

Russian Correspondent Summer 2009

Jesus said “whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6.35)

The people of the land where I work – they know what it is to thirst. And not because of short supplies of fresh water. No, this thirst is different. It's a spiritual thirst. For 70 years they were forbidden from taking a drink, they were offered nothing but a false ideology – one that claimed to be about the building of a new and just society, one which would be a secular version of the Kingdom of God – full of peace and harmony, where everyone's needs would be met. And yet, without access to the Gospel, with every sip of the salt-water of false ideology that they drank, the people got thirstier. And thirstier.

It is God's good grace that has allowed them to drink fully once again, to see Christ moving in their lives, to know that He had *never* abandoned them.

As we've attended worship at Lutheran congregations in the United States this summer, we've been following the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. There Jesus reminds us that it is through *Him* that we are satisfied, that *He is* our nourishment, our refreshment; upon *Him* we depend for our very being. And it is here that we can be encouraged by the stories of our brothers and sisters in Christ half a world away. The only certainty they knew, for decades and decades, was that to be a believer was to take on great risk; in the decades that followed, the greater degree of personal freedom they've experienced has been coupled with enormous uncertainty about their well-being, their health, their economy and their society. And yet, all the same, they gather together as church, they are striving to move forward in faith.

I know that for many of you, this is a time of uncertainty. You might be tempted to withdraw, to “hunker down,” to retreat from faith and from the community of believers, as they both presume a degree of vulnerability that comes through openness. And yet, I'd like to encourage you to continue to receive the water that truly satisfies, Christ, the bread from heaven. In the former Soviet Union, they know what it is like to suffer from “spiritual malnutrition,” and their experience says to all of us: “come drink of the Inexhaustible Cup that is the grace of our Lord.” It is Christ Himself who is offered to us. Trusting in Him, you will never be thirsty.

In Him, your brother,

Bradn



*Icon from the Russian Orthodox Tradition:
“Inexhaustible Cup”*

Ordination of First Seminary Student from Belarus

I have yet to have had the opportunity to share with you some of the most encouraging news to come out of the Seminary where I am working, Novosaratovka, in the last year. One of our most enthusiastic and committed students, Vladimir Tatarnikov, was ordained on Easter Day in Moscow. He will be serving two congregations on opposite sides of his native Belarus (in addition to working on



bridge-building in the Church in his region), but it was his internship congregation that had the honor of hosting his ordination. As you may recall, Vladimir served in a very unique setting – the English-speaking Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, which just last year officially joined the Lutheran Church. There, under the excellent supervision of Pastor Bob Bronkerma of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and together with an active laity, Vladimir was able to gain great resources and make important connections for his future ministry. I had the privilege of representing the Novosaratovka Seminary and joined fellow ELCA pastor, Arden Haug (regional representative for the ELCA's engagement with churches throughout Europe), as well as pastors from Great Britain and Germany in the ordination.

The World Economic Crisis: how it is affecting the former Soviet Union

“Nobody wants an uncontrollable mass out on the streets.” These words from one local official in Ukraine point to the degree to which economic depression coupled with social instability is worrying political leaders in many nations of the former Soviet Union.

Those countries that have felt the most change because of the crisis are those that were making the most progress before it, in particular, Russia and Ukraine. These two countries' economies are primarily based in their mineral wealth (mainly for steel production in the latter case; oil, natural gas and metals in the former); therefore, falling demand and subsequent price drops on the world market have led to massive job losses in the production and manufacturing sectors. And while Russia has the reserves that allow it to bring into effect an \$85 billion anticrisis program, it still has to deal with growing a serious contraction in the economy (estimated at 6.5% this year, compared to 8% growth last year), unemployment (already up 4% points at more than 10%) and an increase in the poverty rate (which the World Bank predicts will rise from 10% to over 15% this year, erasing over half the county's gains in the last decade.)

All of Russia's neighbors, even those less directly related to the crisis because of less integration in the global economy, also have been feeling the side effects. In Central Asia, the economies of such nations as Tajikistan are largely reliant on money sent home by workers (primarily in construction and

transportation) in Russia; for that reason, the freezing of building projects throughout Russia has serious ripple effects on the region. In addition, some experts anticipate that Russia's political influence will grow as neighbors make adjustments to gain (economic) favor from Moscow. On a more positive note some political scientists see that the current Russian leadership might move in a different direction – that of systematic reform of the now-quite-corrupt courts and bureaucracy as a means by which economic diversification might take place, avoiding such radical swings in the country's fortunes in the future.

Such political and economic analysis, however, says little about how “everyday” people are effected by the economy. At least as important for my ministry is the anecdotal evidence of the crisis' effects – a student's mother who was afraid to take her vacation time for fear of her job disappearing in her absence; a growth in fear among the seminary's neighbors, migrant workers from Central Asia, that their pay will be held back or that they will be taken advantage of; seminary interns saying that the stipend that allowed them to eat healthily a few months earlier is now barely sufficient for the most basic staples.

As we in America hear the news daily about the most recent projections for our own economy, I would encourage you to remember how the downturn is affecting people throughout the globe, and to work for a more equitable economy, to pray for those in need, to be generous, and, as it is said, to “live simply, so that others' may simply live.”

Summer Missionary Conference

For the third time since beginning my service as a missionary I had the opportunity to attend a series of meetings and conversations known as the “Summer Missionary Conference” held at Carthage College, an ELCA college located between Chicago and Milwaukee.

These meetings serve the purpose of bringing the missionary community together to discuss current trends and strategies in global mission. Here we learn from one another about the various kinds of ministries in which our church is engaged, from youth work in Japan to refugee assistance in Cairo, from medical ministry in Tanzania to theological education in Jamaica. No less importantly we come together to find common approaches to incarnating our theological values for the benefit of the church globally, both in America and abroad.

At these meetings we learned that in the coming year your congregations may be receiving new materials from the Global Mission office, informing you of and offering new ways to be involved in the amazing ways God is active throughout the world. If these materials grab your attention and/or bring up any questions, please feel free to contact Global Mission or myself for assistance.

The whole Buerkle family would like to extend a sincere “thank you” to all the sponsoring congregations we have visited thus far. Many of you have gone out of your way to make us feel welcome, many of you have been generous in paying for travel expenses in a time when such generosity doesn't come easily. While such traveling isn't easy (the church now wisely calls such times in America “home assignment” rather than the previous term of “furlough), it is also very rewarding. We pray that the Lord would continue to build on the personal connections we have been able to make or renew this summer – may He richly bless all your ministries.

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