



World  
Communion  
of Reformed  
Churches

# Newsletter

An occasional publication from the Steering Committee of the Council of WCRC Europe

## Steering Committee Solidarity Visits

The WCRC Europe Steering Committee has been making Solidarity Visits to member churches alongside its normal committee meetings. We are prioritising smaller member churches, in particular those who have experience recent difficulties.

Here we report on the first two visits.

### Reformed Church in Transylvania (Cluj)



*13th September, 2013*

The September meeting of the WCRC Europe Steering Committee took place over two days. The first day started with a visit to the offices of the Reformed Church in Transylvania, Cluj District and discussion with Bishop Béla Kató and other members of the church administration.

The Steering Committee was made

most welcome and heard of a variety of challenges facing the Church. In common with the Church in much of Europe, the Reformed Church in Transylvania is experiencing a decline in the numbers attending. This is particularly marked among younger people; part of the reason for this is that many are seeking work in other parts of Europe and communities are being left without many young people in them. There are also ongoing struggles to regain ownership of a number of buildings which belong to the church. Some of these have been successful, and for



that there is much thankfulness, but other are still occupied illegally, some by private individuals and some by the government. There is a deep sense of injustice being done to the church as long as this situation is allowed to continue. In an overwhelmingly Orthodox country, the Reformed Church feels it is often marginalised.



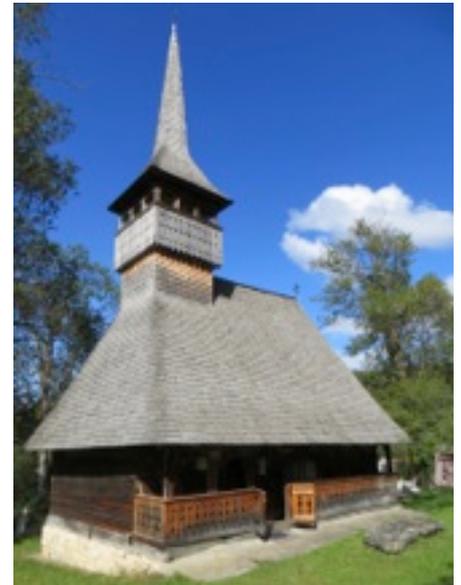
Later in the morning, the Steering Committee paid a visit to a historic reformed church in Cluj and to the Reformed Church School next door, in company with members of staff. We learned much about the work of the School, which has a distinguished history in educating

the children of the Hungarian population. There followed a visit to the Theological College where Reformed, Lutheran and Unitarian students are educated together. The Steering Committee was impressed by this sign of ecumenical cooperation.

In the afternoon we travelled some distance out of Cluj to visit Mănăstireni, a village in the mountains, in the company of Kiss Tibor (the current Reformed Church of Transylvania Ecumenical Officer) where he had ministered from 1991-2007. We visited two Romanian Orthodox churches and met their minister, who told us



about his work. It was good to hear of positive ecumenical links at a local level. We were also able to see the Reformed Church, which is a very fine building; the minister's home, which was built by volunteers during the time Tibor was minister there; and the home of a member of the congregation who graciously showed us examples of traditional costume. A very moving visit was paid to the Reformed Cemetery and we heard of the life and witness of several members of the Reformed congregation who had passed away in recent years. The Steering Committee was treated to a meal in the Parish Centre. Palinka was taken.



The impression gained by the Steering Committee was of a church which works extraordinarily hard in difficult circumstances. It was important, particularly for those who have no personal experience of the kind of national and ethnic tensions lived daily by Hungarians in this part of the world, to hear their stories first hand and to gain a deeper insight into their way of thinking. While we recognised that financial support comes from outwith Transylvania, nonetheless, the fact that a relatively small



church runs the school and the theological college we visited was impressive. We are grateful for the opportunity to have learned more about our Reformed sisters and brothers in Transylvania and to have deepened our relationship with them.



## Evangelical Reformed Church in Lithuania

*24th and 25th January, 2014*

The Steering Committee met with Rev Rimantas Mikalauskas, Vice-Superintendent of the Evangelical



Reformed Church in Lithuania for dinner on 24th January. Conversation ranged over topics including the history of Lithuania, with particular reference to the role of the Reformed Church within it, and the current situation of and challenges faced by the church. About 0.2% of the population are reformed but this figure is holding

up, in contrast to the decline experienced by the Lutheran Church, the Orthodox Church (both minorities) and the Roman Catholic Church which, at about 76% of the population of Lithuania, is in the distinct majority.

