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Sharing the Word in Siberian prisons

By Igor Kizyaev
translated by Olga Suhinina

Greetings, dear readers of the Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS) newsletter. My name is Igor Kizyaev (Keys-YAH-yeff). I am pastor of Holy Trinity church, Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church, in the city of Chita (Chee-TAH).

The area in which I live and serve the Lord and his church is called Transbaikalia—the area to the east of Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia. There are many prisons in our land, of various levels of security and of differing conditions for prisoners—over fifteen in all. I visit one of the high security prisons. The inmates have been convicted of murder, armed robbery, and violence or rape. In 2003 Lutheran Hour Ministries mentioned Transbaikalian Lutherans in one of its broadcasts in our area. Many convicts wrote to the office of Lutheran Hour Ministries. Their letters were handed over to me. At first I simply replied to the convicts' letters, but one day the inmates asked me to meet with them in the prison. I did not reject this idea, thinking that the Spirit of God was giving me an opportunity to labor for the good of the kingdom of heaven and through the preaching of the good news to win those whom the Lord would call to salvation.

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A Bishop's travels part 1

by Vsevolod Lytkin
translated by Igor Andreuk

Peace to you, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ;

I just returned from a trip to the Eastern parishes of our Church.

It was not an easy travel. The traveling from one place to the next was not easy. First, I traveled to the city of Chita. The distance (by our Siberian standards) is not very long: from Novosibirsk – it is just two and a half days by train [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Siberian_Railway]. On traveling I was accompanied by Rev. Pavel Zayakin (the dean of the eastern deanery of our Church) and Rev. Andrei Ivolvega (the senior pastor of the parishes in Angarsk and Buryatia).

In Chita, we met Pastor Igor Kizyaev and parishioners, and I served the liturgy of the Festival of Holy Trinity. It is interesting, in Chita we met an American man who came to attend our Church service. Guests from abroad do not often visit us: there are not many foreigners who visit those remote Siberian towns as Chita. Our guest was a parishioner of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod; he came from the state of New Mexico because his company had signed a contract to install equipment for the Customs on the border between Russia and China.

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Rejoicing on Gospel freedom in prison

by Ivan Konovalov
translated by Olga Suhinina



Dear readers, my name is Ivan Konovalov (Ee-VAHN Ko-no-VAH-loff). I am serving my second term of imprisonment in a correctional high-security institution. I am not proud of it, being aware that I committed a heinous crime and being deeply sorry for what I did. I used to think that I was a tough guy and could do what I would fancy and get away with it. But the

law found me and imposed a just punishment on me.

When I was condemned the second time for a long term, I was sentenced to fourteen years of incarceration. Only then did I begin thinking about life. I realized that life was passing me by, that it was I who had deprived myself of the joy of being a free man. The way of lawlessness is meaningless; evil must be punished, I understood. I only wish to amend my life now and live in a manner pleasing to God when I am free again.

Here in prison, it is very hard to set out on the way to correction, but I have decided that here exactly I ought to break away from the past. In places of detention, there exists a whole different world with its own rules, which a convict must obey whether he likes it or not. And if one acts contrary to the dictates of the criminal world, he is considered weak right away, loses prestige, and consequently forfeits patronage among inmates. I became such a "weakling."

Not only did I decide to set on the way to correction, but also started attending church. In 1997 Pentecostal preachers came to our prison, and I joined the Pentecostal Church, then. I liked their songs about God. They also were former criminals like me. They bore testimony to God's helping them to reform and get their new lives straight upon their release from jail. I did not know anything about God, then. I received instruction in the Pentecostal faith from the newly-converted, like me, who held their Bibles in their hands just a little longer.

They insisted that if I had made a decision and "received Jesus Christ into my heart," I was saved already and all I needed to receive was the gift of "speaking in tongues," and then I would have the "fulness of fellowship" with God. But I never started speaking in tongues, so I began doubting my salvation and new birth.

After eight years with the Pentecostals I never learned to understand Holy Scripture, because they were agreed neither in doctrine nor in their interpretation of the Bible. One might even say there was no doctrine, at all. But everyone interpreted the Bible as he wished, because they all deemed themselves spiritual people with a gift from God to understand Scripture. Related to this, there

were numerous contradictions. I did not have even a clue about original sin.

