

## **Mission to Central Russia June 18-July 1, 2007**

*Pastor David & Stephanie Carlson, Report 7/19/07  
(12-Member Mission Team)*

### MOSCOW (MOSCOW DEANERY)

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, 111020 Moscow, Nalichnaya ul., dom 1, stroyenie 1 (RUSSIA)  
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Pastor Igor Alisov, Assistant Pastor Andrey Yurtaev, Deconess Nina Yurtaeva

This congregation is blessed with a pre-Revolutionary church building (1911) as well as a parish hall across the cemetery, formerly a building for the cemetery caretaker. The parish hall has good spaces to host people and conduct events; it is also a good location – relatively close to downtown and train stations. But the upkeep and renovation of both buildings is a financial strain. The leaders say they are very happy to host visitors from the U.S. It is a little more expensive to stay at this church than in Yoshkar-Ola or Birsik, but that is due to the higher cost of living in Moscow in general.

Our group participated in the last day of a seminar on women's work, which Nina organized for the deanery. After brief introductions, we shared about ministries involving women, families and children in our churches in MN, and then we heard from other participants. Holy Trinity in particular is involved in many outreach ministries – ministry to Afghani refugees (coordinated by a young woman, Marcella, who herself was a recipient of some of the services they provide, such as Russian language classes), ministry to hearing and speech impaired children, ministry to people in Armenia (one member makes an annual trip there), ministry to school children and to others in need. It was impressive to us that in receiving some gifts from our group (e.g. crafts, school supplies, quilts), they asked permission to give some away to these ministries.

The congregation has about 100 members on the roll and an average Sunday worship attendance of 30. Leaders said they are eager to establish a friendship relationship with a congregation in the U.S. Challenges continue to be funding building renovations and reaching new members. Pastors usually need to supplement their salaries with other jobs, and younger members sometimes leave Moscow to study abroad (e.g. Finland). Still, Nina thinks the situation in the churches seems to be getting better each year.

The Moscow Deanery is made up of five congregations (it used to be eight but three are now in a different deanery, "Under the Volga" Deanery). Two congregations in Moscow, and others are up to 200 km away. Pastors in the deanery used to get together every few months, with funding from the LCMS, but now once or twice a year because pastors must pay their own transportation. Once, the deanery received a visit from Robert Kolb, a professor from Concordia Seminary (LCMS), who provided funds for their seminar time together. It was one of the happiest times Igor can remember in the deanery. Igor said their contact with Lutherans in the U.S. has been mostly with the LCMS (the previous senior pastor was an LCMS missionary), but said he was thankful to have this connection now with the ELCA. Andrey, Nina's son, speaks English and accompanied us on our day trips to the city center. All the leaders were friendly and gracious hosts. Andrey and Nina were able to act as a sort of travel agency for our time in Moscow.

They arranged all of our transportation, tours, guides (including Nina's daughter-in-law Maria), and even purchased our train tickets from Moscow to Yoshkar-Ola. They sent us a proposed schedule and budget, were open to our suggestions and revisions, and then received the money from us by wire to the church bank account to pay for everything we agreed on. This worked well.

#### YOSHKAR-OLA (URAL DEANERY)

Lutheran Church of the Holy Cross, 424003 Yoshkar-Ola, ul. Oktyabrskaya 43 (RUSSIA)  
Tel. (8362) 73-42-00, Fax. (8362) 63-44-43, Email: luter@mari-el.ru  
Pastor Vladimir Bochkov, Pastor Juha & Anu Valiaho (Dean, Finnish missionaries)

The Missionary Camp was organized by Vladimir and attended by church leaders (lay and a few clergy) from around the deanery. It included Bible study, worship, singing, discussion groups, good food and fellowship. Pastor Robert Kleinke shared about his work with youth at Duluth's Woodland Hills both in a plenary session and seminar, and Pastor David Carlson gave a plenary Bible study, "Faith Comes by Hearing," led a seminar on evangelism to adults, and preached at the Sunday worship service. Other members had opportunity to hear all plenary presentations and participate in seminars on youth work, alcohol and drug addiction, and women's ministry. Juha said visits like ours that coincide with the Missionary Camp (held annually at the end of June) are desirable. In fact, gifts raised by our group funded the Missionary Camp this year, and both Vladimir and Juha said they were unsure how they could have had the camp without those gifts. The Missionary Camp is an annual project that could be funded in the future.

