

## ***Russian (?) Correspondent*** **June 2022**

Many years ago, I was asked to take part in redesigning the webpage of what had formerly been the “Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States” (ELCROS, or its German equivalent - ELKRAS). The church in the former Soviet Union was splitting apart – not because of any enmity, but simply because maintaining a single juridical structure across international lines had become infeasible. The church throughout that enormous territory (with most congregations in Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia) decided to preserve fellowship among its regions through a new, looser structure known as the Union of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. This change seemed to fit changing circumstance - the social contexts of the countries were changing, and in the years to come issues of localizing Lutheranism (to worship in other languages, for example) might take precedence over the shared history.

But to return to the website – there was the question of the web address for the Union. It seemed obvious to many that the site should be **elkras.ru**. Why dot *ru*, I wondered, when the church was international? The folks with whom I was working in St. Petersburg acknowledged this, but they countered with the fact that all the non-Russian congregations together made up about a quarter of the Union’s total congregations. Certainly no one abroad would have a problem with the fellowship being centered in Russia, would they? This rhetorical question turned out to be not so rhetorical after all...

I think back to that time as I put together this “Russian Correspondent,” the name I have used for my newsletter ever since my first years of missionary service, almost 20 years. I wonder – how can I describe the relationship I have with the country that has become my second home? How can I explain the reactions of the churches in the region, how it struggles to witness to the Gospel despite its small size and vulnerability? How can God use me in service in this part of the world if living in the country (at least for now) appears to be an unwise option, and what positive role might partners (including readers of this newsletter) play?

As many of you know, my family is split between two countries at the moment; we hope for a full reunion of all five of us later this month. While these developments are still in progress, I have been advised to refrain from being too open about our situation. In the meantime, I wanted to give room for voices from churches in the region. Some of these texts (laid out in a more or less chronological manner) are from participants in the educational programs which I am still leading over Zoom; others are from colleagues on the ground. The violence described is sometimes graphic; hearing these stories is sometimes hard. I hope, however, that they help you get a better sense of how Christians are reacting to the situation, including the need to continue “ordinary” congregational ministry in troubling times.

In Christ,  
Bradn

## ***Good Friday Reflections***

It is 3:42 a.m. I can't sleep. Yesterday fatigue rolled over me like a wave, and I fell asleep quickly. Just before that I heard bombers flying over us again, crossing the border into the neighboring country. The sound is strange, blood-chilling. You can't mistake it for anything else...



I just had a nightmare. In it, I saw a young kitten, bloody, surrounded by broken glass. It is a scene I saw in real life about 20 years ago. My husband and I were on the way to our bus stop, headed for a friend's birthday party. On the way we saw a small kitten which boys

had put in a glass jar and thrown off a high-rise. I saw no way to help this poor animal, and our friends were already irritated at us for being late... I kept on walking, hating those boys, a storm of anger raging inside me.

Holy Week is about to begin; a week that plays a special role in the life of every Christian. Having read the passage for the day from the Gospel of Luke 23.32-49, I tried to determine where I am among the characters in the story. At first, I associated myself with the "good criminal" who, hanging on a cross, asked for forgiveness for his deeds. How wonderful it would be to go directly to heaven, to be right next to Jesus there... Certainly I'm not like the other criminal, the one who mocked the Son of Man? I'm not so heartless, or simply indifferent... No, no it can't be!?! I have not done anything wrong. I have always tried to help the elderly, children, relatives, neighbors. I am a good citizen. But something inside tells me that perhaps I behaved this way when it was beneficial to me, protecting my own inner paradise, not allowing myself to think about the people in the neighboring country have been suffering all the while. For 8 years, I silently guarded my own paradise. And if I hadn't been silent, maybe there wouldn't be so many innocent victims now...

In every story in the life of Jesus, we find the most pleasant place for ourselves in order to preserve the tranquility of our inner paradise. We judge other people's children for treating animals so badly. We judge other people for taking the wrong position regarding the war. And only the Lord himself knows us. He himself determines our place in the terrible story of the crucifixion of Christ.

Lord, help, protect the innocent and those who are not innocent. Our heavenly Father, protect the lives of the living and, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord, even if we once passed by suffering, now we ask You, help! Do not leave our bloodied hearts in broken glass jars, we pray to You...

