

# A Matter of Survival

*Liga Plaveniece, a Latvian journalism student attending Northwestern College in St. Paul, MN, USA, describes how a leading Christian newspaper in Latvia is facing the challenges of a post-Soviet changing world.*

This year, Latvia's Christian newspaper *Svetdienas Rits* (Sunday Morning) celebrated the 15th anniversary of its reestablishment. The eight-page weekly is the oldest Christian newspaper in the country, and the only one to survive the tremendous political and economic changes in Latvia over the last 15 years.

*Sunday Morning* published its very first issue in 1922. "Spiritual literature was very attractive to people after World War I, when *Sunday Morning* began," says Inga Recha, the current editor.

During the years of Soviet occupation, however, the government heavily censored literature. Christian writers and activists suffered long years of prohibition and oppression. When perestroika reached Latvia in 1989, *Sunday Morning* began again.

"Publishing a Christian newspaper was a big risk, and we had to find people willing to take that risk. Every issue and every copy was a matter of survival," recalls Aida Predele, *Sunday Morning's* editor at the time.

"Uncertainty hung over us like a black shadow," she recalls. "We had to work around the political system. Nobody knew what the next day would bring, what the

country's political situation would be, and whether Christian activists, like our staff, would be exiled to Siberia."

The first two years after breaking free from the Soviet Union, the newspaper staff experienced much difficulty, but perseverance paid off.

"After years of an atheistic regime, people suddenly had a chance to obtain propaganda-free Christian information," says Juris Rubenis, one of the *Sunday Morning* founders, an author of many books, and a nationally known pastor. The paper "sold like mad," he recalls. At one point, it had a circulation of 50,000, reaching a fifth of Latvia's population.

"One cannot overestimate the newspaper's significance in the early 90's." It educated society about Christianity and encouraged and taught congregational members and theology students.

With the changes that have taken place in Latvian society in the past 15 years, however, *Sunday Morning* is now at a crossroads. Rubenis says the biggest challenge for a Christian newspaper today is the quality. "People nowadays are more competent and demanding," he explains.

"A modern reader expects a thematically-interesting newspaper with high visual

quality," says Recha. "*Sunday Morning* is an official publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL), so we face a hard task—balancing Church information with material that attracts readers."

Together with other journalists and ELCL representatives, Recha has formed a committee to discuss the *Sunday Morning's* future. She wants to focus the paper on topics that are relevant to a larger audience, not only Christians.

Along with news from Lutheran leadership and congregations throughout Latvia, *Sunday Morning* features interviews, advice columns, a crossword puzzle, and a page for children. The newspaper has taken up such controversial topics as Harry Potter, *The Passion of Christ*, smoking, the HIV problem, reality shows, and, after 9/11, Islam.

Vineta Freimane, a *Sunday Morning* subscriber for 10 years, has noticed a shift to



**Aida Predele, left, holds a 1989 *Sunday Morning* edition; Inga Recha displays a current issue.**

spiritual issues within the last four years. "*Sunday Morning* used to focus more on politics. Now it covers more congregational news," she says. Freimane is convinced the newspaper fails to appeal to non-Christians. "They need a different approach," she says.

Rubenis agrees. He would like *Sunday Morning* to become a respected Christian newspaper in Latvian society. "It should cover a variety of topics and be ambitious, and relevant to readers," he says.

Circulation currently stands at 2,500. "Anyone can buy our newspaper in stands," says Recha, "and all copies are sold." Still, change is necessary. It is a matter of survival in a free market. ♦