Of baptism, they told us that it is just a rite; it does not save but is a kind of a fealty (an oath) to God. And I swore such "allegiance" to God, but later, after my baptism, I saw that I was sinning in thoughts, words, and deeds; therefore I could not be true to God and fulfill his law, as he demanded. They told us of communion, that bread and wine are "symbols" of the body and blood of Christ; therefore communion profits nothing but merely reminds us of Christ's death. We viewed Jesus as a "new Moses." We were taught that the gospel is a "new law"; thus, to be saved we must obey Christ's laws.

When a preacher would come to our prison, we all had to look merry and smile a lot. If one did not do it, one could be declared a "lukewarm" or, worse, "dead" Christian. When a preacher would cry "Hallelujah!" we all had to be in raptures and echo him with "Hallelujah!" I gradually became a legalist, thinking that God ought to be proud of me for quitting smoking, stopping swearing, having nothing



An inmate receives his first communion

in common with the criminal world, reading my Bible, praying a lot—in a word, trying to please Jesus Christ in everything. I took part in all of this till Rev. Igor Kizyaev came to our prison, whom we evangelically, "warmly," welcomed, jabbed at our Bibles, buried him with questions, and were anxious because he did not share our "faith."

Between 2003 and 2006, I always came to the prayer room when Fr. Igor came, with one **continued on page 6**

The prison administration allowed me to meet the men who wrote me. With this, my prison ministry began. In 2003 the prison administration and I made a cooperative agreement, and for five years now I have been coming to the prison twice a month.

I had met with and talked to people who had been inmates, but I had not been inside a prison before. I had known very little about people who live by prison rules. At first it was difficult to talk to the convicts – they are trespassers of the law, people with perverted thinking, low education, often with psychic and moral deficiencies.

And I had to face all these defects! But I was certain that the Lord had not directed me in vain to work with the inmates, for he desires that sinners amend their sinful lives and follow him. When I began to visit the prison regularly, I had to start from scratch, as most attenders of church services had perverted ideas about God. Many had been prone to Baptist and Pentecostal errors, and thus heresies and false teachings were elevated to the rank of truth. So I organized catechetical lessons, and slowly but surely, with careful study of Holy Scripture, my hearers have been learning the basics of Christian doctrine.

In addition, I have been maintaining correspondence with the members of this catechetical group, so that the

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men might learn and understand the teaching of the Lutheran church. This work is hard; catechetical instruction takes from one year to a year and a half. Over these five years I have baptized and confirmed five men. Some of them have been released and found jobs, married, and had children. I see the fruit of the good news of Christ in this.

Many people do not understand me. They think I am wasting my time on these criminals. I think since the Lord Jesus Christ did not shrink from stepping on the sinful earth for the world's salvation, we also, by his commission, are to go and preach the good news to all who are bound by sin. On Calvary, two robbers were crucified with Christ. One abused him, but another turned to the Lord and received his pardon and salvation. I am deeply convinced that all people have a chance to turn to the Lord and away



Pastor Igor Kizyaev with inmates from Chita prison

from sin.

I have a new catechetical group comprised of six men. For the past few months I have been working with them, teaching them, instructing them in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have been honored to witness how the Holy Spirit reforms people and changes their way of thinking, teaches them devotion to God and love for the neighbor. There is nothing impossible with God. Therefore I do not doubt that the prisoners to whom I preach the good news will set out on the way to correction and, when free again, will not return to the way of lawlessness but rather build a new life in accord with Christ's teaching. Even though it will be difficult for them to rehabilitate themselves in the eyes of men, and even though the stain of lawbreakers will be theirs all their lives, God is giving them a chance to receive the new birth and new life in Christ Jesus our Lord. ✠

[Editor's note: Additional articles about Chita and Rev. Kizyaev's ministry can be read in the December 2005 and May 2006 editions of the [SLMS newsletter at www.tsllms.org](http://www.tsllms.org).]



