



HARKUJÄRVE PARISH, ESTONIA



Harkujärve is a small parish located just outside of Tallinn. While there are about 800 residents in Harkujärve, it forms a larger unity with 2 nearby parishes, Laabi and Tiskre. Together it is a combined society of 2000 people, and a rapidly growing area as many young families want to move to the countryside where they have more peace but can still be close enough to the city. It is a beautiful area with tall trees on the banks of the lake with plenty of wildlife.

Harkujärve Church was built by Aino Järvesoo and designed by Jaak Kuriks. Aino Järvesoo was an Estonian immigrant in the USA, who returned to her home country after Estonia's independence. She took determined action with the purpose of making children's life in Estonia safer, enabling them to get as good an education as possible and, through it, encouraging young families. She was actively involved in political lobbying, pushing for children's rights and helping out wherever she could. Aino worked with the residents of the Harkujärve area during the construction of the church, employing them and supporting the education of neighbourhood children. In the early 90's she contacted

«The very first tasks were to build connections to the neighbourhood and ask them about their wishes for the church»



Avo Üprus and expressed to him her hopes of establishing a church for young families and children, but at that time Avo was working at Bethel Church and his focus was on helping street children, drug addicts and ex-prisoners. Aino built the church at her own expense and spent around 16 million Estonian crowns on it, while hoping to give it to the Estonian Lutheran Church.

The church was used by the Episcopal Church and their ownership of the building lasted until 2011. The Episcopal Church organized Christian activities such as worship services and summer camps, but they did not co-operate with other actors in the region and did not carry out social work in the area, which meant that the church remained distant from the locals. When the number of the members did not grow and donations came to an end, they were not able to maintain the church anymore. The church remained empty until Avo came and decided that something needed to be done about it. He started started talking to friends and banks to get a loan to buy the church. Three families came together and bought the church to renovate it. The heating system was put in place and the vicarage was re-constructed to be a childcare centre. The very first tasks were to build connections to the neighbourhood and ask them about their wishes for the church. As the route they were going for, was a family and children's church there were a lot of guidelines to follow, based on the EU standards.

People have needs related to faith, communion, belonging and evolving but also to moral, intellectual and social activities. Answering these needs is important in both family life and in society because left unanswered they lead to protest, exclusion, rebellion. The question is just whether we can see the needs of the people and to answer to them in understandable contemporary language and form and to provide what they lack of most. The church must be with the people throughout their whole life.



COOPERATION INSTEAD OF COMPETITION

«People of faith want to make an effort to create safer, more friendly communities that serve the general interests and help increase the benefits. It is the duty of every citizen; it is our duty as Christians.»

The needs of local people in Harkujärve were found out by conversing with them and organizing local events. Parents of the students were asked through school. It turned out that there was a real need for places in childcare for kids up to three years old. There were kindergartens in the municipality but no service for children so young. Another need was to provide interesting activities for students after their school and before going home. Now they have a chance to dance, do handicraft, gymnastics and robotics. Also, there were middle-aged ladies that needed a place to get together and so they set up a dance group. Now there is a long list of ways to spend time: flamenco and gypsy dance, Shindo training, youth dance, different handicraft, language studies etc. The church has become a center of culture and community. Cultural work is led by Fea Üprus, Agnus Dei Üprus is responsible for general development and administrative tasks. It is important for the family that the activities are directed to all local people, no matter their confessional belonging. Services for children with severe and profound disabilities are managed by Keili and Remet Rander. Risto Abel and Hando Laanet take care

of the management of the NGO and congregation.

Still the question can arise as to why these activities should be done in the church. People of faith want to make an effort to create safer, more friendly communities that serve the general interests and help increase the benefits. It is the duty of every citizen; it is our duty as Christians. Talking about who is justified to do what is not a beneficial discussion. Instead of competition we prefer cooperation with other congregations, local municipalities and also, organizations and entrepreneurs of the third sector. Discussions help to find out who can provide what. Church should be both “flexible and mobile” to specialize in different services if needed. We don’t have to do what we like the most but what the people need the most.



CHURCH IS A NATURAL PART OF SOCIETY



Sometimes the church itself is unable to step away from the well worn path, on the other hand there are the stereotypes that stick to the church. We often hear that the church is old-fashioned and outdated, a brake on the society. Historically the church has been an activator for development and surely it can still be it today.

