledge of it. The churches are having to adapt to this new situation.

But this is the situation that the churches in Latvia have been facing for years. Until the last few years the Soviet education system prevailed. When Latvians today become interested in the Christian faith, they are beginning to explore something of which they have virtually no previous knowledge, except to hear it denigrated by teachers of Marxism. The churches in Latvia are used to receiving people with no previous knowledge of the Christian faith, while to the churches in Salisbury this is fairly new. The churches in Salisbury may be able to learn from the experience of the churches in Latvia.

For 50 years, while it was part of the Soviet Union, Latvia was to a large extent cut off from the cultural influences that have been shaping the attitudes and outlook of people in the West. Since independence in 1991, however, Latvia has been increasingly exposed to the impact of television and the mass media, advertising and commercialism. These will shape the attitudes and outlook of people in Latvia in ways that can be guessed but cannot be accurately predicted. The churches in Latvia will

need to adapt their ministry in order to be responsive to people who are coming to them with new attitudes and outlooks, different lifestyles and expectations. They may be able to learn from the experience of churches in Salisbury.

The Church of England General Synod's report *On the Way*, published in 1995, sets out some principles to guide churches as they welcome and receive those enquiring into the Christian faith. In the diocese of Salisbury a working group has been set up to stimulate and support parishes in putting these principles into practice. We saw these as ideas that might well be helpful to parishes in Latvia. I prepared two sheets. One described the purpose of my visit, and told the story of how one parish in Salisbury had started to put the *On the Way* approach into practice. The other provided a summary of the main principles of this approach. These two sheets were translated into Latvian. I took a large number of copies with me and gave them to anyone who was interested and invited their comments. This led into some useful conversations and discussions.

I was in Latvia from 20 June to 14 July 1997.² I shared in the Sunday worship of five parishes, in the midweek worship of two other parishes, and in the four-day summer camp of an eighth parish. In most of these parishes I was able to take part in the weekly house group or confirmation class. In some I took part in the congregational meeting. I was able to have extensive conversations with the ordained clergy – or in one case the lay evangelist – who had responsibility for all the parishes I visited. I also talked with many laypeople from these parishes, both in house groups and in confirmation classes, and informally over meals and after services and other meetings. I was also able to talk to five other clergy who between them had responsibility for two urban parishes and five parishes in country towns or villages. In a country with nearly 300 parishes this is only a small proportion but it was enough for me to form some impressions and to make some observations.

The Recent Historical Background

Latvia was illegally incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. During the Second World War the country was fought over twice. The German army invaded in 1941. In 1944 the Red Army invaded Latvia again and reestablished Soviet control. The two hours I spent going round the Museum of Fifty Years of Soviet Occupation was the most moving experience of my stay. The huge toll of human life and the intensity of the sufferings of the survivors and of political prisoners made a profound impact on me.

When the Red Army invaded Latvia in 1944 most of the clergy who had not fled into exile were deported to Siberia, where many of them died. Many churches were closed and were used as warehouses, museums or concert halls. Other church properties such as clergy houses were confiscated. The activities of the churches were severely restricted. Public worship was permitted, but other kinds of meetings were prohibited.

The Soviet government introduced a programme of systematic denigration of religious faith in education, in the arts and in the mass media. Young people were required to learn Marxist philosophy in schools and at university and to join communist youth organisations. There was active discrimination against those who were openly Christian and went to church. They were denied the opportunity of higher education and were liable to lose their jobs, for example, as teachers.

Over 50,000 Latvians were deported to Siberia in the first decade of Soviet rule. The experience had a profound impact on those who went. One young man told me

about his father who had been deported to Siberia with his family as a child. Speaking of him and others who had been exiled, he said, 'There is something broken about them ... they have no initiative, don't want to be active. ... He says "Keep low, lower than the grass".' Among older people the memories of this time are still vivid. Some recall the time they spent in Siberia. Many remember friends and relatives who were sent into exile and perhaps died there.

In the years that followed many Latvians experienced a sense of alienation, of being foreigners in their own land, unable to say what they thought and felt. A middle-aged woman described her experience as a teacher under the Soviet regime. She had always believed in God, but she had not been to church during this period. She knew that if she went to church she would lose her job as a teacher, and would thus lose her opportunity to influence the children. She could not speak to them directly about God, but she could try to convey to them an attitude to life that was consistent with Christianity. As she spoke her voice expressed something of the anguish of the situation in which she had lived. Throughout this time Latvians lived in a pervasive atmosphere of fear and oppression.

