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On baptism and the church

By Albina Davidovna Vazhenina Becker
translated by Alexei Streltsov

[Editor's note: This is part 3 of a three part series. Parts 1 and 2 were printed in the September and December 2009 edition of the SLMS newsletter. These can be downloaded from the SLMS website]

All my life as I remember, we were forbidden to show faith in God. I was not even baptized then. Maybe because there was no longer any priest around. When I was small, I heard from my mother about baptismal sponsors. As I grew up, I asked my mother: "Who is my baptismal mother?" Having talked to my grandmother, mother shared with me that I was not baptized throughout my life. This is probably why my life did not turn out well. I was eventually baptized in Siberia, where my mother was living, around 1986.

And as soon as the church in Ekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) got opened, my friend Shura and I immediately started to go there. We found it by chance. We kept looking, and a random man told us that the Lutheran church was nearby. The parish rented a room in the building of the library to a children's concert hall. Shura, of course, went to the city authorities, where everybody was supposed to be registered, and were immediately assured that it was not some kind of sect, that

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Evgeny Dmitriev – a Russian's Story

translated by Pavel Khramov

[Translator's note: When I informed Evgeny that we wanted to publish an interview with him, he felt rather embarrassed. He said his life is not special and it is not much to talk about. In a sense, it is true. Evgeny's story is quite typical for today's Russian: an atheist, who opposes God – not out of strong convictions, but rather out of habit. This is the story of his conversion to Christianity]



I was born in 1960, in a small village Plotava of Altai region. My parents were peasants, "kolkhozniki" (it means you work as farmer, but not for yourself, but for the state farm). In 1969 we moved to Tajikistan, my parents decided to participate in one of the big building projects of the USSR. They worked there for six years; I continued my studies in the school. I remember very well how all school students were gathering cotton every summer. It was called "helping to socialize agriculture" and we did it for free. In 1975 we moved to Novokuznetsk.

My parents were baptized. But during the World War II my father's father and his older brother were killed. It hardened his mother, she was angry at God, so she raised him in unbelief. Thus, he is less inclined to listen about Christ than my mother. I also was raised as a typical Soviet child in atheism. However, unbelief in God was expected and considered "natural." I do not remember the atheistic propaganda to be really strong and active in the schools, where I studied. But because of that atmosphere I could not even imagine that I'd become a

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On the exact opposite side of the world

By Valerie Kister

A trip to Russia would be a life-changing experience for many Americans. For Judy Bascom of Muskegon, Mich., however, it was the

continuation of a long-time involvement with both Russia and the Lutherans there.

About the time Bascom and her husband Robert began attending St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, Spring Lake, Mich., three years ago, the congregation was looking for ways to branch in missions. Bascom talked about the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society and the voters set aside funds to help a Siberian Lutheran church. St. Matthew's eventually became involved with St. James the Apostle Lutheran Church in Novokuznetsk, located about a five hour drive by car south of Novosibirsk. That connection quite literally became the trip of a lifetime for Bascom and some members of St. Matthew's.

Bascom's connection to Russia, however, started before then. She had previously traveled to Russia twice with The Russian Project. Started in 1997, two years before Bascom became involved with it, The Russian Project's goal was to bring men from the former Soviet

Union to Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind., to earn their master of divinity and reopen churches closed under the Soviet regime. The original goal was to have 10 men go through the program. Ultimately, 38 men completed it. Around 2002-2003, The Russian Project



Congregation in Novokeznetsk

began the transition to the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society. Bascom retired from her position as the administrative assistant to Rev. Dr. Timothy Quill at CTS in 2007. She was then asked that same year to continue her work as a board member of the Siberian Lutheran Mission

Society.

The Michigan group (which also included Rev. Michael Goers of St. Matthew's, a nurse, a retired elementary teacher, and a retired businessman)

spent 16 days in Russia last September. After spending a few days in St. Petersburg to adjust to the time change, they worshiped at St. Andrew's in Novosibirsk where they also hosted a festival for the children of the congregation to mark the opening of Sunday school, somewhat similar to a rally Sunday in the United States.

