

Daniel S. Johnson

- Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστος Воскрес!

March 2013

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Church officials from the Lithuanian, Latvian and Siberian Lutheran churches frequently visit the United States. If you wish to invite one of these church officials to visit your congregation, please contact me at:

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Siberia covers 4,929,000 square miles. The West Siberian Plain is the largest level region in the world.

The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC), though it is very small in membership (approximately 3,000 communicant members), is the largest Lutheran Church in the world by geography -- covering over 4,000 miles from their eastern most to western most congregations.

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Pastor Zayakin in the "Wild East"

Pastor Pavel Zayakin, a former schoolteacher, is the pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church of the Siberia Ev. Lutheran Church (SELC) in Abakan, Russia and dean of the Eastern Deanery of the SELC. His wife, Nina, a pediatrician by training, continues her medical vocation as a parish physician. Their children are grown. God has blessed Pavel and Nina with the gift of a granddaughter, born to their daughter.



Pr. Pavel Zayakin

Pastor Zayakin has served the Church in the region of Khakassia (an independent republic within the Russian Federation, located in south central Siberia) for 17 years. He also directs a youth camp in the Khakassian Mountains near the city of Ephremkino. Recently he traveled to the eastern regions of Siberia where the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church conducts her mission work. When asked to describe his trip, he was very willing to speak of the challenges of traveling in eastern Siberia, to what he calls the "Wild East." Pavel Zayakin writes:

I like to travel. Of course, it is most pleasant when you are the master of your journey, when you direct your way according to your desire, sitting in your car with [your] wife and children or, for example, hiking across mountain range. Then you feel yourself free, you can stop wherever you like it or leave any place that is dangerous or unpleasant.



But I serve in the Church for 17 years now, and I don't always choose my way, as well as [my] means of transportation. We [pastors] aren't free. I remember how our Bishop told seminarians: "If you want to stay free, leave the seminary." And it is true: a [pastor] must forget about himself and what is his own and serve the people of God. This is the mandate we have from Christ.

In the second part of February I went on my next trip to the eastern parishes of our Church. You know that the territory of our Church is divided into three deaneries, and I am the dean of the eastern one. I regularly visit these parishes, and I know all their needs and difficulties. Oftentimes, one of the pastors accompanies me also, and this time it was Andrey Ivolga, our pastor from Angarsk.

The most complicated things in travel across Siberia, of course, would be our huge distances. Our travel route was from Novosibirsk to Buryatia and then to Chita. This is the same distance as from Novosibirsk to Moscow, that is, 3,000 kilometers (about 1,900 miles). The comfort is non-existent: old third class train cars, packed with crowds of people (we, like majority of Russia's population, cannot afford traveling in the second class train cars). With this, we endure heat and stink of bodies, sitting side-by-side, and constant draft.

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Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Please pray for the Lutherans in Siberia and those who proclaim the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus during Lent. Pray for the preached Word to be heard and believed.



Pray for Pastor Pavel Zayakin and the clergy who serve in his deanery of the Siberian Ev. Lutheran Church. Pray for their health and the health of the people they serve.

Pray for those in Buryatia who hear the Word of God. Pray for those who are recently baptized. Pray that the temptations of the devil, the world and the sinful flesh not deceive or seduce them into returning to their former life.

Next to us in the [train] car, there were some Asian people (they comprised about one one-third of the train passengers). Two of them were sick with tuberculosis and coughed all the time. One of them was coughing with blood, spitting out the parts of his lungs along with that. (That is the terminal stage of tuberculosis; it is impossible to cure such person.)

Forgive me for this level of detail, reminiscent of horror movie, but tuberculosis is an integral part of life in Siberia. Millions of people are sick with tuberculosis in Siberia. Even in relatively wealthy Novosibirsk about 1,700 [people] die annually according to official statistics. In Novosibirsk you can daily meet people sick with tuberculosis -- in subway, in buses, out on the street. It's just that not everybody yet may discern regular cough and tuberculosis cough. We, clergymen, can discern [a tuberculosis] cough by now. In Buryatia, sick people are everywhere, and there is no place for you to hide from the bacteria flying in the air. All hope is for my immune system to be strong enough to cope with infection.

In general, Buryatia always makes a very strong impression on me. In our place, Khakassia, people live poorly, but I found out once again how some things may pale in comparison. In Petropavlovka, a Buryatian town where our parish is located, half of the local population is sick with tuberculosis. There is terrible poverty there and also degradation (alcoholism, drug-addiction).

I saw once again that part of our parishioners got ruined by alcohol and got back to their former pagan life. It is a great pity that people cannot receive constant spiritual care from us. We don't have a permanent clergyman in Buryatia (we lack clergymen in our Church, and we lack funds for regular trips), and services in some remote locations are held once a month. It is very sad. Then we got back to the train and went from Buryatia to Chita. It isn't very far: only 16 hours by Trans-Siberian railroad.

When we came to Chita, we once again faced difficulties: hotels were expensive, and the average local people poor. Thanks to our Chita parishioners. They found mattresses and pillows for us, and we spent nights while [in Chita] on the floor and on the chairs in the church facility.

However, I would like to tell you not only about sad things. You know, the most moving thing is to serve the liturgy in such places. People wait for you. They want to hear you. They ask you many questions. Here every [pastor] always feels how much people need him. You cannot experience this feeling anywhere else. It seems sometimes that in the large cities people attend the services half-heartedly. But here, people take in the Word of God with great hunger, making you understand what it means to be hungry and thirsty for the Word -- in the biblical sense.

I like to travel. I like the fresh wind out in the mountains and the fast road twists under the car tires. I cannot understand only one thing: why is it that the smell of the third class train compartments reminds [me of] prison smell so much? And why do the looks of people who I pass by in the eastern towns and villages, remind so much the looks of the convicts? Maybe, it is because it is still [memory of the] Soviet Union, in their eyes, still lack of freedom? I don't know. But I know one thing: there is one real freedom in these places [from] that smell of prison; it is the Church of Christ, which carries light and forgiveness to people. ✠DSJ



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