Even though we work on the social and educational function of the church, the spiritual function is still at the centre. A sermon every Sunday, baptisms, confirmations, funerals. The key agent is Jesus Christ who has invited people to work with him. Some just smirk, some go with it and find a new calling, new possibilities – the world expands immensely. The state can provide money, but it cannot take care of a person's soul – that this is the reason why the church is indispensable for society.

LEADERS' VOICE



I enjoy the simple things in our church. Our doors are open every working day. The day care centre is usually visited by forty students a day, who, after school hours, hurry to the church on their skateboards and rollerblades. In the afternoon, however, I see adults relaxing in dance and gymnastics groups in the same day care centre. Sometimes I play table tennis with some of them and have a conversation. Twice a year, my wife brings a new performance to the basement stage of the drama studio, once a quarter we have a poetry room. During the Christmas and Resurrection weeks, we have choirs performing both from home and away.

We have many friends. One of them is leading macaroon workshops (cooking biscuits), the other is conducting a weekly creative workshop. My eldest son organized an art exhibition in the church, the younger one coordinates the activities of the classes, takes care of the guests and prepares the church accommodation. When my daughter is in town, she teaches acrobatics to the villagers.

A philologist neighbour asked us why we don't have a library, so I said let's do it. Today, as a volunteer helper, she has already acquired nearly fifteen hundred books and systematised them. We will open a library with a cafe. We've done pop up cafes before, but we're striving to be more persistent. Each year, the ladies of the neighbourhood bring new plants to the green area of the church – from flowers to tomatoes. I affectionately call them the green fingers. An older gentleman who, while homeless, lived mainly on the street but moved to a room in our church five years ago and is grateful for this opportunity, is taking care of the daily challenges in the entire church. Other homeless people and people who have been released from prison have lived in the church: the spacious pastorate, which the teacher's family has no need for, makes it all possible.

When there were no places for new-born children in the village, we kept a day care running for five years. When the municipality built a new kindergarten, we profiled our care to

be for children with severe disabilities. This gives mothers and fathers the opportunity to rest and work. We educate ourselves as caretakers, supporters and volunteers. We often organize training and seminars and offer the same opportunity to our partners. Occasionally, families also celebrate anniversaries in the community church: birthdays, anniversaries, and more. Of course, we also sometimes have weddings, baptisms and funerals and weekly worship services. Our motto is that church belongs in the middle of the village.

We must be available for anyone in need, at all times. The stories of an open church, which is available on weekdays and, if possible, for those outside the community, is spreading rapidly. We do not force them to join the church, they know when and where they want to do it. We have accepted the trend that some people want to be involved but not officially belong, to give their energy when their own energy levels are overflowing but not having to be there when they're all out of energy.

But we cannot accept another trend in Europe, that sanctuaries are being closed or sold to be apartment buildings and restaurants. This church, too, remained empty and was put up for sale by its former owners. The three families decided to take the risk and buy the church so that there would remain a sanctuary that would meet the needs of the people and testify, through word and deed, to the great joy and opportunity we have been gifted.

We are a church that is serving, a diaconical community, a cross-functional service center, and an open space for all people of good will. The keyword «Convivencia» which runs throughout the process of the renewal of diaconia includes solidarity, the rational use and sharing of resources, and the cultivation of a sustainable community. It is a process of growing, giving and receiving together, learning and developing a shared life that benefits all participants.

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VOICE OF PEOPLE/SERVICE USERS

I arrived to Harkujärve church after being on the streets for three years. I lived in a small friendship circle with two other people. It was a constant cycle of getting by and not much changed during that time. Until one of us drank himself to death. It was a moment of clarity and obvious need for a change. I met Avo Üprus and he offered me a room in the church. As I didn't have any money we made an agreement that I would help with everyday chores in the church for a place to live. I got my first job at a bottle recycling station, then got a training at a security company and now I am working in a large school as a security guy and pay the rent, but I am still involved with tasks here and there and the reason is strongly



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This paved the way for a stronger community that wanted to develop. Our teamwork with the church has been fruitful and I hope to see it continue in the same fashion.

because of Aino Järvesoo. I was so moved by her story and ambition that I felt I have to be here and do more with my time. This is my 5th year in Harkujärve church and I am very thankful for this opportunity.

