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'Every word of the Gospel, coming by some miracle'

Editor's note: This is the first part of the story of Tatiana Sokolova, a parishioner at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Novosibirsk.

Translated by Pavel Khramov

My name is Tatiana Sokolova. I live in Novosibirsk. I became a Lutheran recently, though it seems to me that God led me to the Lutheran Church all of my life, and it's really a miracle to me.

My husband, Dmitry, and I were confirmed in May of 2012. My great-grandfather tore down the cross from the dome of the Orthodox monastery, when it was being demolished. He was killed on the battlefield in World War II. Nobody knows where he is buried; there are no documents which could confirm that he lived. It is as if God wiped out all memories of him. My grandmother is buried near her children and grandchildren under the Orthodox cross. Some time ago I was talking to my unbelieving father about Christianity. He asked me, "Your grandmother believed, and has she seen any good in her life? She was pregnant more than 20 times,

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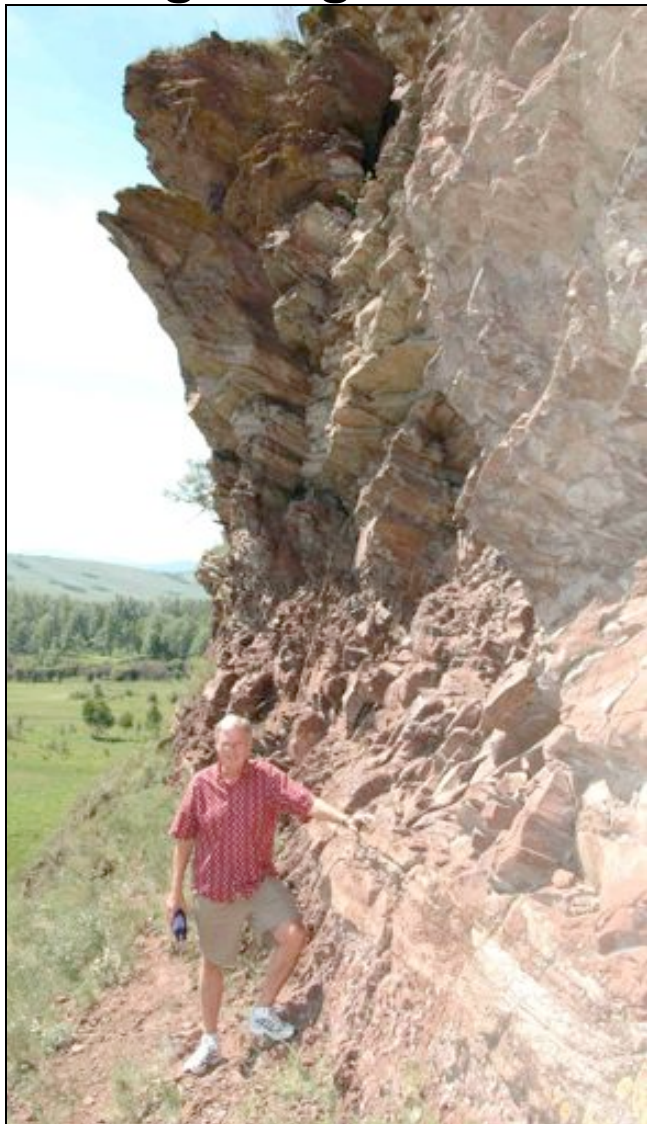
Bible School reopens in Novosibirsk

The Bible School has rather long tradition in our church. The first group studied in Touim in 1999-2001. That time, with the financial help from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Novosibirsk, we were able to gather rather big groups, up to 20 participants from different places. Every two years the Bible School moved to another place in order to give our parishioners chance to study without traveling too far. The program included courses on Book of Concord, isagogics (introduction on the Old and New Testaments), church history, Bible books, and dogmatics. The main goal of the school was twofold. First, it was pre-seminary. Those men, who wanted to enter the seminary in Novosibirsk, could get some preliminary training. If they started to study at the seminary later on, they were better prepared. Second, we wanted parishioners, who got this biblical and theological education, to be more involved in church life, as teachers in Sunday Schools, volunteers in social projects, and helpers at the liturgy.

