

Russian Correspondent

Autumn 2023

Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine began more than a year and half ago, and the millions who have been affected by the violence continue to be in need of your prayers. There are soldiers who have been wounded physically and psychologically; parents that have lost their sons (and, sometimes, daughters); children and wives are left without news of their fathers and husbands; hundreds of thousands are attempting to learn a new language and adapt to a new way of life, as hope for a quick return home fades... Here in Germany, as we maintain relationships with relatives, classmates, friends and colleagues in Russia and as we do what we can to assist Ukrainians in our locality feel get the help they need, we share in the pain they feel; we are reminded to not let fatigue surrounding this "old" news weaken our empathy and our resolve to keep striving - in prayers and in our other actions - a way toward peace.

There is enormous pressure on Christians who remain in these situations to adapt to the "logic" of



war, to dehumanize those who have different citizenship. In my online educational activities with the Russian-speaking Lutherans, I am committed to helping them feel empowered to resist that pressure. And in this newsletter, I hope to paint a picture of your brothers and sisters in Christ that helps make it clear how that they - despite their very different circumstances - are trying, as we are, to be Christ's disciples. Sometimes that looks like cleaning up after a bombing, as in the picture from Odesa (here, left). In other times and places, this means trying to keep the church's work moving

forward, trusting that this is not (only) our human work, but also the action of the Holy Spirit. If my words here can help increase empathy and the desire to remain engaged with sisters and brothers in Christ in the former Soviet Union, I will have accomplished my goal.

Yours in the Lord,
Bradn

“Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.”

Delegates to the sixth General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia had this prayer from Lamentations (5.25) as their theme as they met on September 20-22 in St. Petersburg.

This was the first General Synod led by Archbishop Vladimir Provorov, elected at the last church assembly in June of last year. Besides giving a report on the state of the church (he was able to visit Kaliningrad in the West, Vladivostok in the East, and dozens of spots in between), he spoke about his understanding of the Church's priorities at present. He noted the importance of continued support for theological education and the need to focus on children/youth, along with the strengthening of networks of fellowship both domestically and internationally. There were living examples of this last aspect present at this Synod: Ivan Laptev, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia (ELCI), and Pastor Frank Lotichius (first pastor of the revived congregation in Petrikirche in the 1990s), who came to the Synod as a representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany. The Archbishop and the delegates welcomed renewed attempts to grow closer with the ELCI, and appreciated the solidarity expressed by fellow Lutherans from other countries as well.

On the agenda of the second day of meetings was the election of a new president of the General Synod. Alexander Deryugin (Saratov) received the majority of votes, and Maxim Shekker (Tyumen) was elected as his deputy. Alexander Deryugin is 39 years old, and is a recent graduate of the "O.K. Preacher" lay-leader educational program. He has been installed as a lay preacher in his congregation, as well as working as its secretary. Maxim (43) is also a lay preacher; in addition,

he was elected as the president of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East (ELCUSFE) in October of 2022.

During their time together, delegates had the opportunities to get acquainted with innovative approaches to breaking down the barrier between church and wider society. Anton Kurmyshov spoke about how Petrikirche has become attractive to tourists through excursions and the development of space in the church's "catacombs" (i.e., swimming pool basin that was left in Petrikirche from Soviet times.) Later, Pastor Evgeniy Raskatov of St. Anne's Church (ELCI), described how they used the gutted-by-fire interior of their church building as the jumping off point for building a unique ministry. There, art exhibitions, lectures, and concerts bring in new people to the church.



They have side projects (such as the "Manna" café located next to the church) that bring in financing for other ministries, while offering a "Fundamentals of the Christian Faith" course (both on-line and in-person) to all those interested in Christianity.

"What fascinates me is that they are looking for ways to reach people," said ELCUSFE Bishop Alexander Scheierman. Together he and other delegates thought about how they might take these non-standard approaches and apply them to congregations in different geographical-social settings.

These days together helped church leaders from around the country feel less isolated and renewed by a sense that God's Spirit is still working in and through the Church, despite all the challenges of the present situation.

Shrinking spaces - the Case of Kasta

Note: The text below is a modified version of an article I wrote for the Hermannsburg Mission's magazine "Mitarbeiten." The theme this time is "shrinking spaces," a term used in the social sciences to describe decreases in human freedom and human rights in various contexts where our partners live and carry out ministry.