Over the years there was a gradual process of relaxation of pressure and restriction, but the process was inconsistent, with many changes of policy and practice. Fear continued to dominate the lives of many people. After the introduction of *glasnost*' by Mikhail Gorbachev there were significant changes, but Latvia did not gain its independence until 1991. The comment has been made that for Britain the Second World War ended in 1945, but for Latvia it ended in 1991. When I repeated this to people they nearly always nodded in agreement. In some ways Latvia has the feel of Britain in the years after the war. There is clearly a great deal to be done to repair the physical state of the country after many years of neglect.

The period since independence has been a time of enormous economic upheaval. With the loss of their markets in the former Soviet Union the huge industrial plants which provided employment for very large numbers of people have become redundant. Many have closed or reduced their activities to a fraction of their previous level. As a result there is a great deal of unemployment in Latvia, even though there is clear evidence of the growth of newer sectors of the economy.

One of the legacies of the 50 years of Soviet occupation is a large number of people who have moved into Latvia to take up employment in these large industries. As a result over a third of the population of Latvia are Russian-speaking people from other former Soviet republics. Many of them have not tried to learn Latvian, but now have no other home. Relations with these people is a very significant political issue in Latvia.

Some Impressions of Church Life Today

Since independence the churches have been free to worship, to evangelise and to develop their work. Former church property which was confiscated by the Soviet regime has been gradually handed back. The buildings are often in very bad condition, but grants from Lutheran churches in Germany, Scandinavia and North America are assisting in their repair. They open up a range of opportunities for parishes.

The mood of the churches in Latvia seemed to me to be buoyant. There was a sense of newness and excitement in church congregations. Many people were doing things to express their Christian faith which they had never done before, and they were finding this exciting. People talked about their plans for the future and their

hopes about what might be possible.

Church congregations were generally growing. There were large numbers of people coming forward for confirmation in some churches. In one country town around 150–200 people were being confirmed each year. It was very noticeable that there were considerable numbers of young people in the church congregations. I frequently observed that there were rather more young people in their teens or early twenties than in any other age group. It was also noticeable that there were far more women than men in the congregations, often in a ratio of three or four to one. A list in one parish magazine of those who had been confirmed showed that three quarters were women. (In England the proportions among churchgoers are 60–65 per cent women, 35–40 per cent men.)

Coming to Faith in Christ in Latvia

The focus of my study was the way in which the Church welcomed and nurtured those who were enquiring about the Christian faith and helped them on their way to faith in Jesus Christ. I therefore took every opportunity of talking to people and asking them to tell me their story. These conversations had to be in English unless someone was available to translate, as sometimes happened. Most of them were individual conversations, but there were also group discussions in house groups and confirmation classes.

Altogether 18 people told me of how they had come to faith in Christ sufficiently fully for me to be confident that I understood the key factors and key stages that they had passed through on the way. Many other people made comments in group discussions which either strengthened or qualified the impressions I gained from these 18. Of the 18, seven were men and eleven were women. They ranged in age from 19 to the early 50s. They were nearly all English-speakers, although some spoke English with considerable difficulty, and it is therefore likely that they came mainly from among the more educated people.

Some of these stories were profoundly moving as people told me about their suffering or about times of great anxiety. One man was so moved as he told the parish house group about the tragic death of a close friend who played a key part in his coming to faith that at times he had to stop, unable to continue. I am grateful to all those who shared their personal stories with a visitor from another country who was both a stranger and a brother in Christ.

From the stories of these 18 people a number of features emerged.

Most of the people who told me their stories had parents who had no religious faith. The same was true of a confirmation group I met in which not one of the eight members could identify any religious faith in their parents. It was not just that their parents did not go to church: they had no religious faith at all. This struck me, as a visitor from England, very forcibly. It would be very unusual to find a group of eight confirmation candidates in England not one of whom had a parent who prayed or believed in God. A significant number of these people were however aware of religious faith in one of their grandparents (or in one case a great-grandparent). In most cases this did not mean that their grandparent had gone to church but that he or she had prayed, in some cases regularly, in other cases in times of crisis, such as when a member of the family had been seriously ill.