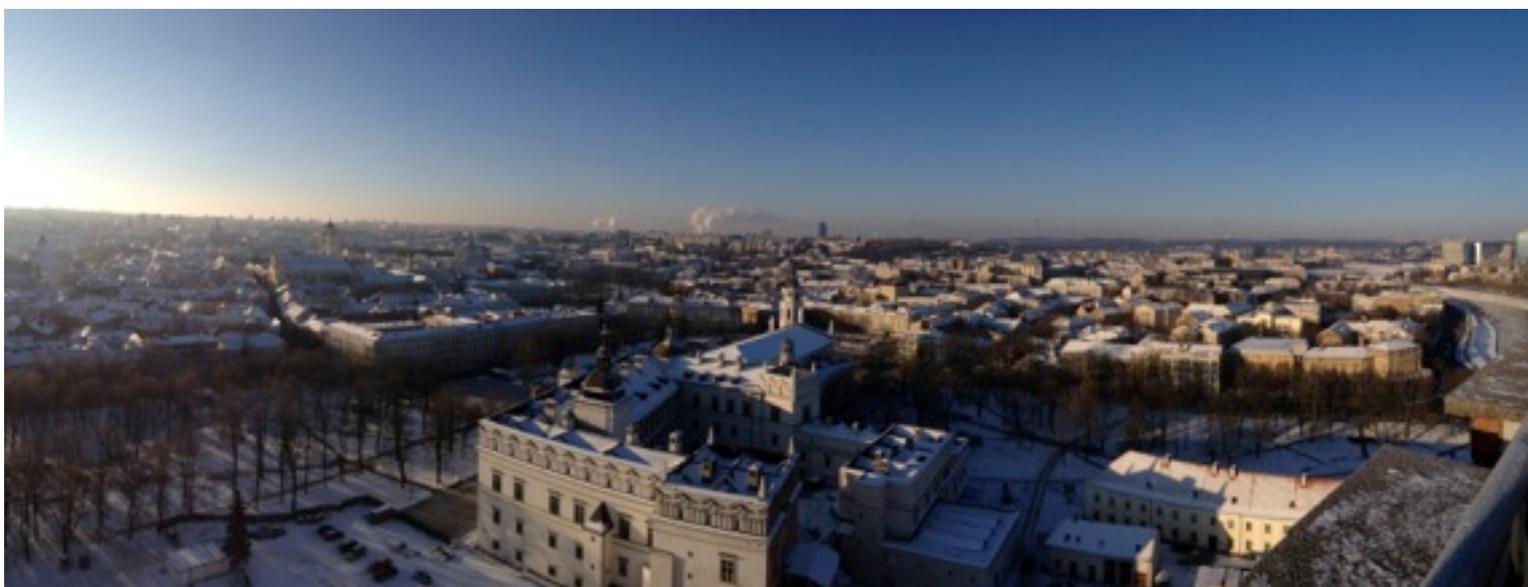
Rimantas described how there are now very significant populations of Lithuanians in, particularly, Dublin and London. Some 700,000 Lithuanians now live abroad, leaving about 2.5 million at home. Many small rural villages are now empty of young people and this is presenting serious problems for the church, and for the communities they have left. The pattern seems to be for permanent emigration, rather than going abroad for a few years to work and then return. There are concerns that Lithuanians living and even being born abroad should retain a connection with the church and with the country, and this is presenting challenges to the church which they are hoping to address.



The Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania is one of the nine officially recognised denominations/religions in Lithuania, and this confers some advantages and safeguards. It was owing to this status that the government listened and acted appropriately when WCRC, WCRC Europe and various member churches made representations on behalf of the Evangelical Reformed Church over the issue of certain church properties which had been seized illegally. This situation has now been happily resolved, and the ERCL is grateful for the support it received from fellow members of the reformed family.

The ERCL is a small church. It has fourteen parishes, of which eight can be said truly to be active, and only five ministers. There are concerns over

recruitment of ministers, over where they study (there being no reformed seminary in Lithuania)



and over the retention of young people.



On the Saturday morning, Rimas took the members of the Steering Committee on a tour of Vilnius, taking in the University and the Upper Castle, for a truly panoramic view of the old city and beyond. Members of the Steering Committee were undeterred by temperatures which certainly never rose about -10°C.



On the Saturday evening, those members of the Steering Committee who were still present were invited to dinner with the Consistory of the ERCL. The Consistory numbers eight people, four pastors and four lay, who bear executive

responsibility between annual meetings of the General Synod. WCRC Europe President, Jan-Gerd Heetderks, was able to bring greetings and explain some of the work of WCRC Europe. The Steering Committee is grateful for the hospitality of the ERCL and for the opportunity to renew and deepen relationships. We are assured that our presence was an encouragement to the ERCL.



The following morning, Jan-Gerd Heetderks, Balázs Ódor and Sandy Horsburgh joined the congregation of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Vilnius for morning worship. Having been well warned that the church was cold, we went prepared, the Secretary, for instance, resembling a somewhat tweedy Michelin man, sporting a total of seven layers. The warnings had not been exaggerated, the inside temperature being -2°C, but the welcome was certainly warm. The members of the Steering Committee were greeted by name in the service, during which Rimas preached. Afterwards, along with the congregation of about 50 people ranging in age from teenagers upwards, we repaired to the Parish

rooms for a buffet lunch, at which Jan-Gerd was able to bring greetings, explain what we had been doing in Vilnius and the broad purposes of WCRC Europe and express our thanks for their hospitality.

It may seem from this brief account that the Solidarity visit was mainly about eating but it should be remembered that hospitality is both a basic human impulse and a core calling of Christian people. The Steering Committee is certain that this was a meaningful encounter and that all such encounters work, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to build up Christ's body, the church.

