

Russian Correspondent Epiphany 2019

One of the challenges of serving in the Russian Lutheran Church is the use here of an older lectionary; it is based on a six-year cycle and each Sunday has a single, designated “preaching text.” This year during Epiphany, on the Sunday when we celebrate Jesus's baptism, the text was from the book of Joshua (3:5-11,17) - the story of the chosen people crossing the Jordan.

Joshua is a book of the Bible that many of us might tend to avoid. For modern readers it raises uncomfortable questions about the connection between faith and violence; even more significantly in my context, the book's dominant image of conquest of land brings to mind current disputes between Russia and its neighbors. Yet, if one can look beyond or through these difficulties, the text can be helpful on another level.

As the Pentateuch closes, God has brought the people out of slavery. The time under Moses's leadership was filled with much that was positive – manna in the desert, pillars of cloud and flame for navigation, commandments for the guidance of everyday living, and God's direct conversation with the people through their leader. But now, after Moses's death, a new era has arrived; God forms relationships differently. There are some disappointments that come with this change, certainly; sometimes it seems preferable to go back to the old way. Yet in a new time there are also new horizons, new hopes, a new vision for the future.

The Russian Lutheran Church has a history that can find parallels with the history of the chosen people. They, too, were an ethnic minority (Germans, mostly, but also Finns and Estonians and Latvians) in a land (the Russian Empire) that viewed their presence as something positive...until they didn't. Then these minority peoples were a problem, a threat. While they did not know slavery as such, the labor camps where they were sent caused much suffering; they were torn from their homes, their places of worship were closed or destroyed, and thousands upon thousands died.

Then times changed again. And while there may not have been a single, individual Moses for Russian Lutherans, there were a great many leaders, most of whom came from abroad, who helped guide the church as it was first emerging from what was a kind of slavery under the Communist regime. These “moses” took the church quite far...but not yet into the promised land. For the church to go further, to really become a Russian Lutheran church (and not just ethnic minorities practicing their faith on Russian soil), they would need new leaders.

And now the Russian Lutheran church is at that stage of settling the land. In doing so there is no trace of an invasion mentality – their neighbors, after all, are not enemies. And just as many Old Testament scholars today would say that the chosen people coming into the Promised Land had a lot to do with winning over hearts and minds to the values and faith of the Hebrew people, so, too, Lutherans spread the Gospel here through word and action, convincing people of the power of the Good News through exemplary lives of faith.

The book of Joshua has limited use insofar as it speaks of taking faith into new territories, but other parts of Scripture provide metaphors that prove to be more helpful; Russian Lutherans together with others in the former Soviet Union have the resurrection of our Lord at the center of their thinking and their action. They have experienced a death, and now catch glimpses of new life.

Our Lutheran churches in Russia and in the United States were never called to become dominant in the political and religious landscapes of our respective countries. But we the baptized are called to enter a new era, trusting in the Lord's guidance; putting aside disappointments and taking note of all the little epiphanies that have a place both in this season and throughout the year, we continue on our common journey of faith, striving onward (even through death) to the resurrection that awaits.

Your brother in Christ,
Bradn



Every body of water becomes "the Jordan" for Eastern Orthodox Christians as they jump in the frigid water on the day of Christ's Baptism



ELCER Pastors Meeting

Archbishop Dietrich Brauer pushes his church and particularly his fellow pastors to reflect theologically about the ministry in which they are engaged and the the direction the Holy Spirit might be leading them. I was happy to be a part of this process when I was invited to speak at the annual conference of pastors in European Russia; the theme this year was mission, and we met in the congregations of the Kaliningrad region.

In listening to the various presentations and in conversation with my fellow ministers, I was struck that, despite our small numbers, we have a great variety of ministry contexts which demand flexibility and creatively built around a common vision. There are heartening stories of vital and vibrant congregations – these bring me special joy when I hear these stories arise among my former students – and other stories where the body of believers has yet to find the path to reach their neighbors. In both cases, however, I was impressed by those who are engaged in the effort, and I was happy to be able to share with them a few of my thoughts, both in my presentation and in conversation.

Lay pastor of the French-speaking congregation in Moscow, Mamy Rakotonitama. Archbishop Brauer in the foreground

Lay Leader Training in Crimea

This fall I made my second trip to the Crimean peninsula as a part of our church's efforts to support the scattered and still-somewhat-shaken-by-political-events people there. Crimea is a relatively small territory, but the congregations are far enough apart and their cities are different enough that it is not all that easy to bring them together. That is the task assigned, however, to Pastor Sergei Matiukh as the area dean for the region. Two common challenges that Sergei faces are disputes related to church property (corruption by the former and current regime has been a huge roadblock in restoring historical justice and in following the Russian law that states that places of worship must be returned to the religious organizations to which they belonged) and lay leader training. Unfortunately I am not able to help with the first problem, but it is my primary call to do what I can to assist in the second.