A prisoner speaks with Rev. Kizyaev in prison library

Bishop

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Obviously, this is a very important work: there are many crimes which take place there (like contraband vodka, that the local population is being poisoned with)



Parishioners following liturgy

which people illegally bring from China to Russia. Also from Russia to China, people try to bring a lot of forbidden things to import.

From Chita we drove to the village of Edinenie. This is a long way by a very bad road. Mostly there is desert around. In such a place it is better never to travel at night because of robbery due to criminals on the roads. However, Igor Kizyaev (our Pastor who serves there) is a veteran of the Russian army special forces, who served in Afghanistan, and we felt safe when traveling with him.

As I said, the criminal situation there is very tragic. Life there is not just full of danger. In those places crimes constantly increase, and the same can also be said of robbery. In most of the villages there are no police stations. Robbers can come to your house at night, and take your money or things. They could murder you... And nobody would help!

Imagine that the most dangerous job there is that of a shepherd. The shepherds are constantly murdered. Criminals come with trucks, murder a shepherd and steal sheep. Recently, a neighbor of our parish elder was murdered; robbers came on a truck, they shot the shepherd with a rifle, and they took 18 sheep. Police came from a distant town and did not find anyone. The man left a wife and two school-aged daughters.

Poverty in those places is terrible. People in the villages if they make about 400-500 rubles (16-20 USD) per month should feel happy.

There are no real roads in the mountains. On our way I often felt bad because our church car could be damaged. In our parish in Chita, we have a car, and this is a real miracle that this car is still alive. But soon it will come to its

end. In these places you need to have a military tank, well, or at least a large four-wheel-drive car.

So, people are very poor. In many ways, this is a consequence of the fact that in the Soviet times, the authorities forced many farmers to abandon their homes and land and move to other places. This was a so-called "consolidation of villages". What is the reason of having several small villages, if one can make a single large one from them? It is true, that the communists never thought about how people would live in new places, or where they would work. The communists only wanted to control people. And of course, it is easier to exercise control over a single village than several ones. This was practiced at the beginning of the Soviet regime because in these places there was great resistance to communism.

Now, there is mostly devastation and famine. And crime is increasing. People do not receive real police protection or medical care. Of course, it is not as bad there, as in neighboring Buryatia, where the situation is worse. In Buryatia there is an epidemic of tuberculosis, and it is already difficult to find healthy people. Children do not receive normal portions of food or vitamins.

And when I traveled, I even thought about how life in the Russian provinces is different from life in the capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg). You know, when I go

abroad, many people say to me: "Oh you are from Russia! We know your country. We were in Moscow and St. Petersburg." And then I answer that if they were in Moscow and St. Petersburg, they DID NOT visit our country. Because our country is not the "metropolises."

Most of the people live in small towns in the various provinces, and the life there is totally different.

Please pray for the preaching of the Gospel among the people in eastern Siberia. ☒

[Editor's note: Part 2 will appear in the December 2008 issue of the SLMS newsletter]



Trans-Siberian railroad terminal in Chita region

“Siberia is waiting” – a history of prisons and faith

By Vsevolod Lytkin
translated by Alexei Shilin

When we invite someone to visit us, we often say: "Siberia is waiting for you." We say it as a joke, because we understand that such words sound ambiguous. Many people are afraid of Siberia for its coldness and a great number of prisons.

It has been always in the history that criminals in Russia were condemned to penal servitude in Siberia. It was true during the time of the Russian Empire, it is still true now.

It is interesting, that some Lutheran congregations in Siberia came into existence because of the prisons. So, after the Russian-Swedish war of 1700-1721 many Swedish soldiers were taken prisoners and sent to Tobolsk, Siberia. A Lutheran congregation was created there in 1718 and a pastor was appointed to take care of the Swedish soldiers.

