

CROSSINGS

Lent, 2015 | Vol. 117 | From the Crossings Community

In October of 2014 I made a three-week trip back to Russia, where I had served for four years as an instructor at a Russian Lutheran seminary on behalf of the ELCA. I had been invited to give a paper at a conference on 300 years of Lutheranism in Siberia, and while there I took the opportunity to help lead a couple of seminars on Law and Gospel theology for Russian Lutheran pastors and lay people. Naturally, I introduced them to the Crossings approach to reading the Bible and proclaiming the Gospel. To understand who these Russian Lutherans are, a little background is in order.



is for CCCP.

Yes, I know. Marcus gave up that old Crossings meme (before we knew what a meme was) of structuring the Crossings newsletter around the letters in CROSSINGS, but this is my first time writing the newsletter, and I wanted to give it a shot.

So just this once, for old time's sake: C is for CCCP. Haven't seen that in a while, have you? CCCP is Cyrillic for SSSR, rendered USSR in English translation, standing for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which is what it was when I first set foot on Russian soil thirty years ago. It was the fall semester of 1984 and I was a college student in my final semester as a Russian Language and Literature major, who had come to Moscow to study at the Pushkin Russian Language Institute. My being there was already in those days linked with my decision to go to seminary (it's complicated and not that interesting), although I could not have foreseen then that I would return in 15 years to teach at a Lutheran seminary, accompanied by the young English woman and fellow student I had just met, together with our three children – not in my wildest dreams. In fact, I had no idea that momentous change was just around the corner. Less than three months after I returned from that semester abroad, Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and the era of “glasnost” (openness) and “perestroika” (rebuilding) had begun. Six years later the CCCP was no more.



is for Russia and Other States.

What was left was Russia and the fourteen other, smaller republics of the Soviet Union, now independent: the three Baltic states, three Eastern European states, three republics in the Caucasuses, and five in Central Asia. R – O is also for Russian Orthodoxy, the dominant form of Christianity throughout Russian history, which came to this part of the world by way of the Byzantine Empire.



Chris Repp, pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church, Carbondale, IL. Also Crossings writer, presenter, & board member.

But there are other Christian denominations and other religions in the former Soviet Union. Estonia and Latvia are historically Lutheran, Lithuania (and parts of Belarus) has been predominantly Roman Catholic, while Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova have been mostly Eastern Orthodox, with Roman and Greek (Eastern-rite) Catholics prevalent in western Ukraine. Georgia and Armenia each have their own branch of Eastern Orthodoxy, while Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics have been historically Islamic.

Into all of these lands Lutherans made their way over the past 300 years, and they built churches. Religions of every stripe were persecuted and all but completely outlawed in Soviet times. The 1990s was a time of renewed interest in Christianity. Many looked to Russian Orthodoxy to fill the void left by the discrediting of Communist ideology. But those with German, Finnish, and Baltic roots turned to the faith of their ancestors, and in this period the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States (ELCROS) was born, along with a smaller, ethnically Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia (ELCIR). For legal reason, ELCROS has since devolved into its component “other state” church bodies, though these continue cooperative efforts in many areas, including theological education. For convenience, I'll continue to call it ELCROS here.



Above: Church complex in Omsk, site of the conference and seminar. It's also the headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East, one of two component churches of the ELCR (formerly ELCROS), over which Dietrich Brauer is now Archbishop.

Below: Seminar participants in Omsk. Anton Tikhomirov and Bradn Buerkle, 2nd and 3rd from left.



S is for *Sophie*.

Not the St. Sophia church in Constantinople, in which – according to legend – emissaries from Kievan Rus' (the common ancestor of Russia and Ukraine) were so impressed with the Eastern Orthodox liturgy that they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth, thus all but deciding which religion their Prince, Vladimir (aka Volodimir to Ukrainians), would choose for his people.