One significant feature was the way people *began* their stories of how they came to faith in Christ. In England people very often begin their stories by describing their contact with the church. For example, they start by saying that their parents used to

go to church and took them when they were children, or that they had come into contact with the church as a result of an illness or the death of a parent or friend. Some people in Latvia started their stories in this way, but few compared with England. More people started by describing a growing awareness of or *awakening to the spiritual or religious dimension of life*. They saw this new awareness as the starting-point that later led them to faith in Christ. For some this awareness came as a result of music or poetry, for others it came in other ways. We need to remember that these people grew up in an educational system based on Marxism, with its compulsory materialist philosophy. Becoming aware of the spiritual and religious dimension of life therefore represents a very significant development.

A major factor in several of the stories was the importance of music. One woman, for example, said that her first awakening to the religious dimension of life had been through a music teacher (who she thought had been a Catholic) who had been the first teacher to make the school choir interesting and who had taught them some classical Christian music (she mentioned J. S. Bach) and also Negro spirituals. The teacher had later been dismissed from her job. Another young woman started her story about how she came to faith in Christ by saying that she was a musician. She had been in the local choir, and towards the end of the Soviet period they had been allowed to sing church music. She mentioned Bach first, then Britten's *Requiem*, Byrd and Poulenc. Church choirs have also clearly been of importance to many young people, particularly young women in their late teens and 20s, as a vehicle for the expression of a developing Christian faith and in establishing them in the life of the church.

It was clear that for some of those who told me their story coming to faith in Christ had been the conclusion of a *long process* of intellectual and spiritual exploration. The factors that had initiated this process or played a critical part in it were sometimes very unexpected to English ears. For one young woman as a university student of English it had been John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that had most deeply influenced her. For a young man it had been reading a Latvian translation of some of the work of the eighteenth-century philosopher and theologian George Berkeley. Another woman described how as a university student of about 21 she had first become aware that the world was fundamentally spiritual rather than material through reading the Romantic poets Byron and Shelley. Later her insights had been clarified by reading Hegel's philosophy. She had then begun to read the New Testament and about religion in general. She had also explored Eastern religion with a group of friends. At a later stage she had felt she wanted to know more about the Bible, and had gone to some meetings organised by the Baptists. She had felt they were rather superficial, but for the first time she had bought her own Bible. At a later stage she got in touch with the elderly pastor Roberts Feldmanis at Mežaparks and had joined a baptism and confirmation group he was leading. By that time she had been 29. The final step in her journey had been reading a Marxist book on Martin Luther, which included as a supplement the full text of his famous tract *The Freedom of the Christian*. For her this had been the transforming moment. She had set herself very high standards and had been feeling guilty because she had not been living up to them. Reading Martin Luther had enabled her to understand God's grace, and to know that she was forgiven by God. She had been baptised and confirmed, and had become an active member of the parish church.

Two elements in her story are echoed in the stories of other people. For a number of them reading the Bible for the first time had been a period of revelation. One man described the struggle he went through to get together the money to buy a Bible, and

the help friends gave him to do so. When he read the Bible ... at this point his rather broken English gave out and he gestured vigorously with his hands as if to say 'It blew my mind'. The age of 20 or 21 was significant for many. Some came to faith in Christ at this age; for others it was the point at which they started the journey which led them to Christian faith. One person I discussed this with suggested that this was the age at which school-leavers found themselves facing all the opportunities of the world and having to answer fundamental questions about the meaning of life.

Personal friendships were clearly of critical importance in many people's stories. In some cases these were friendships with people who were already Christians; in others with people similarly exploring religious and spiritual issues. These friends did not necessarily go on to become Christians, but their support and sharing in the exploration was clearly of great importance at some stage in the journey towards faith.

Several people mentioned the influence of radio. In one group of eight people preparing for confirmation, four mentioned radio as significant, one specifically referring to the choir of Riga Cathedral. One woman said that her spiritual awareness had been awakened by the radio broadcasts given by Juris Rubenis around the time of independence on the theme of new life.