"Although we didn't speak Russian and they didn't speak English, we understood each other well with the games and such," Bascom said.

The group also did some work at St. Mary's in Tomsk and worshiped at St. James. Bascom said the group had very specific goals and tasks laid out by Bishop Vsevolod Lytkin before they traveled to Russia.

While, there Bascom said the group was moved by the poverty they saw and the hospitality they experienced. They were also moved by the Russians' strong desire for confessional worship. Bascom believes this desire reflects what was once taught in Russia before the Soviets took over, as demonstrated by the people's reactions to the teaching of pastors who went through The Russian Project.

"The people who kept the Lutheran faith quietly in their hearts embraced what the new pastors brought [after the collapse of the Soviet Union]," Bascom said.

Reflecting on the Collect for the Word, which reads in part, "Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and take them to heart ..." Bascom added, "I believe that is what the earlier Lutherans did, because they kept that faith."

Although this was Bascom's third trip to Russia, it was the first outside of Novosibirsk. She said it was exciting for her to see the men who had gone through The Russian Project now serving their congregations.

Bascom says although she has many fond memories from her work with The Russian Project, she is very happy to be serving on the SLMS board. "I feel I can still be of assistance to the Russians," she explained.

As for another trip to Russia? Bascom said she would go without hesitation if another opportunity presented itself. "I'm sitting on the exact opposite side of the world and I'm worshiping with fellow Lutherans. It's an awesome experience," Bascom said. ✂



Judy in Tuim

"I'M SITTING ON THE EXACT OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE WORLD AND I'M WORSHIPING WITH FELLOW LUTHERANS. IT'S AN AWESOME EXPERIENCE," BASCOM SAID.

A Russian's story Continued from page 1

Christian. (I remember a story happened to me in Tajikistan. I was going to drawing lessons. Once I wanted to draw a picture of Lenin, but my teacher harshly forbade me. She even struck my hands a few times. Lenin was "sacred." So, an unprepared kid could not dare to draw his "icon".)

However, my parents "baptized" me and my sisters. In our village in the 1960s there was no church, no pastor or priest. But somebody was performing, as everybody called it,

"immersion." My parents took me to that person and I was "immersed." My mom was not interested in all these questions, so, when I asked her much later, she could not remember who it was and what kind of ritual it was. Interestingly, almost all children in our village were "baptized" by that person. Despite the "atheism-that-goes-without-saying" people had kept memory about God and about church. There was a story in our village: When communists were destroying the church building, the most jealous one trampled Christ's icons. After a short while his legs were paralyzed. On the church foundation later on was built a store. This place also was used as a social club. Until now the church has not been rebuilt in our village.

After graduating from the high-school in 1978 I went to Novosibirsk to study at the university. The first year of "freedom" from my parent's control brought bad fruits. I wasted time in parties and misused alcohol. So, the university didn't allow me to live in a dorm for the next year and I was deprived of a scholarship (stipend). With three other students we were renting a flat, I was working; my parents helped me a lot. The second year was much better; I moved back to a dorm and got a stipend. I became a good friend with guys we lived in a flat the second year. We became much more serious, spent more time studying.

I graduated from the university in 1984 and moved to Barnaul to work there. In the Soviet Russia you studied at the university for free, but you could not choose where to work the first three years after graduating. You should go wherever the state would send you. By the end of those three years I was sick of living in dorms, so I went to Novokuznetsk, back to my parents. Rather late for Russians, I married in 1989 to Nadezhda, a girl from my native village.

I always was a little bit religious, as probably most of the Russians, or, even all the people on earth. For example, once I found at home a little metal icon and took it with me

DESPITE THE "ATHEISM-THAT-GOES-WITHOUT-SAYING" PEOPLE HAD KEPT MEMORY ABOUT GOD AND ABOUT CHURCH.

to Novosibirsk. I believed it was helping me during exams.