Of course, during the Soviet regime Joseph Stalin

... AFTER THE RUSSIAN-SWEDISH WAR OF 1700-1721 MANY SWEDISH SOLDIERS WERE TAKEN PRISONERS AND SENT TO TOBOLSK, SIBERIA. A LUTHERAN CONGREGATION WAS CREATED THERE IN 1718 AND A PASTOR WAS APPOINTED TO TAKE CARE OF THE SWEDISH SOLDIERS.

sent a lot of people to Siberia. Nobody knows how many people died at that time in prisons and concentration camps there. It is estimated that 15-20 million people died in the camps [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulag>].

In Soviet prisons there were many Christians. There were one or more concentration camps in every large Siberian town where political prisoners were relocated. There were many Christians among those people, they were sent there because of their faith.

After Stalin died a lot of political prisoners were set free, but the majority of them were still not allowed to leave Siberia. Many of those who had permission to leave did not have a place to return, because their houses were given to other people or plundered.

For example, in the town of Yurga (between Novosibirsk and Tomsk) many "Volga Germans", who survived concentration camp stayed at the town. Gradually they built houses and gathered in a Lutheran congregation (now – Lutheran parish of Saint Luke, SELC). Thanks be to God that those times are over and now Christians may worship God freely and proclaim the Gospel to their neighbors. There are no more political prisoners in Russia.



The center of the old Chara prison camp in Chita region used during Stalin's regime

But the criminality level is very high in our country, so there are many prisons in Siberia. Now, Christians visit prisons to speak there about Christ, to reach lost souls for the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the ministry in which Pastor Igor Kizyaev (Lutheran parish of Saint Trinity, Chita) is very actively involved.

There are many prisons around Chita. (A few years ago this territory became well-known abroad because of the richest man in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky who was sent in one of the remote prisons in the Chita region.)

Pastor Igor Kizyaev visits several prisons near Chita on a regular basis. He talks with convicts, catechizes and baptizes them. There is already a small congregation in one of these prisons. Newly converted convicts share their faith with their neighbors. Please, pray for Pastor Igor Kizyaev and for his work, so that former criminals may come to faith in Christ. ✖



The old guard tower of the Chara camp

Ivan speaks from prison

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purpose: to ask him a question to which he could give no answer, or otherwise to make fun of his words or teaching. But gradually, seeing Fr. Igor's patience, I started to give

I HEARD THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE FIRST TIME AND UNDERSTOOD WHY THE SAVIOR WENT TO THE CROSS! THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS IS IMPUTED TO ME BY GRACE AND FOR THE SAKE OF CHRIST'S MERIT, APART FROM THE WORKS OF THE LAW. I RECEIVE JUSTIFICATION FREELY, BY THE MERCY OF GOD.

heed to the catechetical instruction given by him.

In 2006 I asked Fr. Igor to include me in his catechetical group. We studied every article of church doctrine in detail. My eyes were opened, as it were. I saw that there is no confusion in Bible interpretation in the doctrine of the Lutheran Church, but there is an accurate definition of law and gospel. I heard the good news of Jesus Christ for the first time and understood why the Savior went to the cross! That righteousness is imputed to me by grace and for the sake of Christ's merit, apart from the works of the law. I receive justification freely, by the mercy of God.

Through reading the Book of Concord, I learned what the church is; who can and must teach in church; that all truth is written in Holy Scripture; that God speaks to us not through some mysterious revelation (as Pentecostals teach), but through his word preached in church.

Catechetical classes opened

before me a world of God's order. Thanks to this instruction, I found peace and firm faith in the Lord Jesus Christ's salvation and justification!

In 2007 I was confirmed and admitted to the sacrament of holy communion. This was the happiest day of my life. Now I know and believe that the Lord abides with us in the holy sacraments, through which we are given the grace of the forgiveness of our sins and life eternal.

I am thankful to God for leading me from darkness and bringing me into the wonderful light of the good news of our Savior, Jesus Christ. I received good instruction in the faith; now I know how to believe and live aright, to be pleasing to God.

In three years I shall be free. I want to live my future life decently. I have everything for it – faith, church, a desire to build a normal life. There is no turning back to the past, because God made me wise and showed me the way to walk. I know it will be difficult. For a long time I shall be a criminal in people's eyes. But I also know the Lord gave me a shield of faith that will help me to withstand life's trials. ✕

SIBERIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

SELC



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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