There were also people whose stories contained elements that are very familiar to English ears. They had wanted to be married in church, or had wanted their child to be baptised. As a result they had come into contact with a pastor, and this had led them on into the Christian faith.

Another factor mentioned by some people was the importance of dreams. Some people had recurring dreams and the desire to understand the meaning of the dream had led them to contact with the Church. In two or three cases a friend to whom they had talked about the dream had said to them 'You must go and see the pastor'.

One feature of many of these stories was that people described their spiritual awareness growing without any direct contact with the organised Church. Listening to these very varied stories, in which the Church as an institution played a significant part only at a relatively late stage, left me with a vivid sense of the activity of the Spirit of God drawing people to Himself. One woman started her story by saying that she might claim that she had found it all out for herself, since there had been no religious faith in her family or background; she knew this was the Holy Spirit at work.

How the Churches in Latvia Receive Enquirers

Many people's stories revealed that the critical point had been when they had gone to see the pastor. Sometimes this had been their own idea; quite often it had been on the suggestion of friends. People clearly had reservations about going to see the clergy and of course I did not meet those who had been so hesitant that in the end they had never gone – but equally clearly many people who have virtually no contact with the Church feel able to go to the clergy to talk with them. One man said that at first he had resisted his friend's suggestion on the grounds that the pastor was a holy man and would not be interested in someone like him; but in the end he had gone.

I gained the impression that the average pastor spends a significant amount of time talking with individual enquirers. Those I asked agreed that they saw this as an important part of their ministry. My impression is that this is a larger part of their ministry than it would be for the majority of parish clergy in England.

The typical response of these clergy to those enquiring into the Christian faith is to

invite them to join a confirmation group. There is no preliminary stage to this. The typical confirmation group assumes no previous knowledge of the Christian faith and provides basic teaching. The style of confirmation preparation clearly varies from one parish to another, just as it does in England, but from the conversations I had a broad picture emerges. One man spoke of attending a series of lectures in a group of about 15 people, meeting twice a week over two months. One couple described a series of weekly lectures over three months, with some discussion. One of the clergy said he ran four confirmation courses a year of 13 weeks each. In addition to the weekly meetings those preparing for confirmation took part in church services and Bible study. One confirmation group I attended opened with a short liturgy of prayer and song, followed by a 45-minute lecture by the pastor, a second time of worship which included some singing to Taizé music, and then coffee and biscuits and discussion.

Several people spoke of the reading they were given to do by the clergy. They were well-educated people and the reading was fairly demanding and clearly intended to stretch their understanding of the Christian faith. One young woman said that she was expected to come back to the pastor with the questions the reading had raised in her mind.

The impression I gained from a number of people is that while teaching is given on prayer, those in confirmation groups do not have much opportunity to talk over the experience of praying, nor receive much help in overcoming difficulties they experience in praying. Whether this impression is generally true, or simply represents the experience of a few people I talked to, the clergy in Latvia will be able to judge for themselves.

What the Churches in Latvia and Salisbury Can Learn from Each Other

Three broad areas emerged in which the Church in Latvia and the Church in Salisbury can learn from each other. In each area a difficulty in translation between Latvian and English provided a pointer.

(i) *Mācītājs: The Teacher*

The Latvian word for the ordained minister is *mācītājs* (masculine) or *mācītāja* (feminine). When they are speaking English, Latvians use the word 'pastor'; I imagine the choice of this word has been influenced by the Lutheran Church in Germany, where the ordained minister is called 'pastor'.

Mācītājs is the word used to address Jesus in John's Gospel, chapter 3 verse 2, which reads in English: 'We know you are a teacher who has come from God'. *Mācītājs* is similarly used in the First Letter to the Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 to translate the Greek word '*didaskolos*', which is translated as 'teacher' in English. (In the Ephesians passage it is the Greek word '*poimen*' which is translated as 'pastor' in English, and this is translated '*gans*' in Latvian.) The same root '*māc* ...' produces the verb '*mācīt*' ('to teach') and the noun '*mācība*' ('teaching'). It is thus clear that the English word that corresponds most closely to '*mācītājs*' is 'teacher'. However, in English 'teacher' normally refers to a teacher in a school or college, for which the Latvian is *skolotājs*. To translate *mācītājs* as teacher would therefore be confusing.

