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Growing in the Christian faith

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

Translated by Pavel Khramov

I looked at the Orthodox priests, trusting them absolutely. At the same time I was afraid of their severe looks and words. I knew just little bit about Christianity. I believed that in Holy Communion we eat the Body and Blood of Christ. I knew nothing about church life, ceremonies, and rules, but I believed with all my heart that the Church would take care of me.

Probably, I was too idealistic. Of course, I didn't think that in the church I'd meet people in sandals. I kept getting into embarrassing situations. I didn't know where to stand, what to say. On the day after my baptism I did something wrong at the liturgy. A priest said to me that, though unwittingly, I still committed a grave sin. He was near me at that moment, why didn't he stop me? I still do not understand it. I was too afraid to ask questions. It is so strange, to go to the church for salvation and get eternal death. Russian Orthodox Christians say that grave sin separates man from God forever. I felt totally desperate. I could ask for help and comfort from nobody but God. I know He never left me alone, because even in that most difficult situation He didn't allow me to comfort

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Parish pastor's impressions of Russia

Editor's note: The following interview between Rev. Pavel Khramov of Novosibirsk and Rev. Matthew Rueger appeared in the Faith & Hope newsletter #230. Pastor Rueger is pastor at St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, IA, and first vice president of Iowa District East of the LCMS. He traveled in Siberia in March 2014.

Q: What was the most unexpected thing for you in Russia? What did agree perfectly with your expectations?

A: The most unexpected thing about Russia was what I saw in the villages we visited with Bishop Vsevolod (Lytkin). The level of poverty was surprising to me. I also found it a surprise that at the outskirts of even the larger cities people are living without indoor plumbing. The fact that money seems to be spent on cell phone towers and communication but not on basic things like indoor running water and sewer systems was something I found strange. The degree of animism and Buddhist influences with the many roadside shrines was a bit surprising, too. I was also surprised by the continuing homage paid to Lenin with the statues of him in every

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Reflections on growth, practice in Siberian Church

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

Q: Being, so to say, a friendly outsider to our church, could you mark strong and weak sides of Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC)?

A: I know that from the very beginning you tried to have the strongest possible pastors, so you sent students to Fort Wayne. Immediately, as soon as it was possible, you started a seminary. You cannot have a strong church without a strong and rigorous seminary. So, the establishment of the seminary was vital and it has been blessed with visiting professors, a deployed full-time instructor in Professor Ludwig. That was one of the strengths and I think it was done right. As I see, the reason for this is taking Lutheran theology seriously. This is number one. Then theology and practice should go together.

I see the practice on Sunday mornings. I'm coming here a lot, so I know a large portion of the liturgy by heart. As I look around the world, I see a lot of Lutherans are tempted to follow evangelical or Baptist practices in their worship. It is remarkable that your church made a decision to be liturgical. It would be nice at the beginning to get more assistance with music.

The Lutheran tradition in music is so rich, especially in hymnody and in chorales. I think that in your seminary you have resources to produce translations of hymns, which will deeply enrich the worship, and the life, of the people. Thus, you'll not need to borrow hymns from non-Lutherans. It might be a great help not only for SELC, but for Russian-speaking Lutherans in other places, in Central Asia, for example.

I do not know about pastoral care. I do not see that, because I'm not here. How are the hospital visits made? What kinds of home visits are made? I know that in the early days it was difficult as nobody had cars, people didn't expect the same type of home visitation that is expected in Europe. How do pastors deal with counseling or private confession and absolution (obviously, I do not sit in private confession)? So, I'm sure, as for any church, for the SELC there is a place for improvement in pastoral care.

Q: Could you tell more about your experience of visiting other parishes of Siberian Church? Do you think there is a big difference between Novosibirsk and other cities, and especially smaller towns?

A: Every place is unique. Ekaterinburg is somewhat similar to Novosibirsk, being a big city as well. Tomsk is another story. There is a beautiful church there and parish [that] have some German influence, as there are some old German Lutherans among parishioners.

Then you go to Novokuznetsk, which is really a missionary congregation. Touim is unique with all the difficulties of starting a church there, with all the efforts that local authorities and KGB made to close the church. Then Abakan follows with Pastor Pavel Zayakin and his youth camps. Afterwards Chita has a great number of deaf people in parish.

