

Russian Correspondent

March 2018

Not Giving Up (for Lent)

As we accompany God's children around the globe, missionaries observe, reflect, support, share and witness to their faith. Through these newsletters I let friends and partners know that their prayers and financial support really are making a significant impact, both on those whom we accompany and on us ourselves as we consider on our own faith journeys in light of others' experience.

I named my newsletter *Russian Correspondent* a decade and half ago with the intention that it would bring two images to mind— one of a foreign journalist and the other of a pen pal. The second (and more important) of these remains unchanged – I hope that in these pages you gain some insight and feel (even at a great distance) a personal connection to the people with whom I work, your sisters and brothers in Christ in the former Soviet Union.

There's a problem these days, however, in trying to speak “journalistically” about the context. During my first years in Russia, the country was given little attention in the news. In contrast today Russia is in the news in the West a lot - story after negative story. There is no way in one newsletter to explain how each of these issues look from here. One way to put it very briefly would be to say “more complicated;” as always, I'd be happy to discuss any of the issues with you over email. Yet the task can seem overwhelming. Seeing the way the relationship between Russia and the West continues to deteriorate, it makes me and others with connections in both places feel frustrated, disappointed, deeply sad, sometime even angry. The world has so many serious problems, and instead of joining our resources to address them together, our countries treat one another as enemies and use the (real or imagined) threat of the other as a distraction from serious domestic and global issues. It is a tragedy.

In such an atmosphere, there is the temptation to give up. With people on both sides being bombarded by negative messages, efforts aimed at increasing mutual understanding can seem fruitless. These global issues come close to home when I think about the challenges of finding funding even for our humble mission work in Russia, and when I feel insecure, knowing that as a foreigner in a tense situation, I may end up being a symbolic pawn in someone's large game. I begin to think - “maybe it would be easier just to acknowledge our powerlessness in this situation and turn to issues that seem to be easier to resolve...”

That's where my thoughts go...until I consider the people with whom I work. Even knowing, as the Russian saying goes, that “taking initiative is punishable” these sisters and brothers in Christ keep looking for ways to expand their church's ministries. Even in a context where people seem to be fatalistic and close to cynical, I am constantly running into people who refuse to give up. It seems to be the Lenten discipline that they practice year-round. Whether it be the lay-lead congregation in Chita – the only Lutheran congregation in the entire time zone – or the small but beautiful “kirche” in Muslim-majority Ufa or my former student, Pastor Gleb Pivovarov, fighting aggressive brain cancer, I have the privilege of working with Christians who know how to move forward in their walk of faith even in the face of what seems to be overwhelming obstacles. Having a clear memory of the repression of Christianity in the Soviet Union, they know that God has now granted them the freedom to be open with their faith. Despite cultural, societal and economic barriers and despite the potential for depression that comes from always fighting an uphill battle, they find their strength in acknowledging their own powerlessness (2 Cor 12.9) and in facing the challenges of Christian service, knowing that it is God's grace (and not human power) that will eventually bring in the Heavenly Kingdom.

I am certain that you, too, are facing many challenges. If you or your congregation are involved in Russia in any way, one of those challenges might even be related to why we would have anything to do with “those people.” In any case I hope that on your faith journey you have experienced both giving up (trying to solve the world's problems on our own) and not giving up, knowing that God accompanies us through Lent and into the season of Resurrection. It is my hope that in reading this newsletter you'll find encouragement for your journey in the news and stories I have the opportunity to share about another side to Russia – the real lives of your fellow Christians. Your brother in Christ, Bradn



Seminar in Vladivostok

Witnessing the Wideness of God's Mercy in the Russian Far East

The second half of January took me to the far-flung congregations of the eastern-most deanery of the Lutheran Church in Russia. The goal of this trip was to visit the most “geographically marginalized” of our people in order to provide them with pastoral support and education. The journey began in Chita, a congregation I last visited in 2016 with ELCA Pastor Len Dale from the Central States Synod. They continue to be spiritually hungry there, and they find nourishment in



Baptisms in Komsomolsk

coming together for worship, even with no pastor and no regular lay leadership. While with them I led worship and a study on Revelation, but in the future I hope that I will be able to train one or two of their people so that they might have the skills and self-confidence to take on more responsibility for their congregation's spiritual life. After Chita I began to rack up “frequent rider” miles on the railroad as I moved east to the small home-church in the border (with China) city of Blagoveschensk; there we had worship and a class on church history. The next night train to me to St. John's Lutheran in Khabarovsk, where almost the entire small congregation came out on a weekday morning to meet, have fellowship, and study Scripture.

From there I moved north to Komsomolsk, where I was able to preside at the baptism of three sisters (from 3 to 13 years old) and lead a seminar on the basics of pastoral care. By the last week of the month I had made it to the Pacific Coast and St. Paul's Lutheran in Vladivostok. The seminar we held - “God's Congregation – Our Strategy” - is one in demand throughout the church in congregations in transition or seeking renewal; I believe we made a fruitful beginning to that work there.

Before returning to St. Petersburg, I stopped in Central/Eastern Siberia, where I formerly was the Area Dean. I was happy when the most economical flight path took me through Irkutsk, where my friend and colleague Pastor Thomas Graf Grote is bringing to a close his long missionary ministry in the area. I met with their church council to encourage them and give them a bit of consultation regarding the future. The main goal of my visit to the region, however, was to visit Krasnoyarsk; As I mentioned above, their pastor, Gleb Pivovarov is battling brain cancer. Pastor Gleb has assembled a strong team of young leaders in the congregation, and they've all met this challenge with incredible courage and faith. Gleb's spirit remains high, despite unclear prospects for healing (even after a successful surgery and radiation therapy), while the ministries of the congregation continue thanks to the dedication of those involved.