To translate *mācītājs* as pastor does not convey the basic meaning of the word. To translate *mācītājs* as teacher does not make clear that it describes the ordained

teacher or minister of the Church. There is no other suitable English word. I would suggest that there are considerable advantages in using the word *mācītājs* in English, even though it sounds odd. It serves to emphasise the distinctive perception of the ordained ministry in Latvia and prevents English readers from sliding into the easy but misleading assumption that the role of the clergy in Latvia is the same as it is in England.

Latvian clergy clearly take their role as teachers very seriously. At the summer camp I attended, with 150 church members away in the country over the midsummer holiday weekend, the *mācītājs* gave a 40-minute lecture each day, followed by a group discussion, reports from the groups and general discussion. I was given a running summary of the main points of the lectures in translation, and the impression I gained was of carefully constructed argument. The same was true of a confirmation group in another parish that I attended: the *mācītājs* gave a 45-minute address on the relationship of the Christian faith to other religions.

The context of these lectures is a society whose members have grown up in a system that has taught them a philosophy of life that is hostile to the Christian faith. Since independence this philosophy is obviously no longer taught, but it is in the background of everyone in Latvia over the age of 20. People coming into the Church need to be given a full statement of what the Christian faith is, which does not make any assumptions about what they already know. Members of the Church need to have a coherent grasp of their faith because they are living in a society in which people are generally ignorant about religion.

In England the Christian faith is increasingly finding that it is seen simply as one of a number of options. In England today there are substantial communities of other major world faiths which provide alternative understandings of the world and guidelines for living. There is also a wide range of philosophies and 'New Age' ideas. The sociologist Grace Davie has recently observed that 'between two thirds and three quarters of British people indicate fairly consistently that they believe in some sort of God', but that 'belief begins to drift further and further away from Christian orthodoxies as regular practice diminishes'. 'Nominal belief in God persists ... it is, however, a belief which is less and less influenced by Christian teaching'.³ For Christians in England a clear and coherent understanding of their faith, of what makes it distinctive from other beliefs, is increasingly important, but often seems to be lacking.

Salisbury diocese offers the 'Bishop's Certificate', a two-year course for laypeople based on group discussion led by a tutor. Members of the groups are provided with course material which they read before the meetings and which form the basis of the discussion. The groups usually meet 20–25 times each year. The enthusiasm which people in the Salisbury diocese show for this course arises in part from the fact that those who take it feel for the first time that they have a clear coherent grasp of the Christian faith. They may previously have known a lot about the faith, but did not know how the parts fitted together into a whole. Yet many have worshipped as adults for 10–20 years before taking the Bishop's Certificate, and many have never taken it.

During the lectures I heard in Latvia I found myself wondering how many clergy in Salisbury diocese would be able to give presentations which were as clear and well thought out as these. Some may well judge that lectures of that length are very rarely appropriate in the parish context, and may use other educational methods. The question in my mind was how many *could* present such lectures.

I also gained the impression that Latvian clergy typically spend a significant part of their time in personal conversations with those who are preparing for baptism and confirmation, explaining the Christian faith. Those pastors I asked confirmed that

they saw this as an important part of their ministry.

My impression is that this is a larger part of their ministry than it would be for the majority of parish clergy in England. English clergy spend a good deal of time talking with individuals or couples, but they are often the sick or bereaved or people preparing for marriage or the baptism of their children. This aspect of ministry in Latvia raises a question for us in Salisbury diocese: do we give sufficient time to personal conversations explaining the Christian faith to those enquiring about it or preparing for baptism and confirmation? As people in England know less and less about the Christian faith, more and more time is needed to explain it to them and answer their questions.

(ii) The Enquirer

In Salisbury diocese we have been developing an approach called 'On the Way'. One of its features is that it recognises a stage in which people are regarded as 'enquirers' into the Christian faith. It is clear from my conversations in Latvia that there this is an unfamiliar concept as far as faith is concerned. We had some difficulty finding an appropriate word to translate the word 'enquirer' in the papers I had written to explain the purpose of my visits to people in Latvia. In the end we used the word '*interesents*', which basically means someone who is interested, but does not have the full meaning of the word 'enquirer'. An 'enquirer' is someone who is seeking information in order to be able to understand and appreciate some area of life and thought which is new to him or her, though it may be familiar to others. The word includes the ideas of *asking* and *exploring*. It involves an approach to teaching which understands learning to be more a matter of discovery than of receiving instruction. The enquirer expects to find things out, and takes initiatives in order to do so. The enquirer is more active than the person who expects only to be taught. It is a concept that is more in accord with the contemporary western understanding of adult education.

