

LIVING PARTNERSHIPS: CHURCH TO CHURCH

C H A P T E R 1 6

Bridge builders are partner makers. The backbone of our vision has always been to create, strengthen, and mobilize international partnerships. My original dream was to be used by God to build a thousand living bridges, each with its own distinctiveness, emphasis, and potential. Today our bridges connect schools, publishing houses, social ministries, and businesses, but church partnerships remain the nucleus of what we do. And through them, remarkable ministry takes place.



The Philharmonic Hall was filled to capacity for an unprecedented second time that hot July week in the 800-year-old city of Riga. Local musicians were stunned: even at the height of their concert season in this music-crazed city of Riga, the hall is seldom more than one-third full. But on the stage again before a sell-out crowd were musicians from the First Baptist Church of Richardson, Texas, accompanied by members of the Latvian orchestra *Crescendo*. The result of their combined efforts was a superb blend of skill and hearts, woven together by the international language of music.

The ninety-voice choir from the mega-church in Richardson, under the direction of Don Blackley, had prepared for months to present the story of Christ through “Savior,” a powerful new oratorio in its European premier tour. But the choir members had also been working hard all week on ministry projects with Vilandes Baptist, their sister church since 1997. Women who had been teaching lessons and playing games with

Vacation Bible School children just a few hours earlier now stood on the sweltering stage in their black dresses and red capes. Men who had been covered with sweat and sawdust from the construction project at their sister church were now pressed and polished in their tuxedo attire. The percussionist who had positioned a young boy's fingers on a baseball bat at sports camp that afternoon, now carefully laid out his mallets, brushes, and cymbals. Those who had taught English classes would soon be singing two songs in Latvian, much to the delight and surprise of their audience.

Other members of the choir had been singing all day at various locations around the city. Small ensembles had sung for hours at the train station, the Dome Cathedral Square, and outside McDonald's, handing out thousands of invitations for the evening concerts. Some in the audience had received a flyer while munching on a Latvian Big Mac, some had participated in seminars designed for women, deacons, music directors, and pastors, and still others had heard about the concert after attending one of the business forums held by business executives from the Richardson church. And now the hall was full of a clear cross-section of Riga society.

Those who had come were not disappointed. From the first note, the audience could tell that the musical quality was of the highest caliber. The program provided a powerful musical story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ followed by a clear presentation of the gospel by Dr. Brian Harbour, pastor of Richardson First Baptist Church. And conversations following the concert made it clear that audience members understood the connection between the story told on stage and the practical outreach that the choir had performed throughout the week.



The soloists from Richardson with their traditional Latvian bouquets: (from left to right) Greg Luttrell, James Westbrooks, Kelle Henson, Scott Cameron, Denise May, Brent Ballweg, and Gerald Ware.



At the end of the concert the Texans gave bandanas to members of the audience. Surprisingly, the Latvian man on the right was already wearing a cowboy hat and shirt when he greeted Bill and Dotty Morrison.



From early morning until late night Tommy managed every detail, adjusting the team's plan to meet countless unexpected needs and opportunities.

During that single hot week in July of 2000, a group of 139 Christians from the heart of Texas used their musical, ministry, manual, and professional skills to enthusiastically bring the message of Christ to the hearts of many in Latvia.

Coordinated by Tommy Weathersbee, a senior executive with Texas Utilities and one of the warmest, friendliest, and hardest-working people I know, Dallas-Riga 2000 was our most ambitious cross-cultural exchange to date. They say that everything that comes out of Texas has

to be big, and as this project began to emerge from the drawing boards down south, its scope and complexity had American and Latvian staff members alarmed. We worked with the Richardson group for more than a year to provide strategic consultation, cross-cultural training, and logistical support. When it came time to carry out the project, Tommy and his hard-working team worked hand-in-hand with our staff and managed it all with skillful assurance. It was a huge success, both for the folks from Dallas and for those they ministered to in Riga.

In the years that followed, this partnership has continued to grow. Large teams returned to Riga in 2002 and 2004 to offer programs for youth, a children's VBS, construction projects, English language instruction, and business development consulting. A construction team led by Dave Harless returned to build a playground for their sister church with materials donated from hardware stores in Dallas. These men were touched by how a simple playground was able to reach out to an entire neighborhood, and they decided to make this an annual event, moving out to other churches as ambassadors of their sister church to build playgrounds and revitalize neighborhoods, sending ripples of love from Dallas into Riga and beyond.

For BBI itself, the Richardson church has been much more than a



Little did Dave Harless realize when he built this playground that it would begin an ongoing playground construction program embraced by other American and Latvian churches.



Pastor Harbour's love for children was evident at the Bible School held at Barbins School.

Dalton, and Clark Red—fly to Oregon twice a year to serve on our board of directors. And they are spreading the news about Latvia and BBI to other churches and folks across the heart of Texas.

congregation with an effective Latvian partnership. Tommy and his friends have tirelessly and generously begun a partnership with our entire ministry. They have organized annual BBI banquets in Dallas, resulting in many members of their congregation who now support BBI on a regular basis. Three men from Dallas—Tommy, Roger