

A year in Estonia



Salvation Army lay missionary describes her year abroad.

By Shelby Hanauer

“Estonia—that’s in the Middle East, right?”

That’s how a friend responded when I told her where I was going with The Salvation Army lay missionary program.

Not long after I graduated from college in 2006, the Lord called me to serve overseas. I researched a few organizations online, but my interest didn’t go further than the webpage. Years later, at The Salvation Army Boot Camp, the call became stronger and clearer. Still, it took me a while to submit the initial application and even longer to send in all the necessary paperwork, but I was in Estonia by January 2012.

The truth is that I wasn’t thrilled about this calling from the Lord. I was scared. I didn’t know Estonian; I’ve lived in the same area all my life; I am quiet and introverted. Certainly God wasn’t calling me. But of course, I was the exact person God was calling and Estonia was the exact place for my ministry.

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Located across the water from Finland and bordering Russia, Estonia is one of Europe's smallest countries, in both size and population (1.3 million). It boasts one of Europe's oldest and most beautiful (in my opinion) cities, Tallinn, which dates back to the 1000s. Many nations have occupied Estonia during its history, notably the former Soviet Union.

I arrived on a snowy January evening to a culture and corps family that immediately welcomed and accepted me. I spent most of my time in the Regional Office of The Päästarmee (Salvation Army). This office of three, then under the leadership of Major Daniel Henderson, is the area command for the five corps and one rehabilitation center in Estonia. Knowing how the U.S. Salvation Army works, I was surprised to discover that this little office had just as many responsibilities and duties as a U.S. divisional headquarters, which employs many people. I was also surprised to learn that despite being in a fairly stable country, 80 percent of The Paastarmee's funding comes from grants. Although I couldn't do much about the scarce resources, I could help with some forgotten projects. The team worked well together and I made close friends. It was a perfect fit, all designed by God.



The Army in Estonia resembled my own corps in

Seattle, with some twists. Weekly programs included Sunday school, a senior group and a youth group. The brass band (with five members) faithfully played on Sunday mornings, and fellowship over a bowl of soup ended each Sunday service. Holidays were joyfully celebrated, including a couple of Easter sunrise services...in the snow. Soldiers and adherents were enrolled and decisions made to be lifelong followers of Christ.

Each of the five corps participates in an integrated mission that includes a weekly clothes and shoes distribution, along with feeding programs and partnerships with the local food banks to provide groceries to those in need from their corps buildings. The Lootusemaja (Hope House Center) offers a nine-month rehabilitation program for the country's growing number of addicts.

As I reflect on my time in Estonia, I realize I am a changed person. I am a bolder, more confident follower of Christ who recognizes the Lord's hand in every step of my life. I thank the friends and family I have in Estonia who made me one of their own, who accepted my faults and encouraged my offering. I am thankful to the Western Territory; without its support, this experience would never have been possible. And, I am so thankful to the number of people around the territory who flooded my mailbox with countless letters of hope, encouragement and prayer. Suur Aitäh!

Faithful is He who calls you and He also will bring it to pass (1 Thess. 5:24 NASB).