To think of people who are interested in the Christian faith, but not yet ready to commit themselves, as 'enquirers', as adults seeking information and understanding, is a good basis for planning how to enable them to develop a thoughtful and lively faith in Christ. Encouraging them to ask questions and to explore, inviting them to make suggestions and leading them to learn from their experience and their questions will help them to develop a Christian faith that is appropriate to an adult who takes responsibility for his or her faith and life.

In this understanding, the adult is aware of himself or herself as someone who is responsible for directing his or her own life. So adult education encourages people to take responsibility for what they are learning and how they go about learning it. It encourages teachers and learners to share together in the process of working out what is to be studied, and the methods that are to be used in studying it. It emphasises the idea of learning as a shared activity, in which the teachers also expect to learn, perhaps from the questions the adult learners ask and the new perspectives they bring to the subject.

This approach is foreign to the Soviet system of education, which encouraged people to be passive and to accept what they were told, and did not encourage people to ask questions, particularly awkward questions. The legacy of the Soviet system of education is still pervasive in Latvia. However, as western ideas and perspectives increasingly permeate through Latvian society, it is probable that more and more people – especially young people – will expect to be treated in a different way. They

will expect to take an active part in the process of learning, to ask awkward questions, to raise new issues that seem important to them, to make suggestions about how the group can work together. If they are not given the opportunity to take an active part and to share responsibility with their teachers they are likely to become irritated and frustrated. And because the Church is a voluntary body, if they become irritated and frustrated as they seek to learn more about the Christian faith, or to give expression to their new-found faith, they are likely to drift away from the Church. This has happened in some Churches in England.

One important aspect of all adult education, and especially adult Christian education, is an awareness of the emotional experience of those taking part, and of possible emotional blocks to learning. People approaching the Church and the clergy are often very hesitant and uncertain at first. They are not sure how their approach will be received. They are anxious about what they are committing themselves to simply by getting into contact with the Church. They may be afraid that their ignorance will be exposed in group discussion. This is likely to be familiar to churches both in Latvia and in Salisbury, but its importance should not be underestimated.

An example of an approach which treats people as enquirers is provided by one of the clergy in Salisbury diocese. At a fairly early stage, when the group of enquirers has settled down and people have begun to get to know one another, he invites everyone in the group to say what they would like to learn about and discuss in the group meetings. He lists all the subjects and questions that people raise on a large sheet of paper on the wall. At the end of the evening he takes it away, and plans a programme that includes all the topics they have mentioned, relating them to the central beliefs of the Christian faith.

One small booklet may be of help to those who are looking for ways of enabling people to take an active part in developing their own learning. It is published in Latvian as *Ticība Ģimenē* and in English as *Faith in the Family*.⁴ As the title suggests, it is intended not for enquirers, but mainly for parents who are seeking to share their faith with their children. However, it offers suggestions of activities which enable people to take an active part in learning, and which can be adapted for use in groups of enquirers.

(iii) *Ceļabiedrs: The Companion on the Way*

The approach that is widely used in Salisbury diocese to help people learn the Christian faith and develop a thoughtful and lively faith in Christ is called 'On the Way'. The name has strong biblical roots, and emphasises the idea of the life of faith as a journey.

In St John's Gospel 14:6 Jesus says 'I am the way' (Greek '*hodos*', Latvian '*ceļš*'). The first name given to the life and faith of his disciples was simply 'The Way' (Acts of the Apostles 9:2, 19:9, 23, 22:4, 24:1–22). The account of the journey of the people of Israel through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land is one of the key themes of the Old Testament, and there are a number of references to it in the New Testament as an image of the life of the Christian. In English the picture of the Christian life as a journey is rich in associations. It is at the heart of some of our greatest hymns (for example 'Guide me, O thou Great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land'). One of the greatest works of popular devotion in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which pictures the temptations and conflicts that the Christian faces on the journey to the Heavenly City.

