

Pastor David Carlson, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Duluth
Reflections on Russia 2011 – Hospitality

During our recent trip to Russia, the last church we visited was a Lutheran congregation near the Ural Mountains. When we got to the neighborhood where the church was, we saw two kids waiting at an intersection. Seeing the van they took off running ahead of us, telling the waiting people, “They’re here! They’re here!” Accordion music started playing, accompanied by drum beats, and as we turned into the church yard we were greeted by Lutherans in traditional Mari folk costume – singing and smiling and dancing. We stepped out of the van, and they surrounded us with hugs and greeted us with bread – a pile of *blini* (like Russian pancakes) – and salt. Such a lavish reception wasn’t always the case, but at every church we visited we felt truly welcomed. You know it when you’ve experienced it, and sometimes *being a guest* heightens your sense of dependency and thankfulness for attention to small things that turn out not to be so small. “You must be tired from your journey, you must want to wash up, you must be hungry.”

In Russia, we were not the only guests. Hand in hand with their worship, even with few resources, our Lutheran friends always had enough food for the visitor, for the destitute neighbor, and we all had a place at the table. And there were other reminders of living under God’s hospitality wherever we were on the journey. Not only the habit of sitting down to pray for one another before a departure, rather than be rushed, or the sign of the cross marked on the window of the van before we pulled away, but also in everyday words. Instead of saying *do svidaniya*, “goodbye,” e.g., they would say, *s Bogom* which means “with God.” And you could respond in the same way. *Go with God. Stay with God.* These are words with which disciples today are sent out, with all we have and are.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus says, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40). When we go *with God*, we are never alone, no matter where we are. And when we stay *with God*, Jesus comes to us as the one who needs our welcome. The hospitality we extend in Christ’s name is rooted in the hospitality we have first received from God who welcomes us at the font and the table. Here is where we get closer to understanding what makes Christian hospitality unique, different from tolerance, say, or political correctness, or even other types of hospitality. It is seeing human vulnerability and dignity in every person, seeing in them a person whom God loves, a person for whom Christ has died and rose again. Such welcoming changes us because it gives a standard of hospitality that is different from what the world gives, genuine reconciliation that is not a means to another end but is its own reward. Justice and peace with God and neighbor, reconciling love and new life – that is the goal of God’s hospitality. Through God’s forgiveness and acceptance, we might realize, if God welcomes me, God can welcome anyone. On the other hand, we might look around and think if this or that person is welcome here, maybe I am too.

Such new-found acceptance and thankfulness for God’s gracious welcome came through in the words of a song sung that was particularly meaningful to us this year, sung in Russian and in Mari, a Finno-Ugric language spoken among a people living between the Volga and the Ural Mountains (words and music by Finnish songwriter Pekka Simojoki).

From the depths of my soul I am calling out to you: Lord, hear my prayer.
Amid darkness and gloom, send me your light: Lord, hear my prayer.
I search for your living water in the desert: Lord, hear my prayer.
My God, send into my heart a new song: Lord, hear my prayer.

Stephanie Carlson
Reflections on Russia 2011

Our trip this year was our fourth visit to congregations in the Ural Deanery of the Ingrian Lutheran Church of Russia. For me, the church at Shuarsola, a former collective farm village near Yoshkar-Ola in the Russian republic of Marii El, comes to mind as one window into the work of the Ingrian Church in the Ural Deanery and as a touchstone for our partnership in the Gospel.

2004: Our family – my husband David, children Katie, age 3 and Martha, age 1, and I spend 3 months in Yoshkar-Ola. Each Tuesday evening we are invited to worship in Shuarsola with Deacon Gennadij, at the home of sisters Zoya and Valentina. Worshippers gather after the cows have been brought home from pasture for the night. Gennadij preaches in the Mari language, and we learn to sing hymns from the Mari hymnbook, recently completed by Gennadij and Pastor Juha Valiaho. Gennadij fills a bowl with water from the well, and David participates in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism for two local children. Katie and Martha pet cats and chase chickens; we are always fed a hot meal and sent home with farm-fresh milk and vegetables.

2005: We are shown a plot of land in Shuarsola where a church could be built. A name has been chosen for the church: “The Candle.”

2007: A son of the Shuarsola congregation, Sasha, has begun attending seminary classes and has become a church worker. Volunteer builders from Finland have visited, and church construction has begun. Sasha travels with our group in the Ural Deaner, helping and working with us every step of the way, a model of enthusiasm and energy. My skills as translator are stretched as our group member “Farmer John” asks Sasha numerous questions about local farming practices.

2011: Sasha and his congregation host our group for a delicious meal and afternoon program at their church, where construction is nearly complete. We share music in Mari, Russian, and English. Sasha’s wife Anya leads the youth in Sunday school songs. We hear how the partnership between Yoshkar-Ola and Shuarsola continues to be strong. A member from Yoshkar-Ola has begun teaching traditional Mari folk dance to the youth in Shuarsola, and they share this special gift with us. Greetings, devotions, testimonies, and many words of mutual encouragement are shared. I am privileged to translate as Sasha seeks out Bishop Tom Aitken with questions Sasha has as a young church leader in an area where the Lutheran church is very new. Amid hugs and laughter we climb into the van, once again renewed and inspired by what we have witnessed of God’s work through the Ingrian church in Shuarsola as the congregation there lives out its calling as a candle and a beacon. Jesus said, “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:15). I thank God for my sisters and brothers there and throughout the Ural Deanery and pray our accompaniment of one another may continue and grow. Amen.