

## Episode 8

### Into All the World

#### PRESIDENT DOUGLAS DANCE, BALTIC MISSION

NARRATOR: The Mormon Channel presents: “Into All the World”

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INTRODUCTION

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REID NEILSON: Hello. My name is Reid Nielson and I'm an assistant professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, where I teach on the global church. Today I'm interviewing President Douglas Dance of the Baltic Mission. President Dance, thank you for being with us.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

REID NEILSON: Now the Baltic Mission, for our listeners that might not be as familiar with it, what does that include? What countries is your mission over?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Well, the countries in our mission are: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In fact, the Baltic Mission is one of the few missions in the Church which is not include a country or a capital name in it; a city name in it.

REID NEILSON: And so these are on the Baltic Sea in Northern Europe. What are the surrounding countries? Sort of give our listeners a background of where this is geographically speaking.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Sure. On the, on the western shores of each of these countries it's the, it's the Baltic Sea. To the east for Estonia and Latvia is Russia. And to, and to the east of Lithuania, which is the southern country, is Belarus. And then to the south of Lithuania is Poland. And so they're part of the original Soviet Empire countries that all kind of just dissipated and collapsed in the, in 1991.

REID NEILSON: Now, you mention the fall of the wall and the collapse of communism in that part of the world. When was the Baltic Mission actually created?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Well, it has kind of a history to it.

REID NEILSON: Yeah, tell us about it.

DOUGLAS DANCE: It began out of the Helsinki East Mission in 1989. Elder Neuenschwander was involved in this process. He was currently serving in the Austria Vienna Mission and they opened up the Helsinki East Mission in 1989. And to preach the gospel outside of Finland they were focusing primarily on Estonia and St. Petersburg and the countries to the east. So in 1990, Estonia was dedicated by Elder Russell M. Nelson for the preaching of the gospel and the mission wasn't actually established as the Baltic Mission until 1993. So in between 1989 and 1993, the countries were serviced by the Helsinki East Mission or also by the Austrian Mission, and then it wasn't until they were able to consolidate the three countries together in 1993 under the, the Riga Latvia Mission, and that's when it became an independent mission.

REID NEILSON: And have the boundaries changed over time or has it stayed pretty much, the same?

DOUGLAS DANCE: It's changed slightly at one point in 1996, the headquarters of the mission moved to Vilnius, Lithuania and the mission included the three countries I mentioned; Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania but it also added Belarus and a little bit of Kaliningrad; which is a little outpost of Russia on the Baltic Sea, of actually a part of the country of Russia just a little, small little peninsula part of Russia. And so, it incorporated there and then in 2001 it was moved back to Riga, Latvia and it just incorporated the current countries that are in the mission today.

REID NEILSON: So the present day mission home is there in Latvia. Is that right?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Correct. It's in Riga, Latvia which is pretty much geographically in the center of the mission. It's approximately 4 hour/5 hour drive to the northern edge and a 5 hour drive to the southern edge of the mission, from Riga.

REID NEILSON: And it sounds like geographically speaking it's a fairly big mission, but with the variety of countries that you have there and I imagine the different nationalities and languages and cultures. How would you describe your mission to outsiders? This seems quite exciting.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Well, you know, it's a place still trying to, I think, to identify itself. In the history of these countries they never really had a shared identity. They had this kind of different growth in their countries. They spent in the 1800s, they were under the Czar rule. Each of the three countries had a period of independence in between World War I and World War II and then in World War II they were all kind of taken over by the Soviet Empire. And so they spent the next 45 years under the Soviet umbrella. And it wasn't until the late 80s as part of the breakup of the Soviet Union, these countries really came together in a shared identity. It was probably about the first time that they did that.

One of the more famous events in the history of these three countries occurred in 1989 when two million people in these countries linked hands from the southern edge of Lithuania, or near the southern edge, which is the city of Vilnius, all the way up through Latvia and up to the northern edge of Estonia which is the capital city of Tallinn. So along the roadway between these countries, two million people linked hands as a symbol of their desires to regain freedom for their countries from the Soviet Empire. It was an

incredibly moving event for the people here and it linked these countries together in a way that they had never been linked before. The Baltics is what they would call themselves at that point. And they were linked together by their desire for freedom and also by the process which they followed to receive that freedom. It was fairly non-violent, there were very few casualties in the process. This demonstration was a peaceful demonstration.

