

20th Seminar of the Provost of the Far East, August 4-11, 2013: “The Christian Church in the Far East and Its Place in Our Society”

We were once again at this beautiful place Buchta Witjas which is pretty far south from Vladivostok and located on the sea. We have been holding our Provost Seminar here for a couple of years. We were a pretty good number: 31 adults and 4 children. It was especially good that everyone of our congregations of our gigantic Provost were represented. Even those who are the furthest away, Magadan, Tschita and Blagoveschtschensk were there. This allowed everyone to get to know the problems of the other congregations. We discussed and thought about everything and eventually came to an understanding. We discovered similarities and developed new perspectives. The main result of this specific seminar was that we realized anew that all of us in this gigantic Provost of the Far East belong together.

The official topic of this seminar was something else: “The Christian Church in the Far East and its place in this society.” It was ecumenical as well as societal. This is why we were far-reaching in our invitation. We included the Russian Orthodox as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Roman Catholic Church as well as other Protestant churches. It revealed to us that trying to be ecumenical in this place is very difficult. Our very good friend, Father Ascot of the Armenian Church, who has often attended, could not attend for personal reasons. But a new found friend, a priest from the Russian Orthodox Church, Father Ilija, could not get permission from his Patriarch Innocence to attend, because the Russian Orthodox Church does not discuss ecumenical matters except at the highest level. Our very good friend, the Provost of the Roman Catholic Church, Miron Effing, was there but did not want to sign the letter of greeting to our Bishop, because it was not his Bishop. The Bishop of the Federation of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, Vladimir Trochimenko, was with us but at the conclusion of the seminar had to admit that there was a lot that separates us from them. (We Lutherans are much closer to the Roman Catholics than the Neo-protestants. Ecumenism is difficult.)

Dietrich Brauer and Dr. Anton Tichomirow, Rector of our Theological Seminary in Novosaratovka were lights in the darkness for us. Dietrich Brauer is the Bishop of Moscow. He was our intern at one time and was born in Vladivostok. Dr. Tichomirow gave a very helpful introduction to the condition of our society in Russia and the place, task and opportunities for our Lutheran Church in Russian Society. “We are no longer in a postmodern, but in a post secular society. How do we preach the gospel to this society?”

It was so sad that we spent so much time on the problem of homosexuality. It was really enlightening, uplifting and encouraging how each congregation told the story of how they live their everyday lives in this difficult society. We praise these tiny congregations!!

We were informed in a detailed manner what the position is of the Russian Orthodox Church is and what it is doing as it deals with the people, those in power, the national government, the business sector, the monetary situation and the poor.

And then we addressed the burning problem of finances. From his rich practical experience Bishop Brauer held a small seminar on “The Problems and Possibilities of Self Support.” Following that we spent time with each congregation seriously examining the following question: What are you doing to make yourselves self-supporting and how can you not be so dependent on the Provost to provide everything? Good examples of how to do this were provided by St. Paul’s in Vladivostok and St. Luke’s in Arsenjev. There are huge deficits at St. Mark’s in Magadan. They were strongly encouraged to rent out a room in their large centrally located residence.

Besides finances there is the ongoing question of personnel and co-workers. St. John’s Church along with St. Catherine’s Church in Komsomolsk and the small congregation in Blagoweschensk are in dire need of a pastor. Perhaps one will come soon? St. Mark’s Church in Magadan is awaiting the arrival of Pastor Juris Simakins in July or August of 2014. Special praise was given to the furthest located congregation of St. Matthew’s in

Tschita. There is so much faithfulness and engaging potential there that we need to provide help for them. The Provost will travel there next.

When it comes to the problem of providing enough trained workers, we share a very striking problem with the Roman Catholics. Both of our seminaries are sitting empty. They are also like us in that people from outside of the country are filling the leadership positions. At the closing service for the seminar we brought everyone in whom we have invested a lot of hope, energy and money for a face to face with us in order to make sure that they do not leave us or be unfaithful to us.

This is our 22 year old history, but “behold, we live”. (2 Cor. 6:9) God has not abandoned us and we continue to feel his blessing over and over again. We are thankful for all of those who remain with us and continue to grow anew with us.

Here are two examples of faithfulness and solidarity . St. John’s Church in Chabarovsk sent a large amount of our new Hymnals, which they received from a sponsor, to several of the congregations in our Provost. A poor retiree from Blagoveschtschensk contributed 2,000 rubles for this seminar. This truly was the “Widow’s mite”.

Further topics were: P. Lapotschenko from St. Luke’s in Arsenjev reported on his visit to his partner congregation, Trinity Lutheran in Great Bend, Kansas, USA; Preacher Nina Dimitrijeva told us about life at St. Paul’s in Vladivostok. Provost Brockmann led us in worship in a meaningful and motivated manner and also in Bible study.

We were especially blessed with music. Under the leadership of Tatjana Filobok and Olga Kim from St. John’s Church in Chabaroffsk and the organist from St. Luke’s in Arsenjev, Svetlana Filotovitsch, we sang a lot and were provided with a lot of music.

It was unfortunate that our guest from Thuringia, Jörg Neumerkel had to suddenly leave us. He was one of those who remained faithful during the time of Socialism in the German Democratic Republic and was able to tell so well about how the church can serve in a society with a governmental dictator.

In spite of all our problems, especially the problem with growth, Bishop D. Brauer ascertained the following: “The situation has stabilized.” Rector Dr. A Tichomiroff is offering theological distance learning courses, which will begin on September 2. 42 have signed up for these courses. Five or six from our Far Eastern Provost have signed up. A special relationship between the Provost of the Far East and the Diocese of European Russia was established and a Lutheran profile was acknowledged.

We are confidently going into the future. God will not abandon our Lutheran Church with its mission here in Russia. “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.” (Psalm 11:10)

Thank you to all of our sponsors!

Manfred Brockmann, provost of the Russian Far East, August 2013