About 1993 I was seriously exposed to Christianity. My wife's sister and her husband became Christians and started to go to a Baptist church in Irkutsk, where they lived at that time. First, I smiled at them. They sent us a New Testament, then the whole Bible and other books. Strangely enough, I started to read it. Nadezhda, my wife played an important role here. From the very beginning she became sincerely interested in Christianity. She was

"digging" me in the side: "You'd better read the Bible than science fiction."

Though I didn't mean to believe in all this, I was attracted to the Bible. I started to read the New Testament from the very beginning. I do remember my confusion when I got to Paul's Epistles. I thought: "What does it have to do with me? All these letters were written to some

Ephesians, Galatians — nations which do not exist anymore. They all are dead for long time already." But suddenly I realized that I'm very serious about what I read. I was not just getting new information, but I believed it. My colleagues worried about me. They found atheistic brochures, trying to turn me from that "opium" (as Marxists used to call any religion — "opium for common people").

About the same time I met Jehovah's Witnesses, who were going from door-to-door, suggesting "Bible studies." I "studied the Bible" with them for about two months. Then my brother-in-law, Igor, sent me a book, disclosing their false teaching. Following his advice I started to go to the Baptist church. Then I knew only two denominations, namely, Baptists and Russian Orthodox. I had no idea of differences between them.

The Russian Orthodox congregation was quite far from our place, but the Baptists were close. So, the choice was obvious.

My wife and I were baptized in the Baptist church in 1995. About six years we were members of that congregation; later on I was even ordained as a deacon. But soon I started to ask questions, I started to doubt about Baptist teaching. In their library I found a book where author

presented Baptism in traditional manner, as the Sacrament that gives

forgiveness of sins and salvation. I was also exposed to Orthodox criticism of Baptist teaching. First, I didn't agree with that criticism, but later I realized that not all of the Baptist doctrines conform to Scripture.

Igor, my brother-in-law, became a Lutheran. He sent us the Small Catechism and a book "Living with God", translated and published by LHF [editor's note: LHF is Lutheran Heritage Foundation]. I liked it very much. I agreed with what this book taught and not as the Baptists were teaching. It was so good to

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Evgeny's family

On baptism

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everything was according to the law. So we started going there. Fr. Sergei [Glushkov] and Fr. Alexey [Trapiznekov] were not priests yet at that time, but they were still seminary students. I remember how Fr. Alexey conducted classes and told us about faith in Jesus Christ. Then when Fr. Sergey got vested in an alb, I remember, I even got surprised. At my mother's place in Tumen region the church gatherings were conducted in a different manner, mostly in German, but I didn't know German, unlike my mom who still remembered it. We no longer knew German.

I asked my mother for a baptismal certificate because Fr. Alexey asked me when and where I was baptized. Subsequently mother presented a confirmation certificate to me also from that church in the Tumen region. They issued it for me in 1999. Even though I did not understand German, I remember my baptism. I knelt and the priest poured water on me.

Nadya, my daughter, has a very close resemblance to her father, just like a copy. I was young, I wanted a boy, but Nadya was born instead. But then I thought, how good it was that it all happened this way.

I was very tall and slim and when I was pregnant, I could not eat anything. At that time there was almost nothing there anyway. So Nadya was born weighting only 2400 grams, blue, ugly, just skin and bones. I was even afraid when they brought her for feeding for the first time, I even said: "Take her away from me, I don't need her." A pregnancy leave used to be 30 days prior to birth and 30 days after. I had such strong headaches that sometimes they took me to a nurse's office unconscious. And once I had very high blood pressure while at work, and it was Saturday, and I had to go to pick up Nadya from the kindergarten. She was in the kindergarten for the whole week. Shura, my colleague at work, was by coincidence in our section. She said she would help me to pick up my daughter from the kindergarten. Since that moment we became friends, and we helped each other throughout our lives. But I would never take any money from her. Just the opposite, I advised her to save money for the apartment purchase. She lived in a dorm, she worked hard, tried to always work extra, both on the weekends and in holidays. But she never had her own family and children. Nadya and I were her family. With nobody else did I have such a friendship. I miss her so much. It will soon be four years since she is



Albina with husband



Albina with Nadya and granddaughter, Anna

deceased. We went to the church together. She was Russian, but she also got confirmed in our Lutheran church .