For some students studying in the Bible School turned out to be

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Seeing the growth of the Siberian Lutheran Church



Rev. Dr. Timothy Quill in Siberia. He has been involved with both the Russian Project and SLMS.

Editor's note: This is the first part of an interview with Rev. Dr. Timothy Quill, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary and former director of the Russian Project.

Q: Could you introduce yourself and briefly explain how did you connect to Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Lutheran Theological Seminary in Novosibirsk?

A: I'm Doctor Timothy Quill, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, dean of international studies, director of theological education in the Office of International Mission in the LCMS. For several years I was the director of

the Russian Project. This project started in 1996 at CTS with the purpose to bring Russian-speaking students from Russia and C.I.S. to the seminary in Fort Wayne and train them for pastoral ministry. Another part of this project was to establish Lutheran Theological Seminary in Novosibirsk. It was dedicated in July 1997 and classes started in October of 1997. We worked as well on organizing summer theological seminars in Siberia, Central Asia, and in Eastern Europe. I was working on my doctoral theses when I was invited to take a position of director of Russian Project. Interestingly, my doctoral theses were on Theodosius Harnak, who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. He was one of the most significant persons in the restoration of Lutheran liturgy in Russian Empire.

Q: Do you remember the first meeting with Russians from Siberia?

A: The first meeting took place in St. Louis. I was a parish pastor, finishing my STM. I met Wallace Schultz, who was organizing a summer seminar in US. He said that he was frustrated, because the seminary in St. Louis was not able to provide enough vans and so on. I said, Let me know if I could help. So, people from our congregation helped to make translation booths. I picked up a few guests in airport. At this seminar I've met a few Russians, though among participants there were not only Russians, but also people from Eastern Europe.

Q: When did you visit Siberia first time?

A: It was in 1996. I spoke no Russian. The trip was kind of scary. As a part of my trip I flew from Novosibirsk to Khabarovsk. The plane stopped in Irkutsk and everybody went out. I thought I am on the wrong plane because nobody said anything. Nobody spoke English. So we got off, many people left, taxi drivers yelled "Taxi!" I didn't say "Nyet" ("no" in Russian), so that nobody recognize me as foreigner. I just grumbled at them. I found my way to the transit desk. There were a couple of Japanese with translator. So, I got on the plane. Now everything changed.

Q: You arrived to Siberia to find potential students to study in Fort Wayne seminary. How did you look for them?

A: I worked with Pastor Lytkin (now he is the bishop of SELC). He picked some people. Indeed, he wanted to go to study himself, but as in case of

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Importance of Bible School for Siberian Lutherans



Rev. Alexey Streltsov, rector of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Novosibirsk, gives a presentation at a Bible School session.

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too demanding, and they stopped. Nevertheless, some students were quite successful. For example, Pastor Dmitry Dotsenko, now serving in St. James' parish in Novokuznetsk, went through Bible School, as well as the pastor in Transfiguration of our Lord parish in Touim, Khakassia, Rev. Vitaly Gavrilov. Interestingly, two former students of Bible School are now pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria.

Later the groups grow smaller due to the financial situation. We were not able to cover housing and transportation for people arriving from other places, so groups consisted almost exclusively of students from the city or town where we conducted classes.

Some time ago we even paused Bible School. However, last summer the Consistory (governing body of our church) decided to re-open the school in Novosibirsk. The seminary allowed the use of rooms in its building for classes and lunch. Also students from other cities can stay overnight at the seminary apartment. Lectures in the school are given by seminary teachers and professors.

As the financial situation still tight, there is no special budget for this education project. St.

Andrew's parish covers lunch and coffee breaks. Students from Tomsk and Novokuznetsk pay for their trips to Novosibirsk.

Besides the obvious usefulness of the Bible School as the place for theological and practical training of lay people, there is another important side in this project. We grow in responsibility for our church. People learn to give their money and time.

