

ELCIR Visions for the Future

Where the Northeastern Minnesota Synod ELCA Can Accompany the ELCIR in Ministry in Russia

From the Northeastern Minnesota Synod ELCA/ELCIR Companion Synod Task Force

Some attributes as a basis for long-range goals:

- There were very few remaining trained pastors and lay leaders and very limited financial resources within the Ingrian Lutheran Church after the fall of communism in the early 1990s. The rebuilding of the Ingrian Lutheran Church is a long-term process, likely over a couple of generations. But, with considerable assistance from the Lutheran Church in Finland and elsewhere, there has been steady progress and a new ministry vision for the future has recently been discerned and approved by the Bishop's Council. As one ELCIR leader noted, "*The Holy Spirit is certainly working, we are having trouble keeping up!*"
- A calling and tradition of the Ingrian Lutheran Church has been engagement in social ministry as a mandate of the Gospel. This takes the form, e.g., of operating elderly care facilities, humanitarian aid for the needy, and ministry with mentally and physically challenged individuals in state institutions. This results in good connections and relationships with secular authorities and a welcoming image for nonmembers
- The focus of the ELCIR now is supporting and strengthening existing churches, emphasizing discipleship, encouraging mission outreach with the Good News, growth in understanding of stewardship, and understanding that a Christian (both lay and clergy) provides leadership with the attitude of being a servant to others.

Visions for the future, goals or plans—priorities for accompaniment opportunities:

- 1) *Identity as a Russian Church:* Attendance at Ingrian Lutheran churches increased dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union. The church subsequently experienced a steady decline due largely to emigration to Finland by "Ethnic Ingrians" members as the result of an early-on agreement between Finland and Russia that allowed anyone with Finnish ethnicity to emigrate (Ingrians are ethnically related to Finland—this agreement has been terminated), as well as death of many of the older generation. But, there is increasing participation by those of Russian ethnicity. This has resulted in the Ingrian Lutheran church more fully experiencing its own identity and moving forward with renewed visions as a Lutheran Church in Russia. One example: the ELCIR's own Study Bible was recently published, emblematic of this identity.
- 2) *New visions:*
 - The Bishop's Council and seminary are taking the lead in developing a "new" emphasis of pastoral and lay leadership – what they view as following the Biblical model, following the example of Christ, i.e., leaders as servants of the church with increased leadership from lay members.
 - Another area of emphasis is taking advantage of opportunities to be visible in the community, e.g., by sponsoring concerts accompanied by an invitation to learn what the church is about, inviting guests to attend their "Basic Christianity Course," various Bible studies and worship services, and to talk to the pastor.
 - The Theological Institute now offers their first-year pre-seminary curriculum of 8 modules at a key host-church in each of the 6 ELCIR administrative units (called Deaneries)—this is accomplished by a 3-day weekend at the host church and distance learning in the intervening weeks before the next unit. This has been very popular with greatly increased enrollments of lay leaders and pre-seminary students – so much so that they have had to limit enrollment due to space and not enough staff. This "Bible School Without Walls" was initiated to

address the severe shortage of trained lay leaders and pastors, providing opportunity for members who can't leave their work to enroll in courses at the Theological Institute. After completing this introductory sequence, graduates can enroll in the various programs offered through the Ingrian Lutheran Theological Institute, including, e.g., seminary, youth ministry, and missionary training.

- 3) *Shortage of trained leaders and funds to support them.* Despite progress, a severe shortage of pastors and trained lay leaders still exists. Lack of funds is a major difficulty—for support of students who feel called into pastoral or lay ministry to attend the Theological Institute and also for pastoral salaries. Many pastors have to work outside the church in order to support their families, which limits their ministry and growth of congregations. So, it is a kind of “Catch-22” situation. Thus, scholarships for training and improved funding for pastoral salaries are high priorities. Support from outside the ELCIR is important for providing time for churches to grow to the point where members can support the ministry – this can take the form of financial support or short-term “missionaries” to help with training.
- 4) Many smaller churches are struggling and it would be helpful to establish a **friendship-congregation relationship**, the purposes including exchange visits, funding help, interaction/mutual encouragement (communication). Call the Synod office for information (218-724-4424).

Operating Principle:

With the leading of God's Spirit, the role of the Companion Synod relationship will be to prayerfully accompany the ELCIR in its efforts to strengthen and deepen the faith of its members, especially in the areas of stewardship, discipleship, servant leadership, and mission.

See Synod web page for more detailed information: www.nemnsynod.org
(Mission/Companion Synod/Ingria, Russia: <http://www.nemnsynod.org/ingria-russia.html>)