Come out, come take a walk with me! / Freely meeting for a walk/ going anywhere we like, / Freely meeting for a walk, / never mind a bit of fright! / Come out take a walk / just come out for a walk! ... / Who cares if they point at us? So what if we get punished, / if we get soaked and chilled and shiver? / ... Leave your water guns, nerf blasters and spitball shooters at home. / Don't take anything with you, just come take a walk! / Leave your cap guns and slingshots, hockey sticks and jump ropes at home. / Don't take anything with you, just come take a walk! / Cops and robbers will be there, infantry and cavalry, / but come out for a walk. / If you stay at home, what good will that be? / You can come in roller skates / we'll be rolling lots of film / You'll need helmets and elbow pads for this game of tic-tac-toe. We'll play the Os, but they won't X us out....

When the Russian rap group "Kasta" released the video to their song "Come Take a Walk with Me" at the end of 2020, it represented the apogee of these musicians' social-political protest against violent repression by the state, both in their home country and in neighboring Belarus. Under the mask of an innocent invitation from a child, the song provided a message that could be rallied around. By this time, making direct challenges to the powers that be would have been considered an unnecessary risk; still, artists could take a chance by pointing out the cruelty of authoritarian regimes... and they could still express hope that by "coming out for a walk" the masses could change their societies.



Come and take a walk with me ("Enough" - burning banner)

The analogy frequently used to describe “shrinking spaces” in Russia over the years is “the tightening of the screws.” Until the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, the pace of this “tightening” was slow and steady - like someone using a hand-operated screwdriver. Civil liberties eroded at a slow (but, in retrospect, seemingly inevitably steady) pace. Early in President Putin’s rule, institutions (e.g., media outlets, non-governmental organizations) that

challenged the Kremlin’s interest were the main targets, though powerful regional leaders (the foremost of whom is Razam Kadyrov in Chechnya) also could take repressive measures against individuals. In more recent years, public protesters were violently put down, certain themes became taboo, and voices criticizing corruption and the state in general became targets even more frequently than before; the most prominent of these voices, belonging to Alexei Navalny, was almost totally silenced through poisoning. Looking back, it is clear that the steady deterioration of the justice system and the winning of loyalty of government workers (especially of the police and military) through increased wages was no coincidence.

While this all was a matter of concern for those engaged in human rights issues throughout the 2010s and into the first year of the 20ss, not every open space in Russian civil society was shut down. Anti-corruption organizations, advocates for disadvantaged groups, etc. continued their activities; occasionally an opposition politician could even win a local election; while significantly reduced, there was still a presence of opposition media. It was unclear what the future would hold...

After “Come Take A Walk” and the failure of Belarusian protesters’ attempts to install the winner of their election, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, as president, Kasta’s members were split about how to act next. They wondered what the consequences would be of releasing more political tracks...and questioned their usefulness. They decided to take a “time out” and release an album of silly kids’ music. (A particular joy for our youngest son, Lukas.) Kasta, and much of the rest of the country, felt like it was on “pause.”

But then came February 2022. Suddenly, it seemed that the government suddenly found an electric tool to quickly fully tighten the screws and drive out all resistance to its plans. By mid-2022 “space” had diminished to zero.

Today Kasta is one of the dozens of musical groups that has been banned from holding concerts in Russia. Like many other artists and intellectuals, they have lost all hope in the ability of collective action to change their government’s repressive policies and to stop the war; their disempowerment is obvious in the 2023 song “Timelessness” by Kasta member Vladi:

We tell ourselves this fairy tale: “They won’t arrest me, and even if they do, I’ll get a fair hearing. / They won’t accuse me, and if they do I won’t be found guilty. They’ll acquit me and apologize.” / But this has no place in reality; / the President has guaranteed this. / Grow up and accept that your country/ Has spit on you, that mean nothing to them. / Becoming mature means quitting the endless / Search for a thread of meaning in the dead end of contradictions. / Moral values cannot be found in patriotism... / In the East or the West or the “peaceful” lethal atom. / A child always believes that his mother loves him. / But the Motherland is not a mother. / It's time for childhood to end. / Bitterness, loss, darkness -/ These are the things that will help us grow up.

[Chorus] Timelessness / February lasts forever / The old morality is no more than fertilizer.

As partners we can note the struggles of citizens and of churches within such a situation. Recognizing the extreme disempowerment of individuals and institutions, we can refrain from harsh judgements of those who are unable to throw off repressive regimes, even as we always keep in mind those whose lives (in this case, Ukrainians and Russian political prisoners) are most directly impacted by the evil of authoritarianism. Our empathy and our friendship in faith is needed so as to not increase our partners’ suffering by leaving them alone. Instead, we can stand in solidarity with them, awaiting and praying for a time when we can “go out for a walk” with them again.