The main goal of the school was twofold. First, it was pre-seminary. Those men, who wanted to enter the seminary in Novosibirsk, could get some preliminary training. If they started to study at the seminary later on, they were better prepared. Second, we wanted parishioners, who got this biblical and theological education, to be more involved in church life, as teachers in Sunday Schools, volunteers in social projects, and helpers at the liturgy.

For many students even classes on Saturday mean missing their work, losing some money. For example Ilya, a young man from Tomsk, needs to miss the second half of working day on Friday to be in Novosibirsk for classes. Vadim, a parishioner from Novokuznetsk, drives about six hours and starts on 4 a.m. on Saturday.

St. Andrew's parish helps a lot of other parishes in our church, and sometimes it becomes very demanding. Nevertheless, our parish council decided to support Bible School, understanding its importance.

During this school year, students already had courses on Augsburg Confession and Luther's Catechisms, Book of Psalms, and isagogics of Old and New Testament. We want to pay more attention to studying the Scripture, as it is the basis of all Christian education.

So, we plan more courses on different books of the Bible. As in past years, we will add some practical courses for those who are ready to help in Sunday school or in social projects. We want to see our parishioners growing in Christian maturity, in commitment to our Lord and in love to a neighbor. ✕

From communism to Christianity—Tatiana’s story



Tatiana Sokolova and her husband, Dmitry, on their wedding day.

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only three of her children lived until maturity. She died relatively young from long and hard sickness. What did God give her apart the sufferings?”

I was born in 1981 in Soviet Union, in secret forbidden town on the river of Yenisey. In our town was an underground factory, where the internal components of nuclear bombs were produced. Our parents didn’t tell us what they were doing. I was growing up in absolute confidence that my dad made pistols. At that age I even could not imagine what dreadful weapons exist in the adult world.

We grew up in the town behind two rows of barbed wire. For many people this wire was the symbol of forced labor camps and prisons, but it was not so for us, kids of the forbidden town. Our small, beautiful town was full of lush greenery. It was safe and generous to us. I do remember how soldiers were checking cars leaving our town. They were looking not only for spies and stolen secrets, but also salami and butter. Those simple products one could hardly buy in nearby towns. Our parents fearlessly let us wander on

the streets, when we turned five or six, as nobody with a record of conviction was allowed in the town. All “insecure persons” were forced to leave the territory within 48 hours. Maybe all this is hard to consider as something really valuable, but the most basic things, as salami, were symbols of good life. I do remember how I stood with my mom in long line for two hours to buy small towels with a nice flower print. And how happy were we to buy them!

In my parents’ home God’s Word was never heard. It was also true for all my surroundings. I remember how once in kindergarten, on April 22 (Lenin’s birthday), we were sitting on the small chairs and were listening the LP with the record of one of his speeches. We were four or five and we considered it as something very important and solemn. I liked to go with my mom to the Communist demonstrations. I was holding colored balloons and crying “Hooray!” I was very proud when in the third grade I became a “Pioneer,” a member of the children’s Communist organization. And at the same time, somehow I was sure that God lives in the heaven, He knows everything, and cares for us. It was my secret, known to no one.

My parents’ relationships were not good. I didn’t see that they loved and respected each other. Day after day I saw something different. Always I tried to distance myself from it. But alienation means loneliness. What is more difficult for a small kid? I always was well-dressed and fed, I had enough toys and books, and from time to time, we traveled to the Black Sea for vacation. My parents took good care of me and did a lot. I often think that I’m ungrateful child. But I cannot forget.

God often comes to such people — small, weak, uncomforted. I do not remember how old I was then. Six, eight? That child’s faith was so far from Christianity. But I believed that God loves people, cares for us, and wants only good for us. I believed that He will never betray us and never abandon us. He was my refuge and friend.

