

## ***Russian Correspondent*** **Advent/Christmas 2009**

Last week, I almost caused an accident on the suspension bridge not far from our ministry site – the Novosaratovka Theological Seminary outside of St. Petersburg. I so much wanted to stop the car, but eventually I had to give in – my slow speed was doing little to win me friends among other drivers. The bridge gives a nice view of our part of the city and the Neva river as it flows toward the Gulf of Finland, but that's not the reason why I wanted to stop. That day, I hoped to stay up high above the ground for just a few seconds longer. You see, from the apex of the bridge you could see what was not visible from ground level - a thin line of rose-colored sky along the southern horizon. It was the first time I had seen anything other than gray above my head for what seemed like forever. I checked St. Petersburg's weather history when I got home, and my suspicions were confirmed. October, November and December to that point combined had 4 days of “partly cloudy” (as opposed to just “cloudy”) weather. That's hard to deal with when the sun rises almost at 10 and sets before 4. And yet, that's the situation we who live in these northern climes deal with every year.



And that's why it is easy to “get” Advent here. In these winter days the reality and relative quite of the dark and longing for the light reinforce the themes the Church proclaims this season - Wait. Watch. Hope.

It could be that you, too (no matter what your local climate) are experience more clouds these days than sun. While it would be irresponsible of me to encourage you to stop your car on an elevated bridge, I do hope that you can note even that thin sliver of sun on the horizon of your lives. I know that by your support of Christians in this part of the world, you are helping to provide for them a ray of much needed light. They are struggling to be faithful and to preach the Gospel. Theological Education is essential for them to live out the lives of discipleship that they so seriously want to incarnate. On their and my behalf - thank you.

Your brother in Christ, Bradn.

PS Today we saw the sun again. It was -15 C this morning, but sunny nonetheless. I'll take it.

### **2009 – The Year in Review**

2009 has been full of movement in the life of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. At the beginning of 2009, the seminary's largest ever internship group finished their year of service and came back to the seminary for their final colloquium and graduation. At the end of the last academic year, we as a faculty not only continued our regular work of teaching, studying and support, but also began to think creatively about the ways we might adapt to the changing needs for educational ministries in the church in the context of



ever-more-limited resources; this process continues to this day. Summer brought an extension program which again had the seminary “packed to the gills,” (see picture, left) and Fall (to everyone's surprise) – 5 new students for the full-time program. The General Synod of ELCROS (held in St. Petersburg) gave students the possibility to serve and become acquainted with many throughout this (geograph-ically) enormous church, and the workings of the Synod brought both new worries and new possibilities

for both those who serve in the church and its partners. As the new semester began, my colleague at the seminary from the Presbyterian Church (USA), Joseph Kang, was still fulfilling service obligations in the U.S., while both I and Seminary President Anton Tikhomirov were called away from time to time to meetings and seminars in other places. Students also were “out and about,” visiting their “brothers in theological scholarship” at the Lutheran Church in Ingria's Theological Institute in Koltushi (another St. Petersburg suburb, picture left) and the



Spiritual Academy of the Russian Orthodox Church. High-quality guest teachers from America, Germany and Russia, for their part, made their way to us. Now, as another semester ends, two full-time and two part-time students have activated all their academic resources in order to get them through the difficult period of final, comprehensive exams, while the rest of the students deal with the regular challenges that the end of the semester brings.

In all this human movement, as we strive to serve (sometimes with joy, sometimes with an aching for that joy), we know that all that we do pales in comparison for what God has in store for us. The Spirit is calling us, this church, this seminary, forward into the future that is under His control. There is no better reminder of God's Providence at work in the world than Christmas, the time when we see that our Lord will not leave the world to its own devices, but will (and does!) intervene dramatically for the sake of those who He loves. The season helps us, then, move forward, in thankfulness and trust of the One who took on flesh for us, Jesus Christ.

### 2009 – The Year in Review (part 2)

The year has also been one of constant movement for our family. 2009 was our year for “home assignment” and we spent approximately 10 weeks traveling through seven states, visiting sponsoring congregations, meeting with ELCA Global mission personnel, spending some time with my family (presiding at my brother Britt's wedding was certainly a highlight) and taking time for our first real vacation in 5 years. Since returning to Russia, it still feels like we've not had the opportunity to “settle down;” in September the ELCROS General Synod, a trip to Rostov for a new visa, and the beginning of new school year kept me quite busy, while October had me traveling to Omsk (Siberia) to lead a seminar there (photo from inside the Lutheran Church in Omsk - right). In November I finally made it to Helsinki to give a short paper for other doctoral students at the University there and to meet my dissertation adviser in person.... It seems that December has just begun, but here we are – a week from Christmas.