The community church has been active in the neighbourhood in more ways than just offering activities. When a worried neighbour contacted us about a planned cutting of the forest, workers of the community centre also took the matter seriously and started to join in the struggle with the neighbourhood to preserve the forest. Some politicians and other well-known people were involved, and the forest was saved. But more importantly the church acted as a place where both sides came together to enter the conversation.

The mentorship of released prisoners has also been built around the community centre. They organise training, mentoring and other joint activities to mentors in the community church. Training is provided for beginners and those who already work as support persons. The office of criminal work is right here in the church and the operation is funded by the EU and Estonian ministry of Justice. The mentors receive a salary for their work paid by the ministry. In addition, it is possible to accommodate 1-2 released prisoners in the church when they have nowhere else to go. Prisoners who have stayed at the church help around with works and communicate with locals. This helps the rehabilitation and takes away unnecessary fear.

Toomas Andres



In 2013 the situation was clear – there was more than 2000 people living in our parish but they did not have a place to come together. Sometimes we could rent rooms in local kindergarden, but this was not a solution. Then we got in contact with our good friend Avo Üprus and he told us about his plan to renovate the Harkujärve Church into a church and community centre with rooms for local services. The plans sounded good but were quite large-scale so we were cautious at first if he can deliver, but we decided to support his work with funds from the local municipality. Luckily Avo showed that he is a go-getter having written projects and also by securing funding from the EU and delivering on his promises. The first thing was starting a day centre for local youth so they could come together in a warm and welcoming place with fun activities after school. As the school was overcrowded and lacking space, the local municipality and church worked together to provide a solution. The church offered a room on the church balcony and the municipality aided financially to renovate it into a classroom for the first grade students. At first we were afraid of what the parents would think when their children had classes in a church building but people were nice and when they came to pick up their kids some of them had their first experience with Harkujärve Church and they were interested in the plans and let us know what they would like to see here – such as pilates classes or language studies for parents. This paved the way for a stronger community that wanted to develop. Our teamwork with the church has been fruitful and I hope to see it continue in the same fashion.

Erik Sandla, governor of Harku municipality

VOICE OF A VISITOR TO THE CHURCH

The year at Harkujärve has provided a unique opportunity to observe and participate personally with the growth of the emerging church. It is certainly not limited to my experience only with specific events that fit into to the long list of activities. There are many moments that I consider important to my growing up, there are personal contacts or conversations with local people, church members and visitors.

Community life is undoubtedly an essential part of the Harkujärve congregation development. This undoubtedly is the centre of church activity and also the children can spend time in the basement of the church after school hours but also join a circle. And there are also a few ventures from the latter. The year 2000 describes an attempt to unite this village: for example, the church arranging the Midsummer fire, taking care of the



Undoubtedly, the big challenge is to keep the threshold of the church door low (without losing your identity.) However, it is essential in order to reach people.



church's green space and the local gardeners «Greenfinger Group», organizing events like “beauty day”, poetry evenings, countless beautiful concerts etc.

I must admit that this way of building a church is new to my experience. My previous understanding of the work of the church is much more that it is focused on on the church's direct spiritual endeavours (e.g.worship, bible / prayer circles, spiritual choir, devotional conversation, etc.) Similar community-centred thinking (especially just the growth of the church or its justifying function in society) is quite remarkable. I'm feeling very inspired being in the middle of this kind of process.

It has been an exciting experience for me to see up close the social aspect of the church. The conversation with the ex-prisoners has been encouraging for me, but also with people with addiction problems: to see their longing and desire to heal, but also to be with them in the moments, when they experience setbacks. But especially encouraging have been moments which had become just like those so-called life gears between people who want to do something at the church together (church repairs in particular).Undoubtedly, the big challenge is to keep the threshold of the church door low (without losing your identity.) However, it is essential in order to reach people.

Ariel Sūvari, intern priest

VOICE OF MEMBERS

Often the church offers a response only to the people's spiritual life but the community church has opened outward and asks people what their needs are without leaving the Christian message.