Shura and I worked together in a tram park, and I worked in the planning department. Other than my work I had to work as a conductor for five shifts since there was a lack of conductors. At that time they did not ask if I had a small child or if I were raising her on my own. Instead, I asked for more work to get more payment. It used to be not permitted, since the pay check was fixed, and they did not allow paying extra, but somehow people responded and added 5 more shifts. So this is how it was: I would wake up early on the weekend, prepare everything for my daughter, and tell her what she would eat and drink, these are the toys, this is what you will play. She was still small, preschool age, but I had to go to work. She stayed at home and didn't cry. Then I worked extra as a conductor in a trolley, I would come early, ride on a trolley until 8 am, then would also ride some after main work.

The school principal once told me: "How can you be this way, Alla [translator's note: she probably used this name as a Russian version since her German name Albina may have been perceived in a bad way after WWII] Davydovna, you raised such a daughter, she has so nice manners and is a good student, and how can you do it on your own, you work so much, all your life on two jobs, how are you able to accomplish that." Somehow he treated me with respect, since he saw that I didn't drink, wasn't promiscuous, didn't behave in any improper way. And the wives were never jealous of me. When they (the bosses) went for vacation, they took Nadya and me with them. Once a director of Gortorg [translator's note: City Trade Organization] came to our enterprise with an offer to organize the "Table of Orders" at our enterprise so that people could get their groceries right at work. And so, when the opportunity came, the

director offered my name, knowing my responsibility and that I raised a child on my own. He knew that I would take any opportunity to earn some cash. I agreed right away. This is how I got into the habit of sleeping 4 to 5 hours per night. Even now I wake up early. I always try to get along with people, and they help me too.

Earlier I said to myself: "Why does the Lord treat me this way?" He didn't give me a personal life. My husband died early. I worked

so much and tried not to deceive anybody. I live in a just way. The sun was shining, but didn't give me warmth.

I was for her a father, mother, man, woman, always there working. So I burnt out. Now I am sick all over, everything is aching. So this is how hard it is sometimes.

But now I think otherwise, now **Continued on page 5**

know that there is a church, which faithfully follows God's Word. I started to look for the Lutheran church and wrote to the Russian division of LHF. They sent me the Book of Concord and Small Catechism with explanations. I was surprised to know that Lutheran Hour Ministry had organized a group to study basics of Lutheran theology. Once every two weeks this group was meeting on Saturdays. We were using Dr. Hogg's book "Basics of the Christian Teaching", translated in Novosibirsk.



Sunday School in Novokuznetsk

In the beginning the group numbered about 20 people. But we didn't have a permanent place and needed to move from one place to another. By the end of these studies only four people were confirmed. I wasn't among them, as I was still a member of the Baptist church. These studies taught me the Lutheran faith. I worried even more about their rejection of the clear words of Christ. They deny that in Lord's Supper we receive His Body and Blood. Also, I felt it to be not right that my children (four by that time) were not baptized. Besides the teaching, I was attracted by the liturgy. The Lutheran church looked like a "real church" and not as a gathering of "like-minded people." Together with my wife we decided to leave the Baptists. She strongly supported me, as she also started to see their fallacies. (Nadezhda could not attend Lutheran classes; she watched the kids.)