We were fortunate to find the funds that allowed us to run a multiple day seminar in the town of Evpatoria, where Sergei has concentrated his energies on reviving the congregation and fighting for the historical church building, from which the congregation has been blocked for use since the Soviet era.

Lay leaders from 8 congregations gathered in the city for three days of lectures and fellowship as we covered the first theme – Christ in the Center – of the 6-seminar series entitled “Being a Minister.” I have been initiating this series of courses in our other parts of our church as well, and the hope is that it will help make our lay ministers more capable and confident as they take on the day to day responsibilities of congregational life.



Ideally such seminars would be held twice annually; the limits of time and finances, however, probably mean that more than once a year will not be possible. Certainly our time together whet our appetite for more mutual learning, support and fellowship.

After the seminar ended, I made a visit to lead worship at one of our small house congregations. The group gathered in Koketbel is rather typical for the region – Russian-Germans, intellectuals and seekers who have found their home in the Lutheran church. For groups like these (and slightly larger ones in the bigger cities) such seminars and pastoral visits play a crucial role in their support and development.

Installation and Synod Assembly

As I mentioned in my last newsletter this past year the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Urals, Siberia and Far East asked me to become the area dean for the Far East. I had mixed feelings about this new assignment, as did those back home who supported me; after all, my primary call is to serve the churches in the field of education. However, given the particular circumstances there and given the trust that I had gained with leaders through my teaching and pastoral visits, it was eventually agreed upon that I should succeed Pastor Manfred Brockmann in taking on particular responsibilities for the region. Bishop Alexander Scheiermann joined me in Khabarovsk, where I introduced him to the congregation, and from there we went on to Vladivostok, where we had a good few days of conversation with local leaders before my installation on October 7.

Bishop Scheiermann and I made our way back west to Omsk for the synod council (“consistory”) and Synod Assembly that followed. In the brief interval between, Anton Tikhomirov from the Theological Seminary, Dean of Siberia Vladimir Vinogradov, Bishop Scheiermann and I examined five students from Siberia who had completed the Seminary Extension Education program. This program is continuing to evolve as new approaches and technologies are tested; what is clear is that the capacity of the church to reach others with the love of the Lord has been increased thanks to these educational efforts.



L to R: Gennady Dmitriev (Vladivostok), Ekaterina Stetsenko (Ussurisk), Pastor Alexander Lapochenko (Arseniev), Pastor Manfred Brockmann (Vladivostok), Tatiana Filibok (Khabarovsk), Bishop Scheiermann.



The oral exam (left) took place in the form of a conversation based on the thesis papers each of the students had written. Seminary President Tikhomirov has a knack for encouraging critical thinking up until the last moment before students become alumni, and dealing with hard questions of theology and practical ministry in mutual discussion does much to set the tone for those

collegial relationships that continue to develop among those who continue their faith journey – and accompany others upon theirs – in our church.

First Ever CPE Course Completed for the Russian Church

While I was in Vladivostok and Omsk, another important event supported by the Equipping for Service project was being held in Volgograd - the third and final 10-day seminar on the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) course we began in the fall of 2017. This is the first time the methods of CPE – the pastoral care standard for many churches of the West – had been attempted on Russian soil. While the “clinical” aspect of CPE was not as formal as it would be in America or Germany – after all, it is next to impossible to find institutions where our people would be allowed to act as chaplains – in other aspects we were able to replicate the growth in knowledge, skills and self-understanding that is necessary for quality “care of souls” (using the literal translation from the Russian.)

I look forward to continue to work with our German friends, Kurt-Juergen Schmidt and Anna Crist, and the Russian head of the pastoral care committee, Pastor Oleg Shtulberg, as we plan next steps in the further development of this critical area of ministry.



In Peace - Winter Seminar of the Far East Deanery

There is a hunger among members of congregations in this region – isolated to some degree from each other and to a large degree from the rest of the country – for the fellowship and mutual encouragement that strengthens the spirit. Realizing this, it was one of my priorities as area dean to increase the opportunities for educational events that gather representatives from various congregations in one place in order to grow in their capacity for ministry. The long, January holidays provided the first chance to make steps towards achieving that goal.

