

## Russian Correspondent Summer 2016

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Russia is the kind of place that keeps you on your toes. Just when it seemed that things had calmed down for me (with the renewal of my 5-year residency permit in February) and for the country (insofar as tensions with the West seem to be on a slow but relatively steady decline), in the past weeks the Russian parliament (Duma) passed a series of “anti-terror” laws that could possibly have serious side effects for the Church. The stated aim of the law is to deny terrorists the possibility of building underground networks, but in fact the result is a significant increase in the control the government exercises over religious organizations, especially small ones like ours. If signed by President Putin, attempts to draw new people in to the church could be severely limited, as could the activities of those congregations that meet in private homes (as opposed to traditional church buildings); the ministry of foreign missionaries would be seriously limited. Experience teaches us here that less important than the text of the law is the way local government officials choose to interpret it, so we'll have to just wait and see. In any case, I ask your prayer for those of us serving here, that we all might remain calm and have the wisdom to deal with any barriers we encounter in a Christ-like fashion.

### Educational Events in 2016

The year thus far has been an interesting mix of the familiar and the new; as I write this I'm struck again at what a blessing it is to be called to such interesting work!

The first educational event of the year was held at the seminary in Novosaratovka, where we tackled the themes of “Eschatology, Death and Burial” from the point of view of theology as well as pastoral practice. It felt good to work with students of the distance education program in an area so important for contemporary theology - the “last things” (eschatology). Usually I've limited myself to explaining traditional points of view on theological topics, but this time I was able to present one of my personal favorite approaches in the “Theology of Hope” (especially as expressed in the works of Jürgen Moltmann); I found the students responsive to a new way of viewing questions related to Christ's return and to the “end times.”

In February (and then again in April) I took part in one-day mini-seminars for the Central Deanery of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia. On the first of these trips to Moscow I gave an overview of the Apostle Paul's life and theology, while for the second seminar I spent most of the day with these future catechists going over the history of the church from New Testament times to the Medieval period. While I had hoped to cover more, in the Russia context (with the dominant presence of the Eastern Orthodox Church) it is very important that our lay ministers have a good handle on our common historical roots.



One of my goals for this year was to offer a continuing education seminar for those who have already earned a degree in theology. Unfortunately it has been many years since our church has been able to offer a seminar strictly for such an audience. I was very happy, then, that 13 participants from Siberia, the Urals, the Volga region, southern, central and northwest Russia and Estonia took part in the “New Ideas for Preaching” seminar that we held in Novosaratovka in March. Such seminars are relatively expensive to run (because we invited teachers from Germany and because of the costs of travel costs for the participants themselves), but I find them to be crucial element to healthy church

life. Because our congregations are so far apart, there are not only few chances to get together for education, there are few chances to get together, period. I think that we not only helped our pastors think about fresh ways to preach, we also showed them that they are cared for and highly valued.

Last year when I was in Omsk leading one of their deanery's quarterly seminars for leaders in the region, I was very pleased when participants requested that in 2016 I speak with them about the Sacraments. In April, then, I led a mini-seminar - "Holy Communion: Theology and Practice."



I'm not sure that they got what they were expecting! While as a foreigner in this church I usually keep my personal opinions to myself, for quite some time I have looked critically on worship practices of the church here. With the encouragement of local leaders I have become more outspoken recently, and this was reflected in the kinds of issues I brought up (e.g., frequency of Communion, communion for infants) for discussion during the seminar. For the most part, though, I focused on key Biblical texts and important moments in the development of practice and doctrine in the Church's history.

In April and May the "geography" of the Equipping for Service program continued to expand through deanery seminars – one in the Urals and the other on the Volga. I had been neither to Chelyabinsk nor Saratov before, so I expected that I would have a lot to learn while at the same time sharing insights on the themes of healthy congregations and conflict resolution. I was not disappointed. In both places we met for 3 days, and I was given a significant blocks of time to speak; during my off time I enjoyed learning about the faith of the people in these regions, both known for their strong pietist backgrounds. In that sense my visit to these regions was to some degree a breakthrough – as a former teacher at the Theological Seminary in Novosaratovka, there were a lot of preconceived notions about our different approaches to faith. Conversations with church leaders in these regions over the past two years have paid off, and the result was an invitation to work with their people. I hope and pray that I did not disappoint them.