Finally, we announced that we are leaving our Baptist congregation. According to their tradition we were invited to the common gathering, where we were to explain, why we are leaving. I brought up only one reason. I said that I cannot distribute bread and wine (one of my duties as a deacon) when Christ says: "Take eat, this is my Body... Take drink, this is my Blood." We waited outside, while the congregation was discussing the situation. After about 20 minutes, which we felt to be much longer, they invited us back and said that they cannot let us "go in peace," as we leave to another denomination, but we will be excluded from the members of congregation. We kept good relationships with many people, despite of all our theological discussions and disagreements. However, I also have heard that presbyters of that congregation said a lot of lies about the Lutheran faith, obviously, to prevent people from moving from them to the Lutheran church.

I was confirmed and my children were baptized in 2003 by an American pastor, who was a missionary in Novosibirsk. Our Lutheran group, which came to be after those classes, could not become a "normal church". We had no pastor, nobody gave us Communion. Catechists were coming from the Novosibirsk mission from time to time. They served liturgy of the word. Only once again the same pastor visited us and gave us Communion. Then the mission was closed and for about four months we lived independently. Our group met every Sunday at our place. [Interviewer's

note: Two-room apartment with six people living there.] We read the Bible and prayed. We contacted the provost (DP) of the Ingrian Lutheran church, he promised to help, but did nothing. We felt kind of abandoned and even deceived.

Then one of the catechists, who used to visit us, suggested contacting Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church. I and one active lady from our group went to Novosibirsk. We explained our situation. Pastors in St. Andrew's Lutheran Church said to us that resources are limited, but they will do the best to help us. Since then pastors and seminarians started to come regularly and soon our group became a congregation of the SELC. My wife and later my two sons (Andrey, he is now 19 years old, and Artyom, 17) and two daughters (Maria, 10, and Lubov, 8) have been confirmed in the Siberian Ev. Lutheran Church.

Just a few years ago we were a small group of 5 or 6 people coming together in the flat. Now our congregation consists of about 25 confirmed members and about 10 or 15 more people come from time to time to our liturgy (some come regularly, some less often). Deacon Dmitry Dotsenko comes every Sunday from Abakan to conduct a service. Once a month one of the pastors from Novosibirsk comes to give us communion. We are thankful to God and the generosity of our brothers and sisters here and in the [SLMS](#) that we could purchase a place for our congregation to gather.

My colleagues ask me sometimes, why I waste my Sundays on church. They go to their dachas or watch TV or visit friends. I answer that I always have time for the church, because I love to be there, because I need to be there. Only Christ can give me strength to struggle with daily difficulties of the life. Only in the church I get hope for eternity, and without that hope this life would be too miserable, too pathetic. ✕

On Church

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I believe the Lord has always been with me, even though I did not always recognize it. I lived, and I worked incessantly. I purchased an apartment. For at that time I was considered wealthy: Everything was there: carpets, crystal, etc. It is now that nobody needs that or values that, some of that is just waste. I helped my daughter to buy both an apartment and a car when her husband was still alive. My daughter was both fed and dressed. It is only now that I understand that the Lord has always been with me and helped me. He protected me. The only thing was that I had no personal life. I had men around, but I didn't allow myself to break-apart another family.

I got acquainted with good people at the food storage facility, and also I went on my own to the meat factory, and people conceded to me and helped. I tried to do things for people as much as I could. I find and bring tea and coffee and meat, which were hard to find. Such groceries in our country were not for the "common people," so the store shelves were completely empty.

I had to come on Saturday and Sunday and catch up at my main job, as nobody else

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could do it for me. I could not say to people at my job that I received a second salary, as not only could I be punished

**WHEN THERE WERE CHURCH HOLIDAYS,
IF YOU WOULD GO TO CHURCH, SOME
SPY WOULD SEE YOU FOR SURE AND WILL
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for that, but also somebody else. Some people could have envied me, not realizing that while they sleep in on every morning, I am already at work at 5 am, Saturday and Sunday, included. I brought Nadya at my work place with me. She was doing her homework there, that is, after she began to attend school, while I was working hard. And nobody could see that, people were discussing movies they saw and the magazines they read, but I had to go to the store during the lunch break to receive the goods there, then come and stock the shelves. I was at one job until 3 pm and after 3 pm I worked at the "Table of Orders." There were people who envied all that.

