

The Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS) has been in existence for more than five years and we rejoice at God's gracious blessing of our efforts. As we learned of the needs of the young Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC), we realized that financial support would allow pastors and congregations to operate as full-time ministers to congregations dedicated to the teaching and preaching of the Gospel. Although SELC has increased its contributions as a percentage of its overall budget, it will still require support for several years.

Lutheranism is not new in Russia. The first Lutheran church building in Russia was dedicated in Moscow in 1576. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Lutheranism was the second largest church denomination in Russia after the Russian Orthodox Church. Parishes stretched from St. Petersburg, along the Volga River and in the Caucasus region of the Black Sea and on to Siberia where daughter colonies of German-Russian Lutherans sprang up as part of a quest for new land. Tolerance for Christians of any sort, particularly Lutherans, came to an abrupt end in 1917.

Within a few years, all church buildings had been confiscated and destroyed or converted into theaters, night clubs, community centers, indoor swimming pools or barns. We can only imagine what happened to pastors and church leaders. We know that all Lutheran Pastors were tried and many were summarily executed. Others were sent to the Gulags, never to return.

Lutherans in communist Russia lived in terrible fear. Bibles and hymnals were burned but those who were faithful wrote out hymn books and scripture based on their memories. What a great testament to the value of confirmation classes and liturgical services and hymns that teach scripture. In 1941, Lutherans were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan where they were forced to remain as employees of collective farms and agricultural enterprises.

Once the communist government fell, many of these Lutherans returned to their ancestral homeland of Germany. But others remained in Siberia and those individuals, along with Russians who had undertaken the study of Lutheranism, formed the nucleus of the infant Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1995, Dr. Wallace Schulz, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President of the LCMS organized a series of theological seminar on the campuses of the Fort Wayne and St. Louis seminaries. Among more than 200 visitors from the nations of the former Soviet Union were Pastor Vsevolod Lytkin and several young members of what would become the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

A Lutheran Theological Seminary was soon established in Novosibirsk to train Russian men for the ministry. It is the only full-time seminary in all of Russia. There are currently 12 full-time pastors and 4 full-time deacons and one deaconess who serve 18 congregations and 8 mission stations across the broad

expanse of Siberia. There are 20 students enrolled at the seminary, where LCMS Pastor, Dr. Alan Ludwig is the senior professor. Several LCMS pastors, including members of the SLMS Board of Directors, have visited Siberia to teach in Summer Seminars and Seminars offered during the academic year.

The challenges in spreading the Gospel in Siberia are great. Decades of atheism have numbed the minds of many to the concept of God's ever present love. Others have been exposed to missionaries who have taught the doctrine of the law without the all-important understanding of the preeminent role of God's grace in man's salvation. An undeniable reality is that Siberia is a land fraught with the teachings of Paganism, Shamanism and Buddhism.

Beyond these doctrinal hurdles, society is in shambles. Inflation is staggering. Although the Russian economy has been buoyed up by the production and development of gas and oil, little of this money has filtered down to the populace east of the Urals. There is a huge divide between rich and poor. Unemployment, averaging 25 percent, is even greater in some rural towns and cities. It is believed that between 30 and 40 million Russians live below the poverty line (\$30 a month). Disease is an additional problem, with tuberculosis rearing its ugly head due to improper nutrition in many of the poorer communities.

The SLMS provides monthly support for the congregations of SELC designed to help with regular expenses, such as rent, gas, and heat. In addition, several individual projects have been undertaken, including donations of laptop computers, capital projects, such as the purchase of church buildings, and designated donations for the purchase of used cars so that the pastors may travel to outlying congregations.

***Please note that the SLMS has no administrative or overhead expenses – all financial donations go directly to the field to support the work of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church. For further information about how you or your church can become involved in the work of the Church in Russia, please visit our website at: [www.tslms.org](http://www.tslms.org) or contact Elizabeth Meyer, SLMS secretary/treasurer at: 408-286-1771.***