

# Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting 17th March 2018

## Introducing the Afternoon Session

*The Rev Eliza Zikmane,  
Pastor of the Latvian Congregation in London and A-LS Executive Committee Member*

This afternoon we shall concentrate on the refugee experience. Before Ruta Abakuks makes her presentation I will give you a broad brush introduction to Latvia, the Latvian Church and how the refugee is an integral part of our story. This is true of all three Baltic States because this year Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are celebrating their centenary. These countries emerged from the destruction created by the First World War.

As the Front Line had stayed in Latvia for years, about one-third of the population had fled the country and were scattered across the vast territories of Russia. Those refugees needed care, support and education. Therefore, they established committees and organisations to carry out these tasks. This work carried out among the refugees later translated itself into the creation of a new nation state.

Similar processes happened in the Church. The first Church Council uniting Latvian congregations and parishes of different regions was established in October 1917, not in the territory of Latvia but in Petrograd. Then the Council's Chairman, Pastor Kārlis Irbe, wrote, 'A great part of our nation has been driven out of our country and scattered across a foreign land. They are dying by roadsides. Where are the leaders of our churches? Have they gone with their flock and shared their fate as refugees? No! Therefore we need to establish a new Church organisation for all Latvian Lutherans.' After returning to Latvia he became the first Latvian Lutheran bishop and was consecrated by Nathan Söderblom.

Two decades later several hundred thousand people had fled the Baltic States to escape occupying armies during the Second World War. This time, most of them did not return home after the war but established communities in the Western World. The Latvian Lutheran Church here in London was established by refugees. They were part of a bigger picture. When the Lutheran World Federation was founded in 1947 it worked from the very start with refugees for, then, every sixth Lutheran in the world was a refugee. That's more than 10%.

The Baltic communities in exile kept alive their hopes of returning home. After the restoration of independence only a minority did return. However, they made a difference in their home countries. In the recent decades in each of the Baltic States a former exile has served as the President. In Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus, had fled his homeland as a teenager. The President of Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, had become a refugee as a young child. The President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, was born of Estonian refugee parents in Sweden. In this he has something in common with Rūta, our next presenter, who was born to people who fled Latvia to Great Britain and grew up here in the Latvian community, in the exiled community she will talk about. I have known her for many years and she has tirelessly served that community in different capacities, and has also been a faithful and active member of the Latvian Lutheran Church. And it's over to Rūta.