No, S here is for the German Lutheran Princes Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst, who through marriage and a subsequent coup became one of the most important monarchs in Russian history. You may have guessed by now that she is better known to posterity as Catherine, the name she took upon her conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, and, due to her long and successful reign, also as “the Great.” It was during her reign and at her invitation that tens of thousands of German farmers settled the territory of the lower Volga River in the 1860s and 70s, and German immigration continued to this area well into the 19th century. This is how the vast majority of those above-mentioned Lutherans made their way into the Russian Empire. S is also for Saratov, the city on the Volga at the center of German settlement

in Russia. Other German Lutherans went to the area of Odessa in Ukraine as well as the Northern Caucasus.

I is for *Invitation*.

Toward the end of 2013 I received an invitation through my successor at the seminary, Bradn Buerkle, now in charge of distance learning for ELCROS, to present a paper at a conference in the Siberian city of Omsk, co-sponsored by the Lutheran church and Omsk State University. The theme of the conference was “300 Years of Lutherans in Siberia.” If you’re checking dates, you’ll note that that puts Lutherans in Siberia half a century before Catherine’s reign. It was under her predecessor, Peter the Great, who turned the course of Russian history toward Europe, that numerous technical experts were brought from the Lutheran lands of Germany and Sweden to sites all over the expanding Russian Empire. Cities like Omsk were founded in this period, with European Lutherans as planners, architects, and construction supervisors. (The Russian word for nonsense, “yerundah” has been connected with the German “hier und da” [here and there] of these supervisors, but it is a dubious etymology.)

As was the case with the new capital of St. Petersburg, one of the first buildings in Omsk was a Lutheran church, built to serve those foreign technical advisors, many of whom came with their families and ended up staying. More Lutherans followed, especially at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of land reform in the Volga region.

S is also for Stalin, the Soviet dictator during World War II, who when the Germans launched their attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 forcibly deported the Black Sea and Volga Germans (as they had come to be known) to the Urals, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian states, fearing that ethnic Germans would collaborate with the invaders. They were put on trains and let off in the middle of nowhere with no supplies. I have spoken with people who were children when this happened, and they told me that were it not for the help of the local people in these areas they would not have survived. And indeed many did not survive, including about a third of their able-bodied men who were taken away to forced-labor camps. After the war some of these ethnic Germans returned to the Volga region, but most continued to live where they had resettled. Many preserved their ethnic heritage, especially in the more remote villages, where clandestine house-churches were established in the absence of legal churches.

N is for
Novosaratovka.

which means “New Saratov.” Novosaratovka is a German suburb of St. Petersburg where the Lutheran Church was confiscated after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and turned into a driving school and later a repair shop for trucks. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 it became possible for church bodies to reconstitute themselves and to reclaim their property.

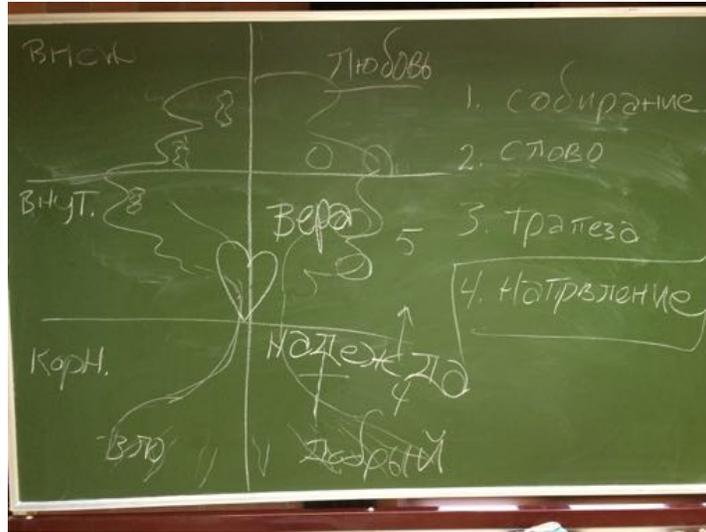
In downtown St. Petersburg, the main Lutheran Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (known as Petrikerche) had been converted into a swimming pool. This was reclaimed by ELCROS as their main church and administrative headquarters. With considerable fundraising help from Gerhard Krodel, German-born American theology professor at Gettysburg Seminary, the church in Novosaratovka was renovated for use as the church’