Now everything is available, if you have the money. But during Soviet times, things got so complicated. I tried to bring something delicious for the women working at my section. It was afterwards that I learned that one of them wrote anonymous complaints both to my bosses and the "organs." [translator's note: either local Communist Party committee or KGB office.]

Earlier Shura, who was a member of the party, a communist, asked me to join the party all the time. I answered her, that I would rather be a non-party member communist. When there were church holidays, if you would go to church, some spy would see you, for sure, and will tell about it to the bosses. It was already under Brezhnev. A "partorg" [translator's note: Party Organizer, someone responsible for communist ideology, a special position at any Soviet enterprise] would tell me later: "So what, Alla Davydovna? Did you go to church?" "Yes, I did." "Do you know about the consequences?" And I must have been so devastated by this word that I answered him thus: "Valentin Pavlovich, expel me from work! I will take my child and go to the forest, go wherever ... (crying) ... Stop torturing us! It is enough! If I gave 10 kopecks to the babushkas at the church and placed a candle, and am guilty. Expel me! I will go to who knows where!"

I would go to church anyway, though not every Sunday. Once he came again and said: "So, Alla Davydovna, have you made up your mind concerning entering the party?" "No, I have not. I'll do all the extra work for you, I guard the location in time of election, I'll go to the collective farm on the weekends, and I never refused to do that or to wash the trolley-buses at night" (once I even fell off the roof and knocked my head), I was available all the time.

And now I wish I could still do a lot, but I have no power left. Much free time, but nowhere to apply myself. My daughter and granddaughter work, and my great-granddaughter studies. I read the Bible, and the hymnbook, but my eyes get tired quickly, and my head aches. In tears I kneel and pray, pray for the Lord to forgive me for everything and direct me on the right path. No matter how hard we try, we sin at every step. I request God to forgive me for everything. But I am ready. I only wish for Nadya, my daughter, to be fine, and for my granddaughter, Anya, to get her personal life restored. She is raising her daughter on her own. I can not wait myself for Sunday to come. I always try to bring them along. I don't want to die sooner. No, I don't want to be a burden. But I am not afraid to die. My mother was afraid, and she held my hand while sleeping. She was 98 when she died. I can't forgive myself for not being able to attend her funeral. I checked out of the hospital on September 2, and my mom died on the 6th, and there were no tickets available on the train. ✕

[Pr. Sergei Glushkov writes: Several months after this interview, Anna, a granddaughter of Albina Davydovna, met a nice young man by the name of Alexey. Recently they had a daughter, Dasha. Albina prepares them for the baptism of the baby, and she prepares the young father for entering the church, with the hope that he would also become Lutheran and will live together with his family in one faith. Probably by the time of this newsletter, there will be news about the baptism of Dasha.]



Kristina, Albina's great-granddaughter, in church

From the Editor: The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC) continues to grow and be a place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the Holy Sacraments provided for sinners seeking forgiveness and healing of body and soul. In the newsletters of [THE SIBERIAN LUTHERAN MISSION SOCIETY \(SLMS\)](#) the members of the SELC reveal their faith and hopes. They are Russians seeking an answer to challenges and problems in their lives. They are a people who have been called by Christ in the healing waters of Holy Baptism and fed by the holy precious food of His body and blood. They may speak a different language but they are all baptized in the name of the same LORD and eat and drink the same Jesus. These are a people who know the mission of the Church – a mission which begins and finds its conclusion in the Word and Sacraments properly administered. We invite you to read this newsletter with a prayer of divine grace for our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Siberia. Their challenges in a land of pagan Buddhism, shamanism, and atheism is great. Your prayers and continuing support is appreciated.

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