In the very beginning of the 1990s, the future bishop of our church, Pastor Vsevolod Lytkin, visited the US for the first time. On TV Christian cartoons were broadcasted, which I

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The wonderful gift given

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watched with bated breath. At the end of each episode children were invited to write a letter, if they want to know more about Christ. Gladly I did it. About the same time a nice lady presented me an English Bible during my travel to St. Petersburg. I could hardly read it, but on the first page there was famous verse—John 3:16 in Russian. Every Christian knows it: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

I wanted to know more, so every word of the Gospel, coming by some miracle, seemed amazing and precious. Do our children realize how much they are given when they attend Sunday school? In St. Petersburg I also bought a small icon of Christ. At that time I wanted to believe in Him, in His redeeming sacrifice, in the truth of His word. I prayed day after day and week after week that God would give me faith in Savior, and He opened my ears. How does He bring us to Himself? What happened inside us that we cannot anymore ignore or miss His words? Then I prayed for about a year that God would give me the possibility to be baptized.

I was baptized when I turned 14. It happened in Russian Orthodox Church, several thousand miles away from home. I didn't know then that there are different churches, I didn't know that there was already a small Lutheran Church where God will mercifully bring me to. I just wanted to be Christian.

I asked Grandma to take me to a church. She took me to a cathedral, huge and mysterious. I remembered painted in full human height archangels, so beautiful and slightly sad. I was baptized in a special building, the baptistery, where was a font. I stepped into the red basin, where I was abundantly poured with water. The words were said that sounded better than music to me. I could not believe it really happens to me. I still keep that dress. I want to remember that day forever. ✕

Russian students come to seminary



Rev. Dr. Timothy Quill

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some other bishops of emerging churches in former Soviet Union, he couldn't leave. He sent Alexey Streltsov, Sergey Glushkov, Pavel Butakov. It was important that Elena Streltsova and Olga Sukhinina came as well, as they helped a lot with translation. Some students from Russia came with very good English and quickly transitioned from Russian classes to only English. We looked for students not only in Siberia, but also in Lithuania, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan.

Q: What did you look for in candidates? What were your criteria for future students?

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Quill's reflections on development of Siberian church

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A: At that time, we looked first for candidates that sincerely and intentionally wanted to be Lutheran. It doesn't mean they needed to understand everything fully. For example, one of the candidates was not even confirmed, he was confirmed in America. We also wanted to be sure that they would go back. We weren't spending all this money and time to make American pastors. Thirdly, they needed to bring references from a bishop or, occasionally, from a missionary about their Christian character, academic ability, desire to be Lutheran, and that the bishop wants them back. I've met with Ingrian Bishop Kugappi, and he sent some people.

Q: How many people came back?

A: Most of them came back. Very few stayed in America. I'm not happy about this. But put it in this way. If compared to the number of those who stayed or didn't finish studies with the number of Americans, who came to the seminary and then quit or got flunked out... You never expect 100 percent graduation. However, I've learned a lot working with internationals. That's why on my current position I do international recruitment. Now I sit at the interview with Asians, Indians, Africans and what I've learned helps me.

Q: Did you see the difference in candidates from Siberia?

A: In every situation, there are some successes and some disappointments. I would say that people from Siberia were very carefully selected. They also were very serious about what they did. The first batch we gathered was quite educated. Some graduated from universities; some were students at the moment. So, they brought with them the intellectual capacity to study theology at the

seminary level. They were doing very well. We also got very good students from the Baltics.

Q: What was your first impression of our church?

A: I remember that at my first visit the congregation in Novosibirsk gathered in basement. It reminded me of the early Church. You had so many young people of college age, almost none of

What struck me, from the very beginning [Pastor Lytkin] said, "We want somebody who would come and teach Early Church, Lutheran doctrine, the Sacraments, and liturgy. We want to know what it means to be Lutherans."

them had children. The Lytkins had children but they were very small. I also remember how we were sitting with Pastor Lytkin and I asked him, what topics he wants for the summer seminar, what is important. What struck me, from the very beginning he said, "We want somebody who would come and teach Early Church, Lutheran doctrine, the Sacraments, and liturgy. We want to know what it means to be Lutherans. Moreover, it is important to know Early Church history and teaching, to show that Lutherans are not another sect." In America we do not think this way. Lutheranism, which came from Europe, certainly is not a sect. So, we know this and believe, but it was striking to see that you want to establish your church from the very beginning as the Church Catholic. I was very happy to see that you want to know how Lutherans should worship. And now, after 17 years you have Divine Service, daily matins, and vespers. ✕

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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