Especially those who lead Bible studies or Sunday worship, however, feel the need to improve their theological education. Besides visiting Gleb, the main focus of my time there was to gather those in the congregation and the wider region who have begun their theological education (especially through our Distance Education program) to give them a chance to have great interaction with one of their teachers. During our 2.5 day seminar -

“Christ in the Center” - we talked about how to carefully read the New Testament and think about Christian living through the lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This was one of six themes in a new cycle of seminars for lay preachers. In the years ahead, we will continue to expand opportunities to participate in these seminars to ensure that all of our lay ministers (many of whom carry out this ministry without the assistance of a near-by pastor) have the basic training they need to respond to the needs of their congregations.

Reflecting on this trip, it is clear that the circumstances our congregations find themselves in are varied, but their common experience is this – the God whose love was shown in Jesus Christ is with them, accompanying them, challenging them to move faithfully into the future.



Seminar selfie in Krasnoyarsk

Return to Bashkorstorstan

While this title might sound like the name of a 19th-century adventure novel, in reality it is simply a reference to a mid-February seminar that is becoming an annual tradition. Last year Dr. Anton Tikhmirov (President of the Novosaratovka Theological Seminary), Pastor Igor Zhuravlev, and I taught about the Reformation in Ufa, the capital city of that region; this year we agreed that we would begin the cycle of lessons for lay ministers referenced in the article above. Thanks to gifts to the "Equipping for Service" project, which covers the logistical expenses related to off-site teaching, we were able to build on what has already been achieved in the region and continue to train the people of the southern Russian for their growing ministries.



While I hope that my teaching on the New Testament and ethics was valuable (as, I'm sure, the lessons of Anton and Igor were), more important, perhaps, was the support for one of the people who has frequently attended my seminars, Rustem Nafikov. In the three years that I've known him, I've witnessed Rustem's growth in faith and knowledge; on this trip I came to learn just how much the rest of his life has changed as well. Having grown up in a secular (Tatar/ Bashkir) Muslim family, Rustem came to the church through his German-Russian wife, Svetlana. Slowly at first and then with growing intensity, Rustem found that his exploration of the Christian faith brought him to a new sense of life's meaning...and began to feel a call. He pursued educational and ministry opportunities with such great dedication that he was forced to put aside his job as a construction worker; now he and his family are

learning to live on one (very small) income, while Rustem serves as the village pastor of Prishib, a village just over an hour out of the city. That congregation, which seemed on the edge of closing, has turned around, and he and Svetlana (who, as she told me, in their first 15 years of marriage she could have barely imagined him in church, let alone a minister) are experiencing the joy that comes from service. Rustem's growth has been so significant that it seems likely that the church will call him to a large congregation in the future; for now I was happy to be a witness to his success, offer a few words of guidance when he asked questions, and encourage him and his family that the Lord who has done so much with them up until this point will continue to touch people's lives through their faith active in love.

Important Guests

In February, I was happy to welcome the new ELCA regional representative, Viking Dietrich (*below, back right*), to Russia. He and I met in Omsk, where I helped translate and accompanied him to a meeting of lay ministers from the Western Siberia Deanery (*below*), for visits with Bishop Alexander Scheierrmann (*below, front right*) and to the congregation in the city of Azovo outside of Omsk. We then flew to St. Petersburg, where we visited partners in the Ingrian (Finnish heritage) Church, theological seminaries in Koltushi and Novosaratovka, and saw a bit of the city and its culture. From there Viking moved on to Moscow, where leaders from local congregations and ministries there met him and acquainted him with the work of the church. Viking showed great interest in learning more about the country and its people, and future visits should be much easier thanks to this.





Then this month, Archbishop Dietrich Brauer, Seminary President Anton Tikhmirov and I met with Matthias Woerhmann, a consultant for organizing church ministries from the Evangelical Church in Germany. While my head hurt at the end of two days trying to follow meetings in German, this visit gave us a good reason to reflect as we sat together, explained, discussed, and to (re-)considered educational missionaries in light of the church's needs. A follow-up meeting will be held in May, during which we hope to consider a number of concrete options that the church might choose in order to best use the resources we have for the task at hand.

Urals Deanery Visit

After the intense activities related to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation last year, 2018 has already presented me with a third opportunity to return to regions where I've had previous successful visits – in this case, it was in early March to the Ural deanery. At their biannual meeting of congregational leaders the theme was personal and cooperative aspects of spiritual life. This seminar, too, is part of the training of lay ministers; the limited hours, however, meant that I focused on practical spirituality through the lens of confession. I see it as a point of intersection between the personal and the communal, between liturgy and pastoral care, between Biblical basis (always important, but particularly so in this pious region) and life experience. This approach was somewhat unusual, but I hope that the “otherness” was still accessible enough that it will bear fruits in new thoughts and practices.



After the seminar I made a visit to the industrial city of Nizhny Tagil, where Pastor Matthias Schindler and his wife Lena have put enormous effort into developing the congregation. Yet, despite their great love for the people and creative approach, their congregation remains miniscule. Their dedicated service, despite a lack of obvious fruits of their efforts, is another example of not giving up, of trusting that the Lord is sowing seeds through Christian presence and through the good news of God's saving love for us through Jesus Christ.

Prayer requests

As I prepare to send this out, news of a tragic fire in a Siberian mall is reaching us; please pray for the families of the 40+ victims. Please pray also for the healing for Pastor Gleb Pivovarov and for his wife, Anastasia. Please pray for the leaders of the Russia and its neighbors, as well as for the church here as it continues to seek the most effective way to serve its neighbors. As usual I would be thankful for your prayers for my wife (Natasha) and boys – Matvey (13), 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. My personal blog is currently on hold: russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com, but you can check out the site with news articles on the church at: elcrosnews.blogspot.com