Songs played a big part of this. There's some very large national song festivals in each of the countries. Those became a forum for a desire for freedom. It's just an amazing history for these three countries in terms of how they obtained their freedom and it united them in a way that was unusual relative to their past. That occurred in the late 80s and early 90s and then with the, with the independence as each of the nations became independent they all started to kind of move back in their separate directions. So today in these countries each country has their own national language and their own national identity, their own economy, their own currency, they're all members of the European Union; all three countries are. They joined the European Union formally in 2004 and they also joined NATO formally in 2004 so they're linked with the European Union, they're still as part of the European Union, not adopting yet the Euro. So as you travel from country to country you have to have multiple currencies. Up until about a year ago you also had to have visas and pass through passport controls going through the borders of each country. Now they're part of the common European Union visa so we can travel freely between countries without getting visas; which is a wonderful blessing for missionary work as we travel between the countries and the missionaries move between the countries.

REID NEILSON: Right.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Each of the countries have their own language but the second overlaying language in each of these countries is Russian. Russian is spoken by 30% of the population, maybe a little bit higher in percentage in Latvia and about that same percentage in Lithuania. These are Russians who immigrated into the country during the period of time that they were under the Soviet rule and once the change occurred politically, they just, they chose to remain. They had economic roots here and family roots and so they chose to remain. And so they, ethnically they consider themselves Russian. Language wise they speak Russian. Some of them have citizenship in their local countries and some of them are, I guess what they call non-citizen residents is what they would call them.

REID NEILSON: I see. Well, listening to this overview of the history is fascinating to me. I remember in 1989-1990 was my senior year in high school here in California. And of course as young men and young women often do, you start thinking about missions and going on missions and this sense of is there a possibility of going to some of these former Soviet Republics was certainly in the air and I had a number of friends that were called. But as a child of the Cold War, I remember thinking how intense the animosity was between the United States and Russia and thinking would we ever do missionary work in these places that you are talking about right now. But now as I teach at BYU in the international church class, I share some of these feelings with my students and they sort of look at me with blank looks and go "what was the big deal, you know, we're friends with Russia."

DOUGLAS DANCE: [LAUGHING]

REID NEILSON: “We're friends with these countries.” And so the very fact that I'm talking to you as a mission president of the Baltics, truly is remarkable in our Church's history I think and something that the younger generation doesn't fully appreciate. Would you agree with that?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, we were asked by President Kimball to pray for the walls to come down in the countries of the world and there, from 1989 until 1993, there were just a number of miraculous events that occurred that helped begin the process of sharing the gospel. The first missionaries to enter into the Soviet Union came through Estonia. They came to Estonia, they landed there, they taught the gospel there and actually baptized some individuals there while it was still under Soviet Union control. So the gospel began in that process, in fact, Elder Nelson dedicated the country of Estonia for the preaching of the gospel in April 1990, before it became an independent nation and it began that process. The next day he went over to St. Petersburg and dedicated Russia for the sharing of the gospel. And so the process of unfolding the gospel to these nations is very new, it's in its infancy. And you kind of examine the process and the history, you can see the hand of the Lord as a person who was a Latvian of birth fled the country prior to the occupation by the Soviet Union, grew up in Germany, joined the Church, sealed in the temple, began a temple mission and then was later called to come back and serve in the Baltic Mission; the Riga Latvia Mission. And he was instrumental in helping to establish the Church and helping to teach missionaries Latvian. The early missionaries that came to this mission came really not speaking any language, Russian at best, and they had to learn the local languages here, so there were local language programs sponsored by the first mission president of the Baltic Mission who was President Blair; who happened to be a linguistics professor from BYU. Pretty qualified, had served a mission in Finland and spoke Russian and so he kind of shepherded the process of helping missionaries learn the languages, get the people to be taught in their local language and to share the gospel. But one of the first modern Latvian members of the Church, they joined, it was a couple that joined in Moscow while they were there as young students attending universities there. They graduated, moved back to Latvia in 1992. At the time the Church was not established. Missionaries told them that it may be 5 or 10 years before anyone can come and help establish the Church where they moved to. And within a few months the gospel was beginning to be preached, the mission was established a few months later, the Church was established; received recognition by the Latvian government. And that first member is an Area Authority Seventy

REID NEILSON: You're kidding.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Elder Senkans

REID NEILSON: Wow!