Accommodations at the "Missionary House" (dormitory that houses 30 people) are very comfortable. Since 2005, the dormitory has been completed. On the second floor it has a small common area as well as several sleeping rooms for 2-4 people each. Additional sleeping space is on the first floor. There is a shower and bathroom on each floor and the first floor also has a kitchen.

After starting the Yoshkar-Ola church and serving there for 12 years, Juha and Anu moved on to Birsk two years ago after Vladimir Bochkov graduated from the seminary in Keltto/St. Petersburg. It was good to see stability and continued good work in Yoshkar-Ola after that leadership change. The church there seems to be on solid footing with a number of long-time lay leaders to work with Pastor Vladimir. Juha told us that of all the Ural Deanery churches this one is also the most financially secure.

Shuarsola is a collective farm village near Yoshkar-Ola where the parish has at least 50 confirmed members. Its church structure is partially built and Finnish builders will continue in the fall, but more funding is needed to complete construction. One of the sons of this village, Sasha Mityakov, 27, was commissioned as a catechist at the Sunday worship service in Yoshkar-Ola. He accompanied us on our travel to Bashkortostan and works in Udmurtia, a neighboring province, with emerging Lutheran churches.

Project Maria. Juha and Anu are raising funds privately to purchase a small apartment for a church member confined to a wheelchair, her husband, and 2-year-old daughter, Maria. They currently live in a banya/sauna. Some of our group members have contributed to this project.

### BIRSK (URAL DEANERY)

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Birsk, Tel. (34714) 31-4-31, Email: birskprihod@mail.ru  
Pastor Juha Valiaho, Deaconess Anu Valiaho, Slava Abdullin (2<sup>nd</sup> year seminary student)

Outside Mari El, Birsk (pop. 40,000) has one of the largest concentrations of Mari people in the region. In January 2000, Juha and Anu conducted a worship service in Birsk for the first time at a school during the winter break. Slava Abdullin was baptized then and he began to help with ministry work in the villages. Slava and his family lived in a dormitory and he met with people in a tiny log church building as well as in their homes. The parish's baptized membership now numbers over 200. Since 2005, a great deal of construction has taken place. The new parish hall was dedicated in August 2006 by Bishop Aare Kuukauppi. The main floor includes a sanctuary and restrooms; the second floor an apartment with two bedrooms, a living room, small kitchen and bathroom; and the basement a dining room, kitchen, and church office. Our group slept mainly on mattresses on the floors of the sanctuary and dining room. In addition, they have completed constructing a garage and laid the foundation for a Missionary House similar to the one in Yoshkar-Ola to accommodate many visitors at a time more comfortably. Through the purchase of adjacent land, they have been able to expand the once tiny property into a larger church complex, including a house where Slava and his family live, garden space, and a well. Our synod's offerings to Birsk are contributing to these building projects, and it was impressive to see the results and progress made.

We had expected to conduct a day camp for youth and families similar to the one we did in 2005, but several factors led to a different agenda the days we were there. Slava had invited a Finnish couple he met at Keltto to lead seminar sessions on marriage and families, in which several from our group also participated. He also invited four young adults from St. Petersburg who were interested in working with youth in the villages. They ended up helping others from our group with the handful of youth who came to the church during those days. For the number of leaders present, attendance from the parish members was low, which was disappointing.

The hospitality of the church in Birsk was memorable. When we arrived, we were greeted by church members dressed in national costume and bearing traditional gifts of bread and salt, which everyone tasted as we shared our greetings. In addition, because of the changes in the agenda, several in our group were able to have home stays with church members in villages near Birsk. For some, this unexpected opportunity turned out to be the highlight of the whole trip. Some members visited farms and workshops, went fishing, experienced a Russian banya, and saw the daily life of church members. As a group, we also took an excursion with several members to the foothills of the Ural Mountains. There, we visited an Orthodox monastery, crossed a hydroelectric dam, and picnicked by the beautiful Black River less than an hour from the Continental Divide.

Juha and Anu are technically on furlough this year, fundraising in Finland and Estonia. When we met up with them, they had just come from a Finnish Missionary Society festival where they and others played music and shared about the missionary work in the Ural Deanery among the Mari people. In January 2008, they will return to Birsk for two more years and then Juha plans to retire. Many people we met throughout the region look to them as their spiritual parents, though Juha and Anu have long been preparing local leaders to carry on the work after them.