

Russian Correspondent

October 2016

God's Work, Your (Far Extended) Hands



Zhenya photobombing my picture of the Christ Church Center in Omsk

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Many hours before most of you woke up on the second Sunday in September this year, worship had already concluded in the small city of Azovo, 45 minutes from Omsk. I was in the region to lead a one-day seminar on the theology and practice of confession, and I decided to stay for Sunday in order to help out at one of the many lay-led congregations in the area. I traveled to Azovo, on the one hand, to preach and to preside at Holy Baptism and Confirmation; on the other hand I was there to accompany one of my students, my friend Evgeny. I've known "Zhenya" (as most people call him) for quite some time, even before he began to take part in courses related to the "Equipping for Service" project. He has been a dedicated Christian for decades, and slowly but steadily he came to recognize his call to ministry. His call was confirmed by church leadership and by his home congregation. He has not yet been ordained, but he already is, in fact, their pastor – walking with them in their joys and pains, preaching and teaching, challenging them to grow. It is no surprise, then, that he will be officially called to Word and Sacrament ministry when he is ordained at the synod assembly of the ELCUSFE (Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Urals, Siberia and Far East) later this month.

On that September day, I thought not only about Evgeny and his development as a minister, but also about you. Many of your congregations carried out special service projects that day; at the same time, many of your congregations do something special to support the church where I am. I thought on that day how your hands are carrying out God's work wherever you are, and about how I am privileged to be your partners in carrying out God's work far from home, to be (together with you) God's far-extended hands. May the Lord bless us in our efforts to continue to touch people with Divine grace, peace and love.

Your brother in Christ,
Bradn

Renewal and Hope

I write you this newsletter from Magadan, one of the most isolated places in all of Russia. I arrived here on October 1 together with my colleague from the U.S., Pastor Len Dale. For the two of this, this is a beginning of a trip to a large number of small and scattered congregations throughout the Russian Far East and Siberia; as the month moves on, we will also have large events as part of our schedule in the cities of Perm (Ural Mountains), Krasnoyarsk (central Siberia) and Moscow. The main topics we will be covering are Christian hope and congregational renewal. I intend on giving you a full update on those seminars in my next newsletter.

In the meantime, however, I can say that we can be happy as are the people in St. Mark's in Magadan that we made the extra effort and found the finances to make the trip to these "geographically marginalized" (to use a term I'm fond of) believers in a city that is closer to Seattle than it is to Moscow. Week by week they meet to worship and read a sermon that is sent to them by their area dean, but having never (!) had an on-site pastor of their own, they lack the confidence they need in order to meet the challenges they face,



«Mask of Sorrow» monument to GULAG victims in Magadan



including a declining population and very high utility costs related to their congregational space. Our visit was important, then, both because we were able to lead worship for them on Harvest Festival Sunday and because we were able to help them to think creatively about how they might best shape their life together in order to engage in God's mission of healing and reconciliation.

It won't be easy for them, and they will probably need to find the courage to make major changes. But we hope that they heard the clear message that the Spirit is at work among them, giving them everything they need in order to be faithful to their calling to serve (in whatever form that might take) today and in to the future.

Pastors' Conference - "Year of the Family"

Bishop Dietrich Brauer invited me to take part in the pastors' meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia, held in the Crimean city of Evpatoria at the end of last month. It was my first time in the region, despite having had numerous students from there throughout the years.

Evpatoria was the place where the khan of the Crimean Tatars was crowned, and in the pre-Revolutionary days was home to thriving Muslim, Jewish, Karaites (a branch of Judaism that does not accept the Talmud) and Christian communities. Today one of the strongest Lutheran congregations on the peninsula is located there.

Bishop Brauer has started to guide the church's thinking about its identity and mission by giving each year a specific theme; 2016 was named "The Year of the Family." The events of the pastors' conference were also related to family, and those of us who gave presentations talked about such various issues as families and family values in the Bible, the pastor's family and the

pastor's congregation and the Christian congregation as family. These presentations probably raised more questions than they provided answers, but they moved us toward an honest and complex view that takes into account the real challenges of family life...just as the Bible itself does.

In any case our family was strengthened as we learned more about one another, caught up with old friends, and sought out ways to continue to support one another for the good of the Gospel and for the people whom we are called to serve. It also served as an ideal opportunity for me to talk with pastors throughout European Russia about plans for educational events in their deaneries and congregations in 2017.



Prayer requests

I would certainly appreciate your prayers for: St. Mark's Lutheran in Magadan, Len Dale and I as we travel throughout Russia, my family as they face their daily challenges without me around to help, and U.S.-Russian relations.

The basics....

I am a Lutheran 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