DOUGLAS DANCE: I don't know if he was the first, but he was one of the first Area Authority Seventies called from Eastern Europe.

REID NEILSON: And that was through that capacity?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Yeah, just an incredible man with a wonderful family and just a deeply spiritual man who has helped build the Church and continues to help now build the Church across a wider base.

REID NEILSON: As I look the history of the Church, particularly the international Church, I'm always surprised how quickly things can change when the Lord is ready and when the people are ready for His message. It seems like things don't work, don't work, don't work, and then overnight doors open and things just, just shift in dramatic ways. And it sounds like that happened there in your part of the world.

DOUGLAS DANCE: It did. It did. You know, there are pieces that are, you know, still coming together but part of the like, recognition of the Church by the local governments. You could see the hand of the Lord in the process of getting local recognition and being able to formally meet and being able to invite missionaries to serve. It's just between governments and economic issues and cultural issues, it's just wonderful to see how the doors were opened. You know, what we had prayed for years, happened.

REID NEILSON: Right. President, tell us what's going on today, what is the Church like? We've been talking about the history but in 2009,

DOUGLAS DANCE: Sure.

REID NEILSON: What types of wards and stakes, branches, districts, I'm not sure, I'm not sure what's there right now.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Sure. We have in this mission, each country is its own district.

REID NEILSON: Yes

DOUGLAS DANCE: So there are three districts in the mission; one in Estonia, one in Latvia, and one in Lithuania. In Estonia we have five branches. They have approximately, a little over 900 members. In each of the countries there are Russian speaking branches established, alongside of Estonian or Latvian or Lithuanian speaking branches. Most people over the age of 30 speak Russian, in all three of these countries. They grew up in a Soviet educational system and learned to speak Russian. As you got a little bit older they speak Russian a little bit better. But they speak Russian and so it's kind of a common language but it's not really spoken by the local citizens. In Estonia we have one Russian speaking branch and then we have a branch established in a town that is 95% Russian speaking town so it's not technically a Russian speaking branch but all of the members are Russian speaking, and so the services are held in Russian. And so two of the five are in that category. In Latvia, again we have a district, there are six branches. Two of the branches are Russian speaking branches. And then there is a third branch which is in a community that is predominantly Russian speaking but the services are primarily in Russian but there's also Latvian and Russian spoken in both of those. Then the membership in Latvia is approximately 840. In Lithuania there are five branches. Only one of the branches there is a Russian speaking branch. The other four are predominantly Lithuanian and the membership in Lithuania is about 760. So the total membership is approximately 2500, is the total membership in the mission, of members. They're all presided over by local members, with the exception of two branches. The district presidencies are local citizens

...serving. Two of the three district presidents are return missionaries. There has been a tradition in this mission early on of young people serving missions. They join the Church, they belong to the Church for, you know, a year, a little over a year or more, and then they go out and serve missions. And so they come back and they marry, and there is now in our mission, this process where we're starting to see young families baptizing their sons or daughters who were born in the covenant to parents who were sealed in the temple when they were originally married. And so we are starting to see this second generation of the Church just starting to grow. It's still young, it's I would say predominantly under eight. There are a few that are 14 to 18, but most of them are under 10 I would say. And so this second generation of members is just in its beginning stages and so most of the leadership are first generation, joined the Church when they were young or joined the Church, you know, at any point. We have one branch president who joined the Church five years ago. Within six months he was called to be the branch president of that branch...

REID NEILSON: Wow.

DOUGLAS DANCE: And is still serving as the branch president, four and a half years later, and doing a phenomenal, phenomenal job as a branch president. Just incredible. Sealed in the temple, and a temple worker, and just a wonderful, wonderful man.

