

Russian Correspondent

New Year 2020/2021

Watchword for 2021

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia in which I serve highly values the practice of reading Bible verses chosen for each day, month and year. The “losung” for the upcoming year is Luke 6:36 - “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”



Looking ahead to 2021, it is clear that we will need all the mercy we can get. Here in Russia our experiences in 2020 have taught us to recognize in a new way the depth of our own vulnerability and the seriousness of our responsibility to care for one another. At the same time, your brothers and sisters in Christ in this

part of the globe have been reminded that “your Father is merciful” in a multitude of ways -including through your partnership! In response they are striving to radiate mercy through the ministries of their congregations and in their daily lives. Thank you for all the ways you support the mission of the church - through your prayers, through your offerings, through your personal connections. We look forward to restoring the best of what has been and to opening up new ways of interaction in 2021.

In the name of the All-merciful, Bradn

Word of the Year 2020

Following the trend of their colleagues in English-speaking countries, the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute recently determined a “word of the year” for 2020. The experts who determined the “winner” were themselves surprised to find that their choice was not “quarantine” or “lock-down” or “pandemic,” but instead found an alternative that better represented the year as a whole - обнуление, or “zeroing out.” The immediate context for the year was that it was used to speak of a crucial component of the new Russian constitution; under its rules, President Putin’s former terms in office have been “zeroed out,” and he is eligible to run again for new, 6-year terms in office in 2024 and 2030. At the same time, the experts said, “zeroing out” points to a wider reset, a starting over from scratch in many aspects of the economy and culture in the context of the “new normal.”

2020 made all of us make many resets. My ministry (largely based around traveling to regions of our church that need attention in order to teach, preach, and provide pastoral care) was challenged in many ways. Starting in March in-person events were rescheduled and rescheduled again or (more frequently) postponed indefinitely. Dealing with the unknown and unfamiliar, as you all know, sapped a lot of energy. At the same time, I hope that you saw in your lives and ministries that a forced “zeroing out” has made us more aware both of the essential aspects of our common discipleship to Christ and of new possibilities for living life together (sometimes, apart/together).

Please accept my apologies for not being in touch with you as much as I should have over these past months. There were personal reasons for this (see prayer concerns at the end of the newsletter), but much was related to a sense (or rather, a hope) that we were moving toward the end of “quarantine time” and that I would write to you as we

move into the next phase. Despite the growing availability of the vaccine, however, it is clear that we are not there yet. In the meantime, below you can read about a few of our experiences here in the Russian Lutheran Church...which might help you reflect on all that God has done in and through you during this “reset.” May we all move forward with the Spirit’s guidance, being thankful for the ways God has worked through each of us in these unusual and challenging days.

The Word Made Digital

As with pastors everywhere “COVID time” has been a period when we engage thoughtfully with our congregations in an attempt to see our experience in the light of God’s revelation. The Biblical texts have been seemingly electric with such crucial themes as human vulnerability, fear and courage, sickness and healing, freedom and restriction...and, most of all, the call to God’s children to care for one another.

What has separated our experience in Russia with that of most others has always been



One of the challenges for interactive online events is dealing with Russian time zones. Black stars represent cities of participants.

two factors - history and geography. The first of these includes a wide range of factors, from the dominance of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the country to all the trauma related to the Soviet experience; this background affects every aspect of the church’s mission here. Yet even more significant throughout the years has been the constant challenge of