The community church is a meeting point of different actors, like municipality officers, associations and other actors. They can have their own meetings at the church but also meet over the official fences. The church is seen as part of society. However, many in Estonia are still afraid of the church and they do not have enough knowledge of its activities. Often the church offers a response only to the people's spiritual life but the community church has opened outward and asks people what their needs are without leaving the Christian message. The community church has taken over many of the responsibilities that, in other parts of Estonia, have been taken over by the municipality – such as day care and disability services. On the other hand, the municipality has started taking more responsibility for children with disabilities. This has also helped finance some of the community church work.



A 24-hours open centre for disabled and autistic children was established after the need was brought up by parents. Currently it is possible to have 8 children at a time. Around this care centre we have established a network of support persons for about 400 disabled and autistic children and teenagers in the Harjumaa county. Support persons receive training and supervising from the centre. Support persons take the children to school, to their hobby training or provide overnight care. They are also helping and organizing holiday camps. Activities are financed by the European Social Fund and also by our local Harku Municipality. The current budget is about 1 million euros per year. Negotiations are conducted locally with various partners, such as child custody, if needed.

Depending on the age, depending on the disability, it is very important to understand the needs of the child. He might be 15 years old and not speaking at all. He might be creative but he can't hold a pencil. Everything around them might seem a noise that doesn't allow them to focus. Getting to know each child takes time and attention.

The parents come to pick up their children and are thankful because for the first time they have some worry-free time to themselves. They come and get in touch with the community church, some parents have already started various groups such as a German study group and shindo. And mostly people are very surprised by the wide range of activities offered in the church.

A church belongs in the middle of the village. But It can't just stand there alone. It becomes integrated by involvement and participation. By sharing – to share the lives, dreams, bread and wine.

In many places around Europe church buildings are being sold and by doing so, they are giving away their presence in the minds of hundreds of thousands of people. We must resist. It is possible by catering to their real needs. By asking „what would you want me to do?“, by doing market research when needed. It is possible by providing solutions and delivering on them or even by leading the process. By giving churches and pastorates a new life and turning them into nonstandard workshops of our religion and calling into being laboratories (like the medieval churches were) and by providing new worth.

The church has to define and reassess itself once more and so does diakonia. Diakonia today has to work towards society. We are there for the people. If we don't match their needs, they do not need us. We must be bearers of hope and encouragement, we must show that a change for the better is possible. In Estonia we have done it, in some churches we have established care-centres for elderly, shelters for ex-prisoners. In my church we have a nursery home and a care-centre for children with intellectual disabilities. This is right, just and good.

The people around us deserve it. Even those who have been repelled – prisoners, refugees, elderly and sick. The consumerism and market economy is destroying people's spirit. We must collaborate with the people and organizations of good will, in order to provide solutions. The most important solution is a collaborative society instead of a competitive society. Let`s work for this!

ABOUT THE DRAMA STUDIO

Advertising, as informative and eye-catching as it may be, sometimes just does not work, this became clear while building the studio.

But everything changed when I started to invite the children personally, plus the collaboration with the school and the parents. Make it interesting in the light of child-specific activities. The first class was still in kindergarten. Most of them cannot read yet, let alone be fluent in text comprehension. Theatre making is for the most part fun for a kid, because who wouldn't like to run around in a princess dress or become completely different with a wig and makeup. Most children have a stage fright problem and it is difficult to respond at school unless they are used to performing in front of a large number of children. From a very young age, one can notice



who dares to communicate freely, who rather moves away.

Harkujärve Community Center is located in the immediate vicinity of Harkujärve School and Kindergarten. I started to visit the older kindergarten groups, got to know the kids, sometimes went to play with them. I met the mothers and introduced them to the drama studio, our studio then went to perform at school and kindergarten, and we invited them to church.

Theatre production gives the courage to perform, enhances creativity and improves diction. Stage movement improves posture. But the studio also teaches how to remember words and work with one another. You may skip a choir practice once, but being present at a play rehearsal is crucial because if you don't have your partner, you can't hold a dialogue. It was also important to explain to parents that once a hobby group has been selected, it will not be changed again in the middle of the year. Nowadays, parents are worried when their children do not have something to do every single day, but this is also very tiring and does not allow them to fully engage in their favourite activities.