REID NEILSON: What temple do the Saints go to there? Do they go up to the Helsinki or where do they go?

DOUGLAS DANCE: Two of the districts go to the Helsinki Temple. It's actually Lithuania and Estonia go to the Helsinki Temple. And Latvia goes to the Stockholm Temple and it's partly a phenomenon of very inexpensive airfares between Stockholm and Riga. So it's convenient, very convenient and less expensive for Latvian Saints to go to the Stockholm Temple than to go to the Helsinki, but the other two go to the Helsinki Temple, participate there. So it was a great blessing in this mission when the Helsinki Temple was open, it gave an opportunity for Saints to participate in the temple when some certainly couldn't have. It also gave the Church some visibility as the local Saints worked hard to coordinate with local political leaders and invite influential people to come and participate in the Helsinki Temple and it actually had some very good benefits, the temple opening there. It was a great experience for the Saints here and it's nice for them to feel, particularly the Estonian Saints, they get on a two hour ferry from Tallinn, it's a 15 or 20 minute drive off the ferry and they're at Helsinki Temple. So it's a wonderful blessing to be that close to the temple.

REID NEILSON: I was in Helsinki last summer at a conference and actually was able to go to the temple there and went to the little Church Distribution Center, right down the hill there, and I was just amazed by the different languages all the different materials were in; Russian and Swedish and the Baltic languages and I just thought, this is such a wonderful moment in our Church's history when we're able to gather Saints in places that traditionally did not have the blessings of the temple. Like in Finland, or now in the Baltics, and it sounds like the members, its resonated with them.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Yes it has and they're proud of their countries and they're wonderful citizens, and in fact they're some of the best citizens of their countries because they have a spirit of a desire to help and they learn volunteerism from the gospel and they, you know, learn how to participate and help things grow through serving in the gospel. So they're wonderful citizens of their countries, but they're participation in the kingdom of God helps them in a way, that there is really very little animosity and despite some of the difficult history that is shared between the Russian or the Soviet Empire and these countries. There is very little animosity as you come to the Church. In fact there is a great love that they share for the gospel and it spreads as a love towards one another as brothers and sisters. They truly believe that they're brothers and sisters of a loving Heavenly Father, and they act that way towards one another. It's difficult for the cultures at large in these three countries to accept that and understand that you can reach out to a culture, to an entity or a people that has oppressed you for so many years. But you can reach out in a blind way of love and just become fellow citizens in the household of God.

REID NEILSON: As I've talked to other mission presidents in parts of Latin America and other parts of the world, I've sensed the same phenomena that there's these traditional, nationalistic rivalries between different countries, but as Latter-day Saints come unto the gospel they have their highest loyalty to Jesus Christ and the kingdom, as you pointed out. And they're able to overcome and transcend some of these traditional and cultural barriers. And it's remarkable for me to hear these stories.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Well, and you, there are some people in these, in these countries whose parents in 1946 were taken in the middle of the night and transported to Siberia and some of whom they've never seen again. And so they have these reasons to have some animosity but it's just amazing to see the power of the gospel to overcome that, just, it's just incredible to watch that, to see them take on the attributes of Christ and reach out in love to one another.

REID NEILSON: It's wonderful to hear. Tell me about the missionaries in your part of the world, how many do you have? What's the split between men and women? Do you have any senior couples? And where do they go to the MTC and what languages do they learn?

DOUGLAS DANCE: [LAUGHING] Okay. We have about 100 missionaries in our mission now, 100 young missionaries. They are called to serve in the Baltic Mission and then they are called to learn one specific language in the MTC. So they learn one of four languages; Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, or Russian. So they come after having spent time in the Provo MTC learning that language. The Lithuanians and Latvians spend approximately two months in the MTC. The Russians and the Estonians, they spend three months learning their languages. Of the missionaries serving, about 25% are sisters and 75% are elders, so we have a fairly large number of sisters in our mission proportionately, relative to other missions. There are 10 senior missionaries serving in our mission at the moment. There are four couples and then two single sisters serving. The two single sisters and a couple serve in the office and live in Riga and attend and participate in the local branches and work with the local branches. We have two senior couples who are living out in branches, one in a distant branch in Latvia, and one in a branch up in Estonia. And then we have a CES couple serving. There's a great story about one of the couples serving in our mission, currently serving in Estonia. The sister is a native Estonian. She fled