It is my prayer for you that these days find you and your families strong, healthy, and firm in the faith. Let us continue to keep one another in prayer!

### General Synod of ELCROS

The most anticipated event of the Fall both for me and for many others in the Russian Lutheran Church was the quadrennial meeting of Lutherans from the much of the former Soviet Union, the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Other States.

The theme of the synod was “Fellowship Over Borders,” and I attended the sessions as a translator for my boss, ELCA Regional Representative for Europe, Rev. Arden Haug, who was one of a number of guests at the synod.

The contents of the discussions gave everyone in the church much to think about. As I write this in December, the September synod seems so long ago; on the other hand, just now are we getting a clear picture of what the decisions of the synod might mean. The two most significant outcomes of the synod were a change in the structure of the church and the election of a new leader. Legal difficulties tied with regulations for religious groups both in Russia and in other countries with ELCROS congregations led to a significant change in the way the church is organized. While in the past the head of the entire church was the Archbishop in St.

Petersburg, now the Archbishop will be formal head only of the two Russian synods (European Russia and Siberia/Far East), while representatives of Russia and all the other member countries (Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics) will meet as a committee for such common tasks as representation (e.g., it is assumed, LWF representation) and education (which should still be centered at our seminary in Novosaratovka). While this change was expected, it seems that many were surprised by the choice of August Kruze (Bishop of Siberia/Far East, and the first Russian citizen to be elected as head of the church - pictured right) as the new ELCROS Archbishop. For this year former Archbishop Ratz will continue functioning in this capacity (now officially as Vice-Archbishop) while Bishop Kruze brings to a completion his work in Siberia. The process has now slowly begun of his taking over various functions, and the seminary looks forward to working with him (as head of the seminary board) in the future.



### **Death of former ELCROS Archbishop Georg Kretschmar**

In November of this year the former ELCROS Archbishop Georg Kretschmar passed away. With his death, the seminary lost one of the people who had been most important in its history, a constant supporter and friend of theological education for Lutherans in the former Soviet Union. Yet, with Dr. Kretschmar's passing after a period of extended illness, we were again given reason to think with thankfulness on what he did for us (supporting the seminary spiritually for most of a decade, donating his enormous library to the seminary's collections). Dr. Kretschmar will live long in the memories of those who had the pleasure of knowing him and working with him. Natasha and I had the honor of having Dr. Kretschmar preside at our wedding (picture) and he was a big support to me as a still-too-young-to-be-a-seminary-prof. Teaching at the ELCROS Seminary.

### **New Students**

The seminary's five new students come from and wide (Moldova, Siberia) and from relatively nearby (European Russia - St. Petersburg, Kazan and Volgograd); as usual, they also come with a wide variety of life experience, educational backgrounds, and pieties. This semester with me they had two classes that were far from easy – the History of the Eastern (Byzantine /Russian) Church and History of Dogma I. They are already making significant contributions to the seminary community, and we are blessed to have them!

**As I finish up this newsletter** I realize just how much amiss I would be not to mention the recent tragic events that have rocked the country in which I serve. In the past month to events have led to significant loss of life and have contributed to the constant feeling of uncertainty in the country – the “Nevsky Express” train derailment as the likely result of a terrorist attack (of unknown origin and with unknown purpose) and the night club fire in Perm, from which more than 130 people have died with dozens more still in the hospital. Both events cause citizens of this country to think once more about the unsettled nature of life even for those whose economic situation is stable (since both a nightclub visit and a ride on a high-speed train are aspects of life unknown to the poorer portions of the population). Corruption and negligence (the two causes of the Perm tragedy) and the threat of terrorism haunt this land and do much to stunt its development. I'd ask you to keep Russia in your prayers, that the country might undergo reforms for the good of all.

## **Wishing you all a joyous Christmas and Happy 2010!**

**The Buerkles – Bradn, Natasha, Matvey and Martin**

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You can find more stories related to our mission work on my blog: [russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com](http://russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com)

Seminary news and pictures are updated occasionally at: [en.novosaratovka.org](http://en.novosaratovka.org)

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