All these congregations are different, and yet there is continuity in each of them. I feel the unity in the similar liturgical practice. I suppose you have your own problems, disagreements and jealousies. However, despite them, one may sense the unity. There is no sectarian spirit.

Of course, your pastors studied together, they are shaped by Fort Wayne, and they are shaped by Novosibirsk. It helps to keep unity. Also you have a Consistory to work on church problems, to work together.

Q: Could you share your impression about lay people in Siberian Church? Are they more interested in theology than laity in other churches, or they are kind of average?

A: Historically it was a strong point in the Missouri Synod. We have very strong schools and seminaries, and our lay people are committed to theology. Of course, in recent years a lot of fluffy American evangelical emotional type of Christianity came in, often in mission field. It doesn't take doctrine seriously; it's rather: "Let us show the love of Jesus."

Over here, I've seen a core group of people. I've seen some of them at the first summer seminars, and they are still here. They seemed still to be interested in theology.

You have Bible School that cultivates the interest in theology. You have a certain percentage of the people, who are going and taking advantage of it. You have your seminary organizing summer seminars and conferences during the year. It's great that you invite lay people to come. And they come! I watched them here. The topic of this conference was the Holy Spirit. I saw people being really engaged, asking good questions.

I guess, one of the reasons is that the Novosibirsk congregation, as a core parish for the whole Siberian Church and was organized by university-educated people. It makes a huge difference!

Q: What do you think, with this interest in theology, do

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Teaching, traveling among Siberian Lutherans



Rev. Matthew Rueger and Rev. Daniel Johnson pose at one of the statues of Lenin still remaining in Russia

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place I went.

As to what agreed with my expectations ... Perhaps the food was about what I expected. I enjoy different foods and liked what I ate in Russia. The Russian Orthodox presence throughout my travels was also as expected. The types of places where we stayed and the means by which we traveled were all as I was expecting them to be.

Q: Teaching at our seminary on sexual moral issues, did you feel that students understood the discussed problems, that these problems are “real-life” problems in Siberia? What made you think this way?

A: I do think the matter of sexual immortality and pagan influences on sexual attitudes is a real problem in Russia as it is in America. This is something every pastor will have to face very quickly in his ministry—so yes, I believe it is a practical matter. As to the discussion from the seminarians, the students didn’t ask too many questions, probably

because without experience they don’t know what to expect. I did enjoy the questions asked by the pastor who visited for a couple of days and from you and the other instructor present.

Q: Was Russian liturgy too different for you or could you follow it and really worship, even without knowing Russian?

A: No, I did not think the Russian liturgy was greatly different from our American LCMS liturgy. I could tell the various parts of the liturgy and knew what was happening. I was able to pray the various parts of the liturgy quietly in English as the congregation spoke Russian.

Q: Visiting small towns and villages, what did you find most striking?

A: The poverty and lack of a sewer system or indoor plumbing was most striking. The log home construction is similar to what was common in the US in the late 1800s. I was a bit surprised that nearly all of the villages seemed to be at this same level of development. Also the level of road maintenance was surprising. The roads were in very rough shape. I was thankful no one had any health problems when we were away from the larger cities, too, because medical care seemed to be in low supply as well.

Q: You said, “I was moved by the passion of Lutheran men and women to let those around them know about Jesus and to encourage others in faith and bring them to Christ’s Church.” Could you give a couple of examples, where you could see this passion?

A: The man who impressed me the most was Alexsey Kondratiev in Chita. After his conversion he has helped bring his wife, mother-in-law, mother, and grandparents into the Lutheran Church. The lady named Katherina had been a huge influence in his life and had helped him be faithful through difficult times. There was obviously a great deal of respect between them. After the Divine Service in Chita, a few of the members spoke with us and said how they believe Lutheranism will spread and grow because they have the truth so many are looking for. They spoke as people not ashamed to confess Christ to the world around them.

Q: In addition, you mentioned that people spoke through acts of kindness. It would be nice if you could give an example of such an act.