Estonia when she was two with her family. They escaped and went to Stockholm and there they joined the Church and then she immigrated to the United States and met her husband. They married and they had, they've had some children and two of their sons actually served in our mission. And then when the second son was preparing to return home she convinced her husband to return and serve a mission. So two weeks after their youngest son returned home from his mission they arrived in the MTC to come and serve in the Baltic Mission.

REID NEILSON: Wow.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Began their service in the Baltic Mission, yeah, so she speaks Estonia, it was a little rusty for her but she's picked it up and, you know, she's just doing wonderfully, the husband is actually one of the missionaries serving as one of our branch presidents and he's learning Estonian and conducting Church meetings in Estonian. It's just an inspiring sight to see. They've done some wonderful, wonderful work with the Saints there, helped strengthen the Church wonderfully with their service, so, but the missionaries, typically the senior missionaries don't learn to speak the language, and they can get by on English pretty much everywhere in these countries. But the local missionaries, the young missionaries, they become very fluent in their local languages.

REID NEILSON: Well President Dance, I sure appreciate your time today, we're about done with this interview. This has been fascinating to hear what is going on in the Baltics, part of the world that many Church members have never been to and know probably very little about in terms of the Church history there as it's so new and the Church is so recent in that part of the world. I'd like to conclude our interview today by hearing your testimony and any other thoughts you had on doing missionary work in the Baltics.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Sure. I'm grateful for this opportunity to share my testimony. I, we join with the missionaries in each of the countries, we went this January, we went with the missionaries to the location where the apostles dedicated these countries for the sharing of the gospel. And we sit on those sites and we read prayers that these apostles gave as they unlocked the doors to these nations and opened the sharing of the gospel and felt the spirit that they, that was there. It's a, these are precious places, it's been a great blessing for me to learn how our Heavenly Father loves all of His children and that everyone will have the opportunity to hear the gospel in their native language and to have the chance to feel the power of the gospel in their lives. I have come to learn through my service that what King Benjamin taught is really true; that if we do all that we can, if we serve with all of our heart and we serve with all of our souls, that He'll immediately bless us and that He immediately pays me. And as I look at the scale on my life, the blessings are just so far outweigh the sacrifices, that it's just, it's been a great testimony builder for me to participate in this great experience of sharing the gospel. I have come to see the gospel in, as it really is lived in the day to day lives of people who struggle just to make ends meet, whose sacrifices are far greater than anything I could have imagined. I've come to feel and learn of the power of the atonement of Jesus Christ in a different way. I've felt the mercy and the enabling grace that comes from the atonement of Jesus Christ in a way that I have never felt. I'm serving a mission because a prophet of God called me and I'm serving because I love God and I'll do everything He asks me to do. I know that Christ restored this gospel through a prophet of God; through Joseph Smith. And the priesthood



power exists on the earth today. I'm, I know that we are led by a living prophet, that President Monson is a prophet of God and that when he speaks the Saints hear, hear a prophet of God speak and they can sense it. Investigators feel it, feel that great power as he shares his testimony and speaks to us. I believe that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, it's true and it contains a testimony of Christ unlike any other scripture. And I believe in God's promise with all my heart that if I'm faithful, if I keep my covenants, then I can live together forever with my family in the presence of God. It's a privilege and a blessing; in fact it's one of the greatest privileges of our lives to serve here and to work with these wonderful and noble Saints and to work with these incredible missionaries that have been so well prepared by parents and families. And I'm grateful for this opportunity and I bear this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

REID NEILSON: Thank you President Dance, not only for your testimony but your stories of faith and overview of the history of the Lord's work in the Baltics. This has been a wonderful interview and I hope that the Lord's choicest blessings will be upon you and your missionaries and the Saints in the various countries of your mission. So thank you.

DOUGLAS DANCE: Thank you.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: You have been listening to "Into All the World."

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