

Mission Tours

Two group visits to new and reborn congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia May 17-26 and May 28-June 5, 2007, led by Antti Lepisto

Group Visit #1. A nine-member group visited congregations in northern and southern Karelia as well as the St. Petersburg area. Led by driver and guide Pastor Reino Letonsaari who has assisted us in many ways since 1995, we traveled in a ten-passenger van. Our first stop was in Kajaani, Finland, with the leadership of the local congregation with which we collaborate in funding a church building project in Segeza, north Karelia. We were hosted at the congregation's retreat center.

The next day we entered Russia near the city of Kostamus and traveled 160 kilometers on gravel road north to Kalevala where we were hosted by Pastor Ari Huotari and the parish women. After dinner, we enjoyed the parish sauna and stayed in guestrooms in the church. Our group included Pastor Rollie Bockbrader and his 14-year old daughter Hannah from Kalevala's friendship congregation, Our Savior's in Cloquet, MN. On Sunday morning Pastor Bockbrader preached with translation. Two teenage girls were baptized without family present. They sought baptism after attending children's and youth activities. A retired teacher was recently appointed parish worker and a recently-ordained deacon will be assisting the parish. Pastor Huotari serves other cities and villages over a broad area.

Sunday afternoon involved a 190-mile ride to the city of Segeza and an evening worship on the second floor of a community center (the tenth location the congregation has rented in its 13 years). Gail Saari and Mary Sedin of Peace Lutheran in Poplar, WI (Segeza's friendship congregation) were part of the group. Both at Kalevala and at Segeza, gifts were exchanged and Pastor Bockbrader and Gail brought financial support as well. These visits strengthened and enriched these friendship congregations.

The following morning we continued south to Medvezegorsk to visit the town from which Janet Hodnik, a member of our group, and her husband Tim McCarthy adopted a young Karelian girl several years ago. We then went to Kondopoga (Kontupohja) where we attended an evening event in the church and met Vadim Lysenko, a newly-ordained young deacon. This church was assisted in its building project by friendship congregations in Finland and Zion Lutheran in Fairport, OH. Our home hosts were remarkable.

The next day we went to Petrozavodsk to see the new church building project which has a completion target date of September 2009. We met the congregation staff including newly-ordained deacon Alexei Krongolm and his wife Nadia, a youth worker. They and Vadim are a part of the new generation and future of the Ingrian Church. Their outreach to folks new to Christianity and their work with high school and university students are impressive.

The following morning we drove to Tsalna, a small congregation in a humble village, which has an impressive ministry of feeding children and providing food assistance to the elderly and shut-ins. The support funds they receive are all used for this program and are well documented.

We then continued to the Sodder/Novie Peski parish of seven poor villages. Hosted in log homes in a low-lying swampy area, we attended a wonderful presentation by six little children and their teacher. Pastor Pekka Palosaari explained the nature of ministry and social assistance done by a support group in Finland. He has driven 750 kilometers each month for 13 years to serve these folks. Remarkable!

We continued to Olonets (Aunus) 200 kilometers south, were warmly received, and heard of the work of this eight-village parish and its 12 Sunday schools. Again, a son of the parish was just ordained a deacon and will serve the largest of the outlying villages. The rest of the day was spent driving to Kolutshi (Keltto) to the Theological Institute. There and in some satellite locations in Russia, all types of congregational staff are trained: pastors, deacons, Sunday school superintendents, musicians, youth and children's workers, diaconal leaders and family and marriage leaders.

Finally, after a visit to St. Petersburg, St. Mary's church and its remarkable street children's and other ministries, and local museums, we returned to Helsinki.

Group visit #2. A 29-member bus tour group began in Helsinki, stopped in Viborg (Viipuri) at the local church and then went on to St. Mary's Church in St. Petersburg and heard a fine presentation by Pastor Aleksei Uimonen, mission director of the Ingrian Church, before dinner. The next day we visited the Russian Museum and the Hermitage and had housing and meals at the Ingrian Church Theological Institute. There we met Bishop Aarre Kuukauppi and Rector Tapio Karjalainen of the Institute and Kaija Karjalainen, chair of the Women's and Family Ministry Committee. We learned about the rebirth of the Ingrian Church since 1990 and the need for passionate congregation staff willing to serve with the limited resources and salaries the church can provide.

The next morning we drove to Olonets and there a young woman named Julia explained the ministry of the eight-village parish and the 12 Sunday schools which serve in the area. We also met her husband who had been a key local official who assisted the congregation in securing a lot and needed permits. The congregation women served us a fine meal. That evening we drove to Petrozavodsk and visited the new church project. After a stay in a hotel, we met with the staff of the congregation (friendship congregation of First Lutheran in Duluth), including meeting Alexei Krongolm, the recently-ordained youth pastor for the Republic of Karelia. Later we met his wife Nadia. They are doing remarkable ministry in reaching youth and university students and in doing children's and youth retreats in congregations. They have also arranged marriage and family retreats which have attracted non-members.

We then went to a small village of Tsalna where we were warmly received by Pastor Juho Pakkari and his wife and the women who provide a warm meal for village children each Saturday and food packages for elderly and shut-in folks in the village. Four women carry out this food ministry each week with their wood-fired kitchen stove and keep complete records of how all support funds are used in this ministry. Again, we were served a fine meal. Kenwood Lutheran in Duluth is a friendship congregation. We proceeded to Kondopoga, an industrial town nearby, where we were housed in members' homes and apartments. This gave us a personal understanding of life in this town. Once again, the hospitality was magnificent. We

met Vadim Lysenko, a recent graduate of the Theological Institute, who is serving as a deacon in this parish.

The following morning we drove through many humble villages where bitter battles were fought between Finns and Russians in 1939-1945 to Pitkäranta. (This town was formerly a part of Finland.) There we stayed in the local hotel and had an opportunity to walk around the town. The next morning (Sunday), we attended worship at the beautiful log church where the local choir sang and a fine sermon by a visiting pastor from Finland was translated into English and Russian. A fine meal was prepared by congregation women and served by youth of the parish.

Heading west, our next stop was Läskelä where we met with congregation members, including the mayor of the town, to discuss the possibility of building a small church for Läskelä and a central gathering place for five area villages. The town is offering a lot. This was followed by a visit to the village of Harlu where we participated in a worship service in a small rented building. Once again, the hospitality of these poor villagers took our breath away. Finally, that evening we drove to Sortavala where we were ensconced in a local hotel. The next morning a part of our group went by hydrofoil to visit the Orthodox monastery on the island of Valaam and the rest visited the local Ingrian congregation and made a bus tour of the city and visited an orphanage. That afternoon we stopped briefly at a log-building firm and then, before crossing the border to Finland, we stopped to see the new retreat center being built by volunteers at the little village of Ruskeala.

In Finland we traveled south to the Oronmylly retreat center where we spent a wonderful evening and night, again with good meals and a final worship experience before heading back to Helsinki to complete our pilgrim tour. On this final leg of our journey, group members made commitments of \$36,500 toward the Läskelä church building project and four members of our group agreed to serve for fundraising for this project. Some folks remained in Finland to visit relatives and friends and some visited Estonia and other countries before returning home. It was an inspiring time.