A: I and Pastor Daniel Johnson were treated with great kindness by everyone we met. A man in the village near the Mongolian border offered to drive us to Ulan-Ude in his car, which unfortunately

Tatiana—explaining importance of faith, church



Tatiana Sokolova

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myself with the idea that it's possible to live without the Church. I wept over that sin almost 20 years, and could confess it only to my Lutheran pastor. I didn't hope that it could be forgotten, it was so painful, but he said that there is nothing to be forgiven, and absolved all my other sins.

In Russian Orthodoxy nobody taught me. Ceremonies are very important in the Russian Orthodox Church, but it seemed to me that I was sinking in them. The core things remained somewhere else, behind the ceremonies. I saw many people who considered secondary as principal, forgetting about, for example, the Sacraments. In our Lutheran Church, there are so many possibilities to study — sermons, Bible classes, Biblical School, conferences. Pastors and teachers tirelessly tell us what is the most important, what is fundamental to Christianity.

When I was told to pray to the saints for intercession before God, I asked myself: Doesn't God love each one of us? Doesn't He will good and salvation for us? Don't we trust Him? Why should saints intercede for us before Him? Also I didn't understand, why sinners should be constantly threatened by God's wrath and punishment. I was

awfully sorry for any deed, thought, and word that grieved God. Isn't this sorrow the punishment in itself? If you love someone and caused pain to this person, would you not suffer? And He felt pain on the Cross. Thus I felt I was a terrible Orthodox believer.

On the day of my baptism I got a booklet saying that a person commits grave sin if he comes to Holy Communion being reproached by his conscience. But my conscience was especially loud when I stood at the altar. It kept speaking to me that I'm not worthy. I could do nothing about this. Others communed, so, obviously, with their consciences everything was OK. But I was not one of them, I was a criminal. In our [Lutheran] confirmation class the pastor told us that if a person feels his unworthiness, then he is worthy to commune.

This story is my story, it happened, and nothing could be changed. I would not be able to explain why the Lutheran faith and my church mean so much to me, if I did not tell the whole story. It seems very important to tell it, so I write it, and I write it honestly.

I was too afraid of the priests. I was afraid to look at them, not asking questions about my problems. I know there are those who shepherd the God's sheep with patience and mercy. May God bless them! But for me, after that rebuke by a priest, it was too scary to trust the most vulnerable areas of my life to them. So much power! With one word one can send a person to Heaven or to Hell. And you can't defend yourself, because you cannot stand against God.

I prayed the Lord would make me a true Orthodox believer, but I could not commune. I had married and moved to Novosibirsk. And I still couldn't even enter the church. In Novosibirsk there are some big and beautiful Orthodox churches. I wanted something small and simple. Sometimes I was near a church and wanted to enter and to pray, but I wore jeans and had no covering for my head. A woman is not allowed in an Orthodox church in pants or jeans and without a head-covering.

I wanted to become a true Orthodox believer. I didn't ask for another church. I wanted a small church with a small

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Finding hope in Lutheranism

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congregation, where everybody knew each other. I wanted a church where the priests knew your name and for them what is inside you is more important than whether you correctly cross yourself. I was dreaming about a church where parishioners are taught about important articles of faith, where they are shepherded carefully, and are helped to avoid sins. I was looking for a church where I would hear about God's grace, love, salvation, and forgiveness — all that struck me in Christianity and showed the true Light, the hope-giving Light. I needed a church where I could trust priests again, confess my sins, believe that God will forgive me and will help to correct everything. I looked for a church where I could commune, where the beauty of Sacrament is valued in its simplicity and perfection.

Those were just fantasies. There was almost no hope. It was like a man in heavy snowstorm who had lost all hope for rescue, and just dreams of the house, where a fire kindled in the stove, good food is ready on the table, and a warm bed is waiting. I did not know what I could do apart of asking God again for help. Then He did everything for me.

Four years ago, I started to think about another church, though I was sure that there was no other option but Russian Orthodoxy. I wasn't in church for several years and it was clear to me that it shouldn't go this way. It is unthinkable for Christian to live without confession, absolution, and the Eucharist. I knew that I would not join the Roman Catholic Church, nor charismatic or other "strange" groups. Indeed, I had very little information about them. About the Lutheran Church I knew absolutely nothing except the fact that Russian emperors often married Lutheran princesses. I started to look on the Internet for information about different denominations and I heard the noise of burning wood, prepared for heretics like me. The first article I came across was the one about Lutheranism. I was reading and could not believe it; I could not choke back my tears. I felt that God took me out of snow pile and brought me home. ✕

Unique tastes, views in Siberia

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broke down along the way. Every home we visited, people were generous in sharing their food with us.