In the beginning, the parents of the studio participants were unfamiliar with the location of the studio, they had not attended church, and obviously



had doubts about what we were doing. So they asked if we would start promoting the Bible to children. When I said we're learning Pippi, whose mother is an angel in heaven, is this okay? It was.

Children spend hours at the church day centre, attend classes and training here, sit in the library on the balcony and are generally very happy kids. And parents can be calm as the children are kept safe in a positive learning environment.

To come to the church building, meet your friends, walk past the beautiful altar, and know that you can talk about your worries here, that there is always someone to listen and guide – it really is a wonderful opportunity.

Fea Üprus, cultural manager

VOICES OF A VISITOR TO THE CHURCH

There was a genuine feel to this place that made you feel comfortable, relaxed, reassured



A night in the church – during summertime, our church was visited by foreign students of the Estonian Arts Academy:

My experience at Harku Community Church was an unexpected one. When we first arrived, the front doors were left open for us after dark, we had been given a place to sleep by a stranger. I felt from the beginning that there was trust in the community with this action alone.

There was a warm, welcoming and cosy atmosphere downstairs, with the rose-tinted lights glowing down from the ceiling, a large boom box in the corner and what seemed like a kind of dance floor in the community space. With the morning light I walked upstairs to see these beautifully striking shadows silhouetting down towards the altar. Warm, inviting bench seats and white walls facing forwards to the altar and cross. Usually a sight of awe and intricately detailed ornate architecture, here it felt genuine. This warm, inviting altar carved from a solid piece of wood.

The cross, usually geometric, rigid, angular in form and nature but here were these quirky natural pieces of timber hatched together. There was a genuine feel to this place that made you feel comfortable, relaxed, reassured. My previous naive and pessimistic experiences and preconceived ideas of the church and the way it is run were turned on their head from my time here at Harku Kogukonnakirik and meeting Avo.

It feels as if he treats the church as a tool to serve the community first and foremost. This was an enlightening realization. His passion and selfless way in which he describes his role in life was not one that I previously connected to that of a Pastor. From this experience I will be sure to hold off on judgements.

Exposing the frailty of the state's support for the disabled community has reinforced my own perception on the lack of access and infrastructure that is in place here in



This church changed my mind and if people are aware that churches are places to pray but also, they can be more functional and abandoned churches could function as a community churches in the future.

Estonia for them. I would like to dig deeper into this issue, things as simple as ramps for access to footpaths, lifts etc. seem to be completely ignored. Perhaps an analysis of an area with some simple fixes to expose these problems could be done and sent to the municipality.

If I was to try and put a job title to Avo Üprus based on his actions alone, I would describe him as a social worker, councillor and activist. I find this fascinating as these are qualities that I never thought to associate with the head of a church.

One can only hope that his story is told, and his infectious devotion can emanate through not only the religious faculties of the country but anyone else that feels inclined to influence society in a positive way.

Sean Thomas Tyler, visitor from USA





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I've visited some churches in Italy and Germany and some other countries, however they were different from the church where we stayed. At first, when we entered the church the atmosphere of the church, the wooden cross on the wall in front of the chairs and the decoration inside the church, painting on the walls, made me feel the place is different from other churches that I visited in the past and it is a more friendly and comfortable feeling in a sacred place. When we went downstairs, I got surprised by the place which was like a mixture of home and gym that had a salon for a workout and ping pong table and kitchen. Thus, I thought about it, that it is a suitable place for travellers who want to stay nights.

After spending night there, in the morning, when we met a pastor who gave us a lecture about community church, he mentioned some aspects of this church as a community church which are about how the church is related to people and neighbours. For example, conviviality in some aspects that are mentioned in the following sentences:

- Conviviality as the art and practice of living together;
- Diaconal vocation as call by God through the other;
- Human dignity as challenged by consumer society and its excluding dynamics;
- And sustaining justice, as individuals and churches.

Moreover, he mentioned activities of people in the church about kids with disability that make handcraft and people who planted an apple-tree for the reformation anniversary, and he showed us pictures which showed that they seemed very happy together.

To put it briefly, before visiting this church I thought that churches are places people go every Sunday for praying. However, this church changed my mind and if people are aware that churches are places to pray but also, they can be more functional and abandoned churches could function as a community churches in the future.

Amene Saleme, visitor from India