geography. Even having grown up in rural Montana, I find myself regularly stunned by the enormous distances that separate congregations from one another. If these congregations were all strong, independent units they would still desire fellowship with one another, but as it is, many of the congregations are quite small, lay-led, and in need of outside support. Not being able to incarnate our plans for in-person support (through visiting pastors and regional-wide educational events) this year, we were forced to test technology as a way of overcoming the limits of geography. The success of these endeavors has not eliminated distance as a problem, but it has had a significant impact on those who have the ability and make the choice to use internet-based resources for spiritual support. While for years I have been sending a weekly sermon text to congregations without a pastor (especially in the Far East, but also elsewhere), now we have been holding weekly Bible study and worship online (paused in the early fall months, when we thought that it was safe to come back together again....until the next wave of infections began to hit us) with participants from places without a congregation or who for health reasons are not able to attend their local congregation. In addition I have recorded videos for congregational use, have helped out the church’s Theological Seminary by experimenting with lecturers in Church History to supplement the written materials that I have already provided, and, last but not least, we have connected with partners in Germany and the United States in new ways thanks to technology. While in-person meetings will continue to be important for practical and spiritual reasons, this pandemic has sparked us to take steps in the right direction toward overcoming the isolation that so many of our people feel.

The Word Present and Future

Despite the challenges and risks we were able to organize a few, important in-person meetings over the past few months. This includes two trips to the Russian Far East and another to the church center in Omsk.

Vladivostok/ Ussuriysk, August and September

While we unable to gather our people together for our annual deanery-wide seminar for adults and youth, in late summer, it was safe enough for me to travel that I did go to the Far East. While I limited to Vladivostok and its surroundings, this fit well with my first priority – being with the St. Paul Lutheran in Vladivostok as it is undergoing a transition in pastoral leadership. Thanks to a good group of lay leaders assisted by retired pastor Manfred Brockmann and occasionally by their nearest “neighbor” (Pastor Alexander Lapochenko, a 5 hour bus-ride away), the congregation has made it through the difficult period of vacancy. Now, starting literally today (January 6), their new pastor has arrived. I will write more about Pastor Vitaly Mohr in upcoming newsletters, but for now I will say that Vitaly grew up in Siberia, immigrated with his family to Germany as a teenager, and, having completed his theological education there, returned to serve in the Russian Lutheran Church. For the past few years he has been pastor in Tomsk and several other cities in eastern Siberia. We had hoped to celebrate his installation in Vladivostok this coming Sunday, but personal circumstances (again, see prayer requests below) have made me delay my trip. This change in plans, however, will not affect the enthusiasm with which he will be welcomed by the members of the congregation.



Sister Sabine Mattis in the foreground. I am on the far right, with the new pastor for St. Paul in Vladivostok, Vitaly Mohr, sitting next to me. ELCUSFE Synod Assembly, October 2020.

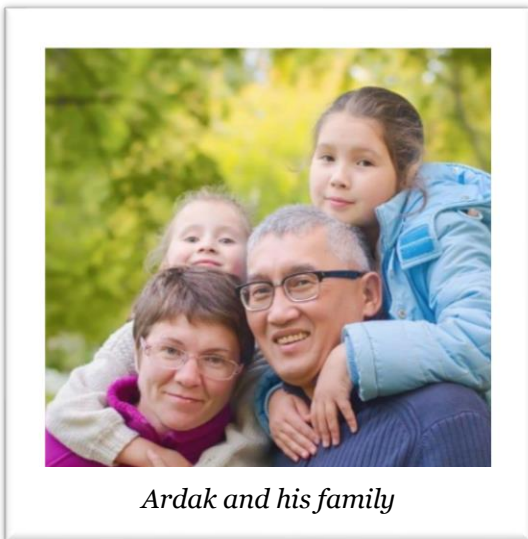
Synod Assembly / Seminar

In the late summer the leadership of the ELCUSFE (...Urals, Siberia and Far East) decided that they would work to minimize health risks, but would, all the same, host an in-person synod assembly in the fall. Delegates from high risk populations were asked to send their alternates instead, while other safety measures were taken for those who would attend. It must be acknowledged that there was a tendency at that time not to take the threat of COVID seriously enough; the first wave had not hit Siberia very hard,

and many had the sense that being less-densely populated did wonders to slow down the spread of the disease. As we were to learn, we were not cautious enough. There were a number of positive cases that can be connected directly to the synod assembly and seminar; thankfully, however, none of the participants or their loved ones was fatally infected by the virus.