When I talked about this concept in Latvia, however, I was surprised that a number of people in different parishes said that the picture of the Christian life as a journey was not a familiar one. People in Latvia will be able to judge if their view is truly representative of the Church in Latvia or simply an expression of their own local experience. (Someone said to me that because of the Soviet system of education many people are not comfortable with the use of metaphors, and often misunderstand them, trying to take them literally. I do not know whether this is generally true.)

One of the principles of the 'On the Way' approach is that each enquirer is accompanied on the way to faith in Christ. The people who accompany them are ordinary members of the church congregation, usually of similar age to their enquirer and the same sex. They pray for the enquirers they are accompanying, meet them both in a group and individually, listen to them, try to answer their questions, offer encouragement if it is needed. In England they are often called 'sponsors'. This is a word that is often used of the godparents of children who are being baptised. It proved to be a most difficult word to translate.

The word '*sponsors*' (sing.) in Latvian means someone who gives money, which is quite a different idea. Another possibility is the word '*konsultants*', but this implies someone with specialised knowledge or expertise who gives advice, whereas those who accompany people on the way to faith are ordinary members of the congregation without any special expertise. Another possible translation is '*palīgs*', a person who assists, and sometimes this word was used in sermons or conversations. We finally decided that the best word to use was '*ceļabiedrs*', a companion on the journey. This brings together both the idea of a journey, of moving onwards towards a destination, and the idea of accompaniment, companionship.⁵ The experience in Salisbury diocese has been that the provision of companions has frequently been very helpful. Choosing suitable people to be companions, and pairing them with those who are on the way to faith in Christ, is a delicate process. Mistakes here undermine the value of the practice. Clergy usually consult people carefully and then put forward their proposals. Those who become companions need to realise they are setting out on a shared journey of discovery, which will be a learning experience for all who are taking part. Companions are often delighted at how much they have learned and how they have grown as Christians by doing this. But it is the enquirers whose experience matters most. Their appreciative comments often show how valuable they have found this companionship.

Conclusion

Out of this study four themes emerge as of particular importance for the Churches in seeking to welcome people and assist them on the way to faith in Christ.

- (i) Awareness of the work of the Spirit of God, opening people's eyes and drawing them on towards faith in God, often long before they are in contact with the organised Church.
- (ii) The importance of enabling people to gain a clear and coherent grasp of the Christian faith at a time when there is a multiplicity of alternative beliefs and value systems.
- (iii) The value of thinking of people as enquirers into the Christian faith, and providing the resources and opportunities that will enable them to discover the Christian faith for themselves.
- (iv) The value of picturing progress towards faith in Christ, and the life of faith in

Christ, as a journey, and the great contribution that can be made by those who are companions on the way.

Notes and References

- ¹ I would like to thank the many people who made my study leave such a refreshing, stimulating and enjoyable experience, and especially: Austris and Īrisa, and Valters and Guna, for their generous hospitality and the welcome they gave me when I stayed with them; Tālis, Viesturs and Dace, who welcomed me to their churches; Ilze, who so kindly looked after me at summer camp; all the people who talked with me about their experiences, and shared with me their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears; Elita Saliņa, teacher of English at the University of Latvia, who translated both the papers I took to Latvia and this report; the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group for their Ministry Bursary Award and the Sarum St Michael Educational Charity for the grant which together made possible my visit to Latvia and the production of this report; and my colleagues at Salisbury Cathedral who readily agreed to my study leave, and covered my responsibilities while I was away.
- ² The programme of my visit worked out like this:

21–24 June	Luther Church (Riga) summer camp at Talsi
25 June–1 July	Sarkandaugava (Riga) – Holy Trinity; Krimulda
2 July	Jelgava–St Anna
4 July	Rūjiena
6 July	Ainaži
9–13 July	Kuldīga–St Katrīna and St Anna
11 July	Talsi
- ³ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994), pp. 74–75, 76, 122.
- ⁴ *Tiċiba Ģimenē* (Svētdienas Rīts, Riga, 1997); *Faith in the Family* (Bible Society, Swindon, 1991).
- ⁵ I am grateful to Linda Straume, Lauma Lapa and Elita Saliņa, who lecture in English at the University of Latvia, for their help in explaining to me the meaning of these different Latvian words.