Continuing Development of Theological Education

Regarding my ministry in the area of theological education, I continue to hold weekly text studies and send out sermons to congregations without a pastor. The 90 minute or so discussions of the Scripture and preaching paths provides me an opportunity for some insight into how ministers and congregational members are feeling in Russia and – to a lesser degree – Ukraine. My original plan was to shift focus at the beginning of the new church year to collegial sermon improvement (rather than preparation), but I have the sense that everyone right now is a bit in his or her own “shell” for protection of one’s mental health, so it may not be the best time for (even constructive) criticism. In the meantime, a database of sermon-preparation materials for Russian lay preachers has been prepared, and now the major question is whether or not we can finally gain permission from a German church organization to use their structure as the behind-the-scenes “backbone” structure of the site. Conversations are ongoing.

At the request of the Russian church, I continue to be involved in their online educational programs – the pre-college level “OK Preacher” (for lay training) and the bachelor-degree level at the Theological Seminary. Regarding the former, the two-year program had its first 13 graduates this May; their feedback helped guide the governing board (upon which I sit) to make suggestions for revisions, which will benefit the new group of students, who have recently begun their first semester. Regarding



Online worship and graduation ceremony, OK Preacher.

the latter, Seminary President Anton Tikhomirov has recently moved the online educational platform to one that will be more secure, locally-adapted and functional. In that process, I revised the materials (lecture texts, quizzes etc.) that I provided on Church History until the year 1500.

In my next newsletter, I will write more about how cooperation in theological education in other parts of the world is developing as a part of my ministry. For now, I will simply say that I am continuing to plan experimental courses that will bring together Christians from across the globe to look at themes that are of common concern. You, too, are invited to take part! (see last page below)

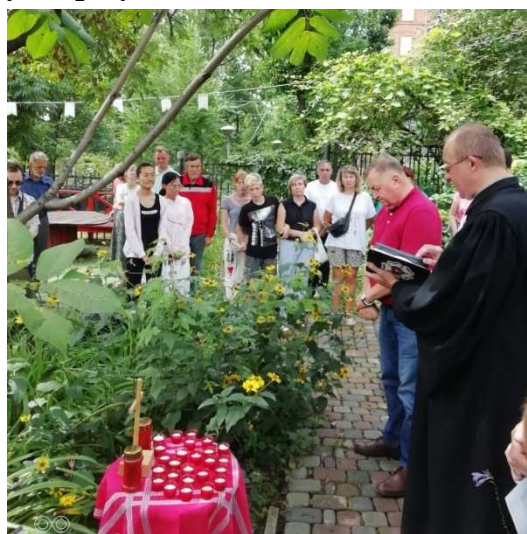
Update on Congregations in the Russian Far East

Recently one of my colleagues asked me about the general state of affairs in the congregations of the region where I was formerly the dean, a region that has traditionally had a lot of ties to Lutherans in the U.S. – the Far East. While I would be able to say much more were I there “on the ground,” I am happy to share with you what I am able to gather from conversations with church leaders from the area.

One of the important changes over the past two years is that the number of functioning congregations has decreased. Magadan and Komsomolsk are two cities that have lost a lot of population, and both suffered from isolation and dependence on a single, strong lay leader who was unable to continue in ministry for health reasons. While they continue to meet locally from time to time and stay in touch over messenger apps, they are no longer meeting regularly. A similar future might be in store for the congregations in Khabarovsk (St. John’s) and Blagoveshchensk. While neither of these cities are as economically depressed as the other two, they also have never had a pastor there for constant, week-to-week spiritual support. After many years in this state, their lay leaders are tired, and they now gather for worship a couple of times a month.

St. Mary's in Ussuriysk is also a very small congregation that suffers from a degree of burnout. However, they do have the advantage of being located relatively close to Vladivostok, and they can count on Pastor Vitaly Mohr (see below) from there to visit from time to time... And they, too, can make the trip to St. Paul's without too much of a problem.

North from Ussuriysk is St. Luke's in Arseniev. This congregation has been led for many years by Pastor Alexander Lapochenko, and they have had a strong partner relationship with their sister church in Great Bend, Kansas. Arseniev, like many isolated areas, has been affected more by the war (i.e., a higher number of men were mobilized for military service) than the big metropolitan areas. Even though it is almost as far away from Ukraine as one can get in Russia, the congregation – which, unlike most Russian congregations, has a large percentage of male members – is all too aware of the ongoing conflict. St. Luke's has struggled lately because of health problems that both Pastor Lapochenko and his wife, Oksana, have been facing. In addition, they feel almost overwhelmed by the danger of the mold that has been causing damage to their church building; one of the ways to fight the mold is to keep the building heated properly, but right now they do not have the finances available to do so. Please remember them in your prayers.