This summer I had my first chance to witness and take part in ordinary congregational life in the Northern Caucasus, the place where I lived way back in 1997-98. Back then I didn't even know that the Lutheran church in Russia existed, though their building in Krasnodar was only a 15 minute walk from the university where I studied. I have been traveling to the area over the past two years, but only in order participate in their retreats. This time my ministry took place in the congregations themselves, which helped me see, for instance, the interesting connections between the "brother" tradition of Siberia and in another center for Russian-Germans during the Soviet period, the city of Prokhladny in Kabardino-Balkaria. I tried to emphasize with them (in my sermons especially) the value of their particular tradition and the challenges that congregations like theirs face while considering their mission in their communities today. I also hope that my lectures on Reformation history helped them better understand the theological basis of our Lutheran identity.



Now during the summer "down time" (not "down," actually, but many people are busy either with camps or with their vegetable gardens, so it's not the best time for educational events) I'm quite excited for plans in the months ahead. The fall will be particularly busy; in September I'll

be attending a meeting of the pastors from European Russia, while if all goes as planned in October (and into November) I will travel and co-lead seminars with Pastor Len Dale from the ELCA Central States Synod. At present we are scheduled to lead congregational seminars on the northern Pacific coast (Magadan) and in the Amur river region; hopefully we'll also be able to visit the congregation in isolated Chita, as well as a seminar for select leaders in the two western Siberian deaneries. Our theme in most of these places will be congregational revitalization and strategic planning; we hope that these seminars will be not only helpful in and of themselves, but that they will also strengthen ties with the American partners.

### Representing Russian Lutheranism

This year, besides my regular ministry of organizing educational events in our church, I've had the unique (and to some degree even awkward) privilege of representing the Russian Lutheran Church...while also gaining experience good for my own development as a teacher and theologian.

In May I was invited as a driver / participant / lecturer to Reformation-related sites in Germany organized by German partners (included the ELM) and the Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC). 13 theologians from different Protestant denominational backgrounds (but all from among the Dalit - "outcast" - communities) came from Hyderabad, India, in order to grow together as a faculty and to learn more about their common Reformation heritage. In addition their program was set up in such a way that it became possible to get acquainted with the missionary roots of the Indian Lutheran church, 20<sup>th</sup> century German history, and the state of the Lutheran church in Germany today. All that means that we visited Halle and Berlin as well as Wartburg and Wittenberg. I believe that I was able to be useful for the trip's organizers – my Indian colleagues gave me good feedback after my lecture on "Russia and the Reformation," and it turns out that my background as a teacher of theology and church history was useful, too, insofar as not all had a strong background in Reformation history and theology. At the same time this trip was about *mutual* learning. The Dalit theologians not only come from a vastly different context from the ones where I have worked, I came to see that their whole patterns of thought (e.g., the kinds of questions they asked) were surprising and sometimes unusual for me. I can imagine that the contacts made with them on this trip might lead me to visits (in one direction or another, maybe in both) that would include a teaching component. This, my first intensive interaction with Asian theologians, left me with the desire to learn more and to find ways to establish points of contact with my place of ministry.

More recently I made one more trip to Germany, this time to read a paper at a conference: "The churches of the Reformation in their social and political responsibility for the One World." My presentation was focused on the reasons behind Lutheranism's limited influence in pre-revolutionary Russia (despite its place as the the country's second largest Christian confession) and the unique historical moment we are living in now, when Lutherans as Russians (or Russians as Lutherans) can begin to find their own voice and exert influence on the wider context. It was quite an honor to be invited to take part in such a large and prominent academic conference, and I hope that I was able to well represent the church in which I serve.

### 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](mailto:bradnbuerkle@gmail.com). You can read more at my personal blog: [russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com](http://russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com) or on the site with news articles on the church here: [elcrosnews.blogspot.com](http://elcrosnews.blogspot.com)

**Prayer requests:** First of all I'd like to thank you for your prayers for the "Equipping for Service" program and for the church in Russia in general. In particular I'd like to thank all of you that prayed for the renewal of my residency permit. While there were challenges along the way, everything is now fine. I would ask for your continued prayers for the church here, for Natasha and our boys (Matvey, Martin, Lukas) and, finally, I'd like to ask for your continuing prayers for peace between Russia and its neighbors, that leaders would make wise choices that lead to justice and well-being for all.