Again in Chita, the members of the congregation treated one another kindly and seemed to be very close to one another.

Of course, it is also true that there were times when we were told to be careful not to let our Americanism show. Some of the places were visited had the potential to be dangerous and I did feel a certain uneasiness about being an American at times. This is not fault of the Lutheran people whom we met. I think with the Russian/US tensions these days it was simply a matter of public feelings.

Q: Finally, what food did you like the most and the least in Siberia?

A: I really enjoyed the borsht and the herring in a fur coat. The soups were all very good. I can say that there wasn't really anything I didn't like. I suppose my least favorite food was the slices of pork fat served to us in some of the homes we visited.

Thank you, Pastor Matthew Rueger!

Please pray for the Siberian Lutheran clergymen and laymen, and especially for those who live in poverty. ✕



A road in Buryatia, Siberia

Quill's reflections on development of Siberian church

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we neglect somehow practical areas?

A: Yes and no. From the beginning, your church was committed to evangelism and social work. In the year when we were going everywhere by public buses and were freezing waiting for them at the stops, you managed to collect offerings and buy bread [for] poor people. You had some projects, like the "Crisis center," where young pregnant women could get some help. And without any projects you were collecting cloths and shoes to give to the needy. I know that your church does care and it isn't just doctrine or just attending the worship service. Do you need to be more loving? I guess, yes, though people always are very loving to me when I come.

Q: Do you have any advice for us? What we'd better do to grow as a healthy confessional church?

A: Well, I mostly work with the seminary. Rev. Daniel Johnson as a head of the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society is more involved with your church, so he might be a better person to ask this question. By the way, I'm so glad that there is a SLMS! This work is so huge. Coming back to your question, I think you do not need western "programs."

What you need is what you're doing—the Word and the Sacrament. People are coming because they want to be fed. You need good preaching. Missouri Synod needs good preaching. That means preaching which frees people through the preaching of the Law and then truly frees them through the Gospel. It doesn't lay more Law on them. We have plenty [of] legalistic preaching in the Missouri Synod that pretends to be Gospel. So, your seminary needs to teach pastors how to preach. And it is not only about courses on Homiletics. Exegetical courses, where students deeply study the Scripture, they are also about preaching.

Q: You've observed our church for 17 years. Every process has its own ups and downs. Do you think we had some really bad "downs," or is development of the

Siberian Church rather steady growth?

A: It looks to me as steady growth. I think it is difficult now, because Russian society is becoming quite materialistic, and it is challenging. With financial difficulties, you need to find ways to be self-supported. I know it is not easy, but your pastors support themselves, having a job outside of the church. You look at the church in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Tanzania—they are growing so fast, they are exploding! This fast growth is result of faithful work of missionaries, who labored for decades.

So, if one asks, "What do we need to do to see the same growth?" the answer is, "You do what God gave you to do, and He will give growth in His time." The biggest problem of those churches is to find pastors. They are lacking trained ministers. A lot of people are coming to the church, some of them with strange ideas. To keep the Lutheran confession, Lutheran identity could be hard in some cases. Here you do not have this problem, or at least it is not as urgent as there.

Q: Finally, do you have a feeling that you are not totally American anymore, after 17 years of working with Russians, and not only Russians, of course?

A: I feel quite comfortable here. I know a few words, enough to go shopping. People are normally friendly, and I use it. Did I become Russian in part? I don't know. I'm an American, you're Russians. I have friends here whom I trust as much as I trust my friends in the States. And this friendship is precious. ...[O]ur faith centers on the Lord Jesus, and it centers on that He comes to us in His body and blood, and it was great to worship with you this morning and receive His meal from a SELC pastor. And what a great gift you receive from your friend, when he gives you the Lord Jesus. This friendship, which is build around our Lord and His sacrament, will last forever.

Q: Thank you very much for your openness and sharing your thoughts. ✕

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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