

# Daniel S. Johnson

## - Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστὸς ἠνέστη!

May 2013

Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org

### Bishop reflects on journey to Lutheranism

By Valerie Kister

[This article first appeared in the May 2008 edition of the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS) newsletter (see: <http://siberianlutheranmissions.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/SLMS-May2008.pdf>). Permission to reprint this article has been granted by the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS) and the author.]

Bishop Vsevolod Lytkin's first lessons in religion didn't come from a church or a Lutheran school.

Instead, he considers that in some ways those first lessons came when he was a child, falling asleep to the sound of his parents listening to the radio broadcasts of Voice of America.

"My parents taught me to study by myself, in my own mind; not to trust official propaganda," Lytkin said. "The intelligentsia were not



Soviet-minded."

Born into a scientific research community in Novosibirsk (both of his parents held doctorates in mathematics), Lytkin was consecrated bishop of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church on May 6, 2007.

The Church was never fully rooted out in the former Soviet Union. "Many old religion-groups were somewhere underground," Lytkin explained, noting that there were also official or "open" Russian Orthodox and Baptist churches.

These congregations stemmed from decisions made by Josef Stalin in 1943 in order to receive American aid. The U.S. government required demonstration of visible religious freedom before giving the funds. Stalin selected some Orthodox congregations (representing typical Russian religion) and a few Baptist (representing what he saw as typical American religion) to prove religious freedom existed. Lytkin said these congregations were similar to the "open" Catholic churches in today's China—Christian in name, but controlled by the Communist leadership.

Still, for Lytkin, theological education started by using official, atheistic books. Many of these books used biblical quotes with the intention of refuting them. The trick was to read the books as many Soviets did—"You must understand the opposite of what is said," Lytkin explained.

When visiting Soviet Republic of Latvia on a vacation with his mother at 16, Lytkin was interested in the many churches he saw. He began looking for information on denominations, often getting it from a Soviet atheistic dictionary on religion. He attended an Orthodox congregation, but said, "This was not a way of Christianity I understood."

**continued on next page**



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:

[Daniel.johnson@lcmsintl.org](mailto:Daniel.johnson@lcmsintl.org)

If you wish to read other stories about the people of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran church, the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS) newsletter archive is located at: <http://siberianlutheranmissions.com/slms-resources-for-you/newsletters/>

The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC) may be small in membership, but she is the largest in the world with regard to territory, covering over 4000 miles from the eastern to the western congregations.

To be added to or removed from this mailing list, send an email message to [Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org](mailto:Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org) with the word ADD or REMOVE in the subject line.





## Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Pray for the faith and perseverance of the Siberian people as they are confronted with the dangers of an increasingly secular culture.

Pray for safe travel of the SELC clergy, as they must travel hundreds of miles every week to conduct liturgy in their various congregations and visit parishioners.

***O Christ, hear us!  
God the Father in heaven,  
have mercy!  
God the Son, Redeemer of  
the World, have mercy!  
God the Holy Spirit, have  
mercy!***  
(The Litany, LSB p.288)



**Lytkin with Wife, Daria, in Tallinn (1996)**

When Lytkin finally looked for a Lutheran congregation in 1987, he tried to return to Latvia for baptism. Since no train tickets were from Leningrad to Riga in Latvia, he headed to Tallinn in Estonia instead and met a Lutheran pastor's wife who told him, "Lutheranism is the religion of well-educated people."

The pastor (who later became the Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church) gave Lytkin his first Small Catechism—which was a binder of photographed pages from a Russian language catechism. After studying it for two days at the train station, Lytkin was baptized. "He must have had some foreknowledge," Lytkin said, laughing. "If a young man came to me like that today, I don't know if I would do that."

Very few of Lytkin's friends shared his interest in Lutheranism. Although many were interested in spiritual things, some of them turned to cults instead of Christianity. Gradually, though, a group gathered around Lytkin to study the Bible. Lytkin was ordained as a pastor in Estonia at 1993, and passed his theological exams in 1995 and received his pectoral cross [Ed. note—This is an Estonian tradition, similar to when a man receives a stole at his ordination in this country].

Lytkin was eventually elected as bishop-elect of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was several years before he could be consecrated, as the bishop who was to consecrate him died. Lytkin's consecration was also opposed by the Lutheran World Federation, as the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church does not want to ordain women.

New challenges have arisen for the Church since the collapse of communism in Russia. "There are many difficulties because of our Soviet past," Lytkin said. Some people don't think their children need to be taught differently than they were. Others, although officially members various denominations, simply don't come to church.

In Novosibirsk, a city of 1.7 million people, there are only about 60 churches. Of these, only four are Lutheran of some type. Lytkin said one big challenge facing the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church is finding ways to bring non-religious or non-practicing people to the church.

"You have to change your mentality. The Soviet Union took it (church attendance) out of our heads," Lytkin said. "It's difficult to change after living your whole life with no church."

Another difficulty within the Church is the lack of trust. For example, Lytkin said confession and absolution are hard to understand after a lifetime of keeping things secret from nearly everyone. "It was dangerous to speak," he said.

Yet, Lytkin said Western denominations like Lutheranism appeal to those coming from intelligentsia backgrounds. The people understand what is being said in a congregation where the liturgy is linear (moving from point to point) rather than circular, as with Orthodox congregations.

Lytkin hopes to see continued growth in the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church, both in terms of congregations and membership. But the growth must happen, he said, with Christ remaining at the heart of the Church's teachings. "If it will be so, I will feel satisfied, that it will not be for nothing," he said. ✠ **DSJ**



**To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to:**

**The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
P.O. Box 790089  
St. Louis, MO 63179-0089.**

**Make checks payable to "The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. " Write "Support of Rev. Daniel S. Johnson" on the memo line. Gifts can also be given securely online through the LCMS website, on my online giving page at [www.lcms.org/Johnson](http://www.lcms.org/Johnson).**