

Russian Correspondent

January 2017

Beyond the Headlines

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Throughout my years of service in this country it feels like I have been constantly trying to explain that most Americans do not see Russia as their enemy. After the fall of the Soviet Union most people in the U.S. (or so it seems to me) thought something along the lines of - “well, we've won the Cold War and now we're concerned with other things,” whether it be the economy, terrorism, or any of the myriad of other domestic and global challenges that we face.

This year, though, things have changed. And not for the better. After years of seeing the state-sponsored Russian press find any and every excuse to paint America in a bad light, it seems like our society (with its free press) is doing the same thing with Russia. I believe that being critical (in particular, self-critical) is helpful and important; without getting into details or suggesting a false equivalence I recognize that there are good reasons why both our countries should be targets of criticism. That's true if it turns out that the stories of Russian hackers influencing the election ends up being 100% true, 100% false or (as usual) somewhere in between. Yet now that escalation of demonization has become mutual, it seems that we're reaching a point where no reasonable voices get heard, where complex pictures become caricatures and where our “knowledge” is limited to the most shocking of headlines.

Recently I was asked to write a short text for a flyer that will be distributed by the German mission which employs me. I was to answer one of two questions – “1. What causes fear or makes me anxious when I think about Russia and the church there?” 2. “What positive tendency can I perceive in Russia that needs support and prayer?”

My mind flooded with answers for the first question...but that very fact gave me pause. Wouldn't it, instead, be particularly important at this time to answer the second question? Here is what I wrote: “The words 'positive' and 'Russia' are not all that often found together in one sentence. Yet we in the mission community have our eyes trained to see the quiet, subtle ways that the Lord is working even if (maybe even particularly if) others might not notice it. It is true that many of us experience serious anxiety about the direction of the country and its relationship to its neighbors - you can read many reasons for that in almost any newspaper. It isn't always easy to support what is happening here in the country that has become my second home. At the same time there really is much to affirm – from the slow-but-steady improvement in people's religious literacy to growth in volunteer and charity work, from increased fluency in foreign languages to the chance to minister with people who have never known Soviet-era oppression. There are great benefits when we partner with, encourage and pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia as it continues to move towards defining its place in the theological and social landscape of the country. Even now as they are only still gaining confidence, local Lutheran leaders provide a rare voice of reason and sincere faith that avoids the fundamentalistic and nationalistic extremes... Congregations in Siberia have paid significant attention to the development of lay leaders and this is producing fruits through revived worship life and new programs for outreach and discipleship. Financial, personnel and prayer support of brothers and sisters from abroad does much to maintain these important ministries.”

My text was to be followed by a prayer. I'll include this as well with the hope that you might join me in using it: “Ruler of Heaven and Earth, we thank you, All-merciful and Almighty, for your constant presence among and within us, despite our failures. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, forgive us when we act out of fear, frustration and selfishness.

Help us to see the in-breaking of your kingdom even in times of anxiety. Guide us and the leaders of the nations that peace may reign among all peoples. We pray in particular for Russia and its neighbors, and we ask that you would give us and all who share our faith the wisdom and strength to be committed disciples of the One who gave his life for us. Amen.”

Your brother in Christ,

Bradn



Renewal and Hope – Part 2

My last newsletter to you was sent from the Russian Far East, where my colleague Rev. Len Dale (recently retired from the ELCA's Central States Synod) and I were at the beginning of our month of travels to 8 different locations to lead seminars on congregational (re-) development.

Some of our stops were short visits that simply introduced the topic. These visits (in places like Khabarovsk, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Chita, Shelekhov and Tjumen) were important not just for the materials we presented, but because they were important signs of brotherly/sisterly concern for their communities; just to have pastors there that could listen to them, preach and preside at Holy Communion meant a lot.



In a few other places, (namely, Perm in the Urals and Krasnoyarsk in central Siberia) we had the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time giving pastors and lay leaders the tools they need in order to direct a process of growth in their congregations' sense of God's mission for them.

On this trip we gained a deep impression of the challenges facing the church (especially in the vast region of the Far East, where isolated congregations have little access to pastoral leadership) while at the same time we were consistently impressed and encouraged by the faith and commitment of Russian Lutherans. Members who are currently working and have lived most of

their adult lives in post-Soviet Russia caught on relatively quickly to the idea that church ministry can be approached creatively and strategically. It is my sense that the time is ripe for them to do such work, and I hope and pray for the good of the church (and the people the church will reach) that they will be able to follow through...and that I'll be able to assist them in the process.

Advent in Khakasia

Before the year was through I had one more visit to make; despite the distance and the cold, it did not feel like a burden to me, because going to the south-central region of Siberia almost always feels at least a little bit like coming home. I made trips there frequently when I was acting Area Dean because there was no pastor on-site; the region is again without a full-time pastor, but in recent years the team of of lay leaders has gotten stronger as it has grown in education and experience. It is a joy to accompany them. In 10 days there I led worship in five congregations (including a wedding), as well as Bible studies and an intensive refresher course on the Reformation as the team there prepares for the events of the year ahead.



Reading the Reformation

One area of ministry that I am hoping to build upon this year is online courses. While I'm still testing out the usefulness of such things (and still organizing them using relatively primitive technology), at this stage the form of this course is very simple – participants read texts at home and answer questions; if they choose they gain join in regular online meetings for discussion. Last year I tried the first of these courses - a Bible study on Advent texts I called “Good Questions”; this year we'll be reading and discussing Luther's theology. While a limited amount of translations hinders this to some degree, we still will be able to cover a wide variety of materials and come to a better understanding of our denominational roots.

After thinking about it for a while, I've also decided to invite all of you English speakers to take part! Perhaps you would find it useful to read and discuss for your own faith journey; maybe, in the end, we'll even find ways to connect the English-speaking and Russian-speaking groups. If you find this idea interesting, just search for “Equipping for Service” on Facebook and the page there will have the texts, questions, and online meeting times. I'd be so happy if you'd join us!

Plans for 2017

In Russian culture anniversaries of historical events (e.g., the 300th “birthday” of St. Petersburg in 2003) are widely celebrated and used as a good excuse for learning, renewal

and reflection. For that reason the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 presents a unique opportunity for our church – this year more than any other we are likely to have the chance to be heard in the press, in university settings and in wider culture.

The Lutheran church here (together with educational institutions, museums, ethnic clubs and ecumenical partners) is planning events that will help highlight the history behind the Reformation and its significance for today. For my part I will be hitting on Reformation themes in a number of places – in Ufa in February and Krasnodar in March; in Moscow in May, Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in September, Omsk in October... Throughout the year, though, that we will have a strong “competitor” for most significant anniversary - it is, after all, the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution....

Besides Reformation-related courses I am looking forward to other exciting developments in the year ahead. In April we will be trying our first course together with teachers from the Presbyterian church (on social service ministry); in the fall we will begin our first full course of pastoral care training (equivalent to what American pastors go through in seminary, a requirement known as “Clinical Pastoral Education.”) In between there will be new seminars related to liturgical training and men's ministry and repeated themes (most especially congregational strategic planning) in new places. I'll keep you up to date.

Prayer requests

I would certainly appreciate your prayers for the leaders of the Russia and the West, that they might seek ways to build mutual respect and trust that takes into account the needs and concerns of the citizens of our countries; the Lutheran congregations in Russia that they might clearly witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ as they share of themselves in this Reformation-anniversary year and that they might be inspired to follow through on their ideas for creative new ministries. As usual I would be thankful for your prayers for my wife (Natasha) and boys – Matvey (12), Martin (9) and Lukas (2).

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