*(Congregation member from Crimea that wishes to remain anonymous)*

## ***From a Good Friday Sermon***

One of the results of the Second World War for Christianity was the emergence of the “Theology after Auschwitz.” This was an attempt to understand how highly educated people, many of whom were committed parishioners, good spouses, and kind parents in ordinary life, directed all their energy toward the most efficient way to destroy other people. The Church, which until then naively thought that a person is naturally good and with enough education and the right upbringing peace and order would reign, turned out to be morally bankrupt. The Church had nothing to say to the generation that went through this hell. Only decades later theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann were able to comprehend what had happened and find a way to speak about Christ in an understandable language.

Today, Ukrainian theologians are raising the question: do we need a theology after Bucha? How does one talk about God after the terror, the murders and the rapes that men, women and children have experienced under the heel of Russian occupiers simply because they are Ukrainians? What about the fact that the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill blessed the Russian army for an aggressive war, and hence blessed all these atrocities? Where was God in the midst of this nightmare, and why didn't he intervene and provide protection? Why do we try to find a rational explanation, such as to say that “it is all very complicated,” that it could be “fake news,” despite the huge amount of evidence to the contrary? Is there room for genuine compassion here?

I do not pretend to give exhaustive answers to these questions, but I invite you to reflect on this topic based on today's sermon text, Luke 23.32-49...

At the Last Supper, Jesus gave the disciples final instructions - that they should serve each other - and also instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which establishes a physical connection with His future sacrifice. But He was betrayed by Judas and the religious elite and executed by Roman occupiers.

In addition to Jesus, we see several actors in the scene that unfolded on Golgotha. Two of them are criminals. Since they were given the cruelest form of punishment, we can surmise that they, too, were condemned as enemies of the state. Yet, each of these criminals behaves differently on the cross. One of them, as the Evangelist writes, slandered Jesus. Perhaps he was angry at Jesus, since he himself had literally laid down his life to fight the occupiers, while Jesus, instead of leading an uprising, engaged only in preaching and in such symbolic actions as expelling merchants from the Temple. From the criminal's perspective Jesus' sermons did not change anything. “What kind of



“E LAHI, E LAHI, LEMA SHABAQTANI!”

MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME!

БОЖЕ МІЙ, БОЖЕ, ЧОМУ ТИ МЕНЕ ПОКИНУВ?

Messiah are you? If you really want to God's kingdom to come, prove it! Save yourself and us! No? Well, then you deserve nothing more than to be mocked."

The other criminal had every reason to do the same, but instead he had sympathy for Jesus. He understood that, unlike them, Jesus had not stained his hands with the blood of people; He was suffering unjustly. And so the second criminal decided to trust that Jesus really was the Messiah. Perhaps he had heard Jesus preach; maybe God granted faith through some other means, but he believed that the execution of Jesus was not the end, but only the beginning of His reign... He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus gives him hope: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." ... One criminal who shared the same suffering and humiliation as Jesus saw only his own pain and disappointment. The second saw in Jesus hope for himself.

...I think we are all here because we are attracted to Jesus. We know that death will be conquered on the third day, and we will soon celebrate the Resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, it was the Cross that became the culmination of the path of God's Son, who completely identified himself both with the Father and with humanity, who voluntarily took on other people's sins and suffered punishment for them, even dying for them. He did not shy away from shame, from torture, from looting, from complete abandonment by God and people. Jürgen Moltmann wrote: "What we say about 'God after Auschwitz' depends on what we say about 'God after the cross of Christ.'" Crucifixion gives us reason to talk about God after Auschwitz, after the Gulag, after Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, after the basement of the Simferopol military enlistment office, after prison torture in Donetsk, after everything that happened in Mariupol, Kharkov, Bucha, Gostomel and Borodyanka. We have yet to find the right language for this, but the Cross will always be a reminder that God is not removed from each of us in the midst of suffering. He Himself went through hellish suffering in order to give us hope.

*Deacon Alexander Zhakoon, Odessa.*

### **30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Paul's Lutheran in Vladivostok**

The Sunday after Ascension Day is special for the congregation in Vladivostok. It was this Sunday on the church calendar on May 31, 1992, when, after many years of oblivion and ignorance, Pastor Manfred Brockmann invited Russian Germans (and whomever else was interested) for the first service in the re-born congregation.

Worship took place outside, next to the walls of the congregation's historic building. At that time the building belonged to the Pacific Fleet of the Russian Navy; it housed museum exhibits inside, with military weapons in the courtyard.

Thanks be to God that the church, built on a piece of land purchased for its construction at the expense of the parishioners, was not destroyed and has survived to the present day, although the building suffered significant damage because of many years of misuse and neglect.