Memorial service for the victims of political repression. St. Paul's, Vladivostok.

St. Paul's in Vladivostok has been led for almost two years now by Pastor Vitaly Mohr. Vitaly, with his pastoral heart, his skills at bringing people together, and his openness to various kinds of ministry, has been a great fit in the congregation. Under his leadership, lay-led initiatives from Bible study to German-heritage cultural groups to concerts in the church, have all developed in a positive way. Vitaly himself would admit that his weak side is communication with people away from the congregation...which means that not all potential partners know how the Spirit is moving in their congregation! We thank God for Vitaly's ministry there and pray for him.

Rather surprisingly, the concerts organized by St. Paul's have become even more popular with the surrounding community, and music remains a very important tool for sharing God's beauty and love; at the same time they also provide a significant source of income, insofar as concert-goers usually contribute the "expected donation" for tickets. The congregation's electronic organ main board, however, has just recently stopped functioning, and this adds even more motivation to continue to try to raise funds for a new organ.

One final congregation in the deanery is St. Mark's in Chita - an outlier in every sense. Chita is much further west than the rest of the congregations in the deanery – it takes the same 2.5 days on the train to get to Vladivostok that it takes to get to the bishop's office in Omsk. But, besides that, the congregation is one that is growing stronger thanks to families with children. Despite having no single, formal leader, they have a team spirit that keeps worship and other projects moving. They've recently decided that, if funds can be found, they would like to purchase space for the congregation's use. At present they meet in their own apartments; this works well for those already in the church, but acts as a barrier in the Russian context to new people joining them.

Thank you all for your concern, support, and prayers for your sisters and brothers in the Far East Deanery!



Easter morning breakfast. St. Mark's, Chita.

Meeting of the Union of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (former ELCROS).

The Russian-speaking Lutheran churches in the post-Soviet lands continue to have fellowship with one another through shared media and educational projects. The leaders of the churches also come together at least once annually. This year, they met in Tbilisi (Georgia) from September 7 to 10. The meeting was attended by Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia Vladimir Provorov, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East Alexander Scheirermann, Deputy Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of European Russia of Russia, Dean Viktor Weber, Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan Yuri Novgorodov, Deputy Bishop of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine, Pastor Alexander Gross, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kyrgyz Republic Alfred Eichholz, as well as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Georgia and the South Caucasus, who became the host of the event, Rolf Bareis.

The council of bishops shared with each other about the situations of their churches, and discussed existing and possible future projects. More importantly, though, they committed to regularly pray for each other and to continue to be in close communication with each other. Despite differences in languages, cultures, national and church traditions, they can together hear and proclaim the language of Christ's love, together proclaim peace and salvation in Him. Praise God for that!

Open invitation – International Holy Week Exchange

In February, my colleague Pastor Indra Grasekamp (Secretary for Global Spirituality) and I will be hosting a series of online meetings called “Holy Week Exchange: Best Practices from around the Globe.” For each session (and participants are welcome to attend as many or as few as they like) we will welcome a guest speaker from one of ELM’s partner churches to present about Holy Week practices from their contexts. For example, on February 20th the presenter will speak about and present a liturgy for Maundy Thursday based on what she uses in her congregation in Cape Town, South Africa. Participants will not only receive insight into Christian life in another part of the world, but will receive materials (text, audio, and/or video) that could be used in a congregation or adapted for local use. Meetings will be in English and German. Unfortunately, the time for U.S. participants isn’t great (6 a.m. Mountain/ 7 a.m. Central), but sessions will also be available as recordings. 15.02 Theme: Palm Sunday (Brazil); 20.02 Theme: Maundy Thursday (South Africa). 27.02 Theme: Good Friday (Ethiopia). 29.02 Theme: Easter (Malawi) Please let me know if you are interested, and I will send you the links!

Harvest (Thanksgiving) Celebration

The first Sunday in October is the day when Thanksgiving is celebrated in Lutheran Churches in the former Soviet Union. Below are pictures from Kiev (Ukraine), Perm (Ural Mountains), and Vladivostok.



The basics.... I am an ELCA pastor serving with the Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Lower Saxony (ELM). I spent 20 years of ministry in Russia before leaving there in March of 2022.

Please pray for peace, both among nations and within each of us. If you have any questions for me, please feel free to write to me at: bradnbuerkle@gmail.com.