That said, while questions of health affected the atmosphere, the actual work of the assembly and of the seminar went well and, in my assessment, might have even been more productive than usual. The theme of the synod assembly was “The Church in 2021-2025,” and for the first time the synod assembly really tried to work on strategic planning. Small groups worked in the areas of church structure, education, types of ministries, and stewardship. Each made concrete suggestions to the church’s leadership about goals and plans of action that might be taken in these areas. While we do not yet know the effective this will turn out to be, pragmatic goal-setting and planning was a fresh approach that engaged participants in a more intense way.

Afterwards, during the following week, the church hosted its traditional seminar for congregational leaders; its theme flowed quite naturally from that of the synod assembly - “Striving forward (Phil. 3.13)” Because the guest teachers that had been invited were unable to attend, I and other pastors in the church took their place. Pastor



Ardak and his family

Evgeny Lukinov from the Ural region spoke about new ideas for liturgy, while a Pastor Stanislav Mikula from the Omsk region spoke about increasing offerings as a spiritual practice. Sister Sabina Mattis introduced a program for small-group Bible study in congregations, while Bishop Alexander Scheiermann led daily Bible study. As for my part in teaching, I will “hand over the mic” to one of the participants, Ardak Kashkeev: “The largest part of the seminar was led by the Dean of the Far East, Pastor Bradn Buerkle. He brought up a very important aspect of congregational life - its history and ‘personality.’ We tried to look at ourselves as others might see us, to carefully analyze

everything from our buildings to our people. On the one hand this all seemed like marketing; on the other hand, it speaks to a very important part of our common life and activity. It seems to me that such analysis is something like what we do with an automobile - good diagnosis helps us explain the reason for various problems and helps us to avoid a complete overhaul...or even a fatal accident. And this is even more important when we consider that we are speaking about God’s chosen people.” One of the numerous tools for analysis that I gave participants was the idea of a congregational timeline, about which Ardak said: “I am certain that the idea of a congregational timeline was very helpful to many people. In particular it can help the younger congregational members feel connected to the older members and their common history.” During seminars, the time outside of the classroom is almost always just as important as what takes place inside it. This motivated Ardak to write: “I had the chance to spend some time with Bradn in private conversation. He is a great conversation partner, a sensitive brother in Christ, and his ‘Russian soul’ always encourages us to aspire for new goals.” In short, Ardak and many others found the seminar to be a success insofar as it “pointed to the direction of the future development of our congregations.”

Prayer requests

I am sure that many of you who are reading this have run into very serious challenges in many aspects of life over these many months of the pandemic. Having myself come down with the coronavirus (in a light form, thankfully) in May, for most of the year the main difficulties we faced on a personal level were related to keeping one another safe while at the same time trying to do the best we could for our children's education and development. Things took a turn for the more difficult, however, after the summer. My father-in-law, Alexander, who was diagnosed with late stage prostate cancer in late spring, had difficulties receiving proper medical attention; both COVID and corruption played a role. By the fall we were able to bring him to Moscow for treatment, but by then many of his internal bodily processes were failing, and he needed all of us - my wife (Natasha), my mother-in-law (Alla), and I - to help him physically, while I tried to support them spiritually as well. In the last days of December, Alexander became infected with COVID after his doctor came down with the virus; Natasha, in turn, was also infected when helping out her father at the hospital. Alexander was transferred to a unit where we were no longer able to offer our help... and where he passed away on the morning of January 1. Natasha is isolating at home; no one else in the family seems to be infected. At the same time because these are the holidays here and because of the COVID diagnosis, everything related to the funeral is delayed and uncertain. I would certainly appreciate your prayers for Alla, Natasha and our boys (Matvey, Martin, and Lukas) at this time of mourning for the loss of Alexander, in addition to your continued prayers for your sisters and brothers here, especially St. Paul Lutheran, Pastor Vitaly Mohr, Pastor Manfred Brockmann, and all those who seek to spread God's mercy in word and deed.

The basics....

I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 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 am also temporarily serving as the Dean of the Russian Far East. 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.