The restoration of the church of St. Paul became an integral part of the history of the revival of the congregation. Many years passed before the building was returned to the congregation for its use; many years of hard work of employees, volunteers, partners were required to implement plans for the restoration of the building, a historical

monument. The main leader of the restoration work was Lyudmila Pedyash, a builder by education, and an experienced, persistent worker.

From the day of the first worship service the revival of the spiritual life of Lutherans in Vladivostok began. Ordinary worship services were held on Sundays in a library. Major holidays were celebrated in other places that could accommodate a large quantity of guests and expanding the circle of friends of the congregation.

A major event was the return of the church building to the congregation on September 16, 1997. After that, people were more willing to go to church. The congregation had the opportunity to carry out not only restoration work, but also social ministry, educational work, musical and various other ministries.



For a long 28 years, the spiritual leader and pastor of the community was its founder and spiritual leader, Pastor Manfred Brockmann. Today the congregation is well served by a new pastor, Vitaly Mohr. There are authorized lay leaders in the congregation who hold services in the absence of the pastor and help him in his ministry. The main activities of the resurgent

congregation was and remains spiritual and educational work: worship services, Bible studies, classes with confirmands and those wishing to be baptized. Theological seminars of the Far East Deanery are held annually; representatives from around the deanery, across Russia and from partners in such places as Germany, America and Slovakia, take part.

The Church of St. Paul has become a center of the cultural life of Vladivostok. Sacred music concerts held in it attract residents of the city, regardless of religion. Young couples wish to have their wedding ceremonies in a church - an attractive historical and religious building in the city center on the shores of the Golden Horn Bay.

We always remember the date of the revival of the community – the Sunday after Ascension. On this special day we remember how God heard our prayers and answered us...God continues to lead, guide, accompany, protect, and help us in every way.

The year the celebration fell on May 29<sup>th</sup>, and we marked the 30th anniversary of the rebirth of the congregation. Participants shared their memories from that time. It was important that the gathering was intergenerational, so that young parishioners will later be able to tell others the story of the congregation's rebirth. And in the house of the Lord, let the living Word of God and the unceasing praise of God's Name never cease!

*Nina Dmitrieva*

## **From the Pentecost Greeting of the ELCR**

... Acts describes how, on the day of Pentecost, the diverse group of people who had surrounded Jesus and learned from Him during his life, were unified with one another: they rejoiced with one other, prayed together, waited together for the fulfillment of the promise of the Lord. The experience of fear, devastation, and hopelessness at the death of Jesus were behind them. The Risen One comforted them.

And while the authorities and many other people claimed that Jesus was a false messiah and a criminal, although He was condemned and put to death, although His followers were to be persecuted, suddenly a sermon about the great deeds of God was proclaimed! The Good News rang out that forgiveness of sins was extended to others through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ!

The disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke openly, boldly and confidently about Christ. In preaching and witnessing about the Savior, they felt God's accompaniment... They were not afraid of earthly powers; in the Holy Spirit they were delighted by God's greatness and closeness to them. After Peter's sermon some asked: "What should we do?" Peter responded: 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' ... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added." (Acts. 2.37-38, 41).

Today, too, through proclamation, repentance, baptism, and the power of the Holy Spirit – Behold! Something incredible happens! Embittered, cruel, callous people entrust their lives to the God of love and peace in Jesus Christ! There are thousands of such people!

May God Almighty help us in these days and always to see only Him in the foreground, to listen to the Word, to be led only by the Spirit, to serve only for Lord's glory, to be blessed fruits ourselves and see the fruits God produces in others!

*Deputy Archbishop of ELCR, Dean of the Kama-Volga Deanery Vladimir Provorov*

## **From the Pentecost Greeting of the GELCU**

The Holy Spirit leads the Church through the centuries filled with suffering: wars, famines, persecutions... Huge empires and powerful rulers tried to destroy it, and surrounding circumstances caused Christians to disperse and lose their faith. But the Spirit of God, through the Word and the Sacraments, helped believers hold on to the Savior and rise up again after various catastrophes.

Now you and I are experiencing tremendous upheavals that tempt us to disperse and hide from our responsibility for the well-being of our neighbor. But the Spirit of God is calling the Church again so that we can be light and salt for the world and for our country in these difficult times. Be sensitive to this call; the Holy Spirit is stronger than those that resist the Spirit, but for Christians the Spirit is the tender Comforter.

Together we ask the Holy Spirit to bless our Church and strengthen the hearts of all Christians for the faithful testimony of faith and the service of love to our neighbors!

*Pavel Schwartz, Bishop of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Ukraine*