The seminary theme - “In Peace....” - was deliberately open to various interpretations. For those who have been formed by our liturgy, these words are associated with the prayers of the people; others who know our congregations in the Far East might link them with the work of peace and reconciliation among peoples. Others still might recognize that there is not always peace in our relationships in congregations and in our own heart, and that we need to work on our communication skills if we are to improve that situation.

Susanne Hinz-Smith, a professional mediator from Germany and a member of the mutual ministry team in the American Church in Berlin, provided food for thought for all participants (a total of over 35 different individuals took part in at least some sessions), whatever their expectations. She led lessons that balanced theoretical knowledge and practical application and kept us moving and attentive - important when the church building is a bit too cold!

Susanne became connected to our church thanks to Ellen Smith, regional representative for the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Europe. Ellen and I have known each other since we each arrived to serve in the country in 2001. Ellen has a wide variety of responsibilities, but in this case she helped facilitate Susanne coming to Russia and also took the trip herself in order both to provide support and to get acquainted with our congregations and with a new region of the country.



As I continue the process of evaluation of the seminar, I see that perhaps I underestimated the need for a “trial run.” Being convinced that the Far East could benefit from increased communications skills, it might have been wise to test the program out elsewhere in Russia, (perhaps on a congregational rather than regional scale) during our first time. For future seminars we consider if it might not be helpful if some participants familiarize themselves ahead of time with the work of Marshall Rosenberg and his Nonviolent Communication method which acts as the basis for the material. We have also learned from our experience such that we can make adaptations for the cultural and spiritual

traits that are particularly important for building trust and mutual understanding.

What makes me confident that we will find a way ahead, though, is my renewed observation just how deeply compassion is rooted in the culture of the people, even if, at times, there is a disconnect between those feelings and the survival instinct that also plays a large role in people's thought processes and actions. It is my assessment that our seminar helped participants make some progress in incorporating compassion into their listening skills, and to consider how there might be more opportunities for win-win solutions than they might have thought.

I truly believe that both the guests and the local hosts were mutually enriched by their interaction; if the winter seminar helped all of us discover something new about ourselves and the world, then I cannot help but be pleased and thankful to everyone – from those who donate to the Equipping for Service program, to local hosts and translators - who helped make it happen.

Deanery Visit to Magadan



Over the first days of February, I made the visit to our church's most isolated congregations – St. Mark's in Magadan and its sister congregation, an hour away, in Sokol. The flight to northeast Russia from Moscow took eight hours, and if going so far it might be desirable to stay for longer. However, for some time the situation in Magadan has been at the center of the thoughts, conversations, and prayers of those of us connected with the deanery; even before this visit it was relatively clear that we would be moving toward closing the congregation.

The city of Magadan has experienced very high emigration and the congregation has run into various disappointments throughout the years in regards to spiritual leadership. At present the Magadan congregation is served by lay preacher Andrey Ozols; however during my visit I went to see Andrey at the hospital after a minor stroke. His age and health concerns, unfortunately, make it unreasonable to count on his being able to lead the dwindling

congregation forward. Faith is very important for those few people who are left (picture, upper left), but it seems that it might be in their best interests if they could find a more vital congregation, even if it is of a different denomination.

In Sokol (picture below right) the congregation is relatively vibrant for a a house church -

approximately 10 people meet weekly in lay leader Elena Romanova's apartment. Here, too, however, but it is does not seem wise to invest the significant funds and time needed to develop the congregation when Elena does not plan on staying in the area for the long term and there are no other clear leaders on the horizon.



These conversations are not easy to have, but we held them in the context of thankfulness for what the Lord has given and that God brings us through death and in to a new and different kind of life. In the

coming months I will continue to work with the people in the region to try to see that they find alternative sources of spiritual care and also to sell the Magadan congregations apartment and invest those funds in other parts of the deanery as the Lord and common sense direct us.

Prayer requests

Please pray also for the healing for Pastor Gleb Pivovarov and for his wife, Anastasia, as Gleb continues to recover from brain cancer. Please pray for lay preacher Andrei Olzols and his wife, Viktoria, as they struggle with health issues. I would also ask for prayers between Russia and its neighbors. As usual I would be thankful for your prayers for my wife (Natasha) and boys – Matvey (14), Martin (11) and Lukas (4)

The basics....

I am an ELCA pastor serving through the Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Lower Saxony (ELM) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, where I am in charge of an educational program entitled "Equipping for Service." I maintain relationships with partners (individuals and congregations) in the U.S. and in Germany; if you have any questions for me, please feel free to write to me at: bradnbuerkle@gmail.com. You can read more at my personal blog: russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com or on the site with news articles on the church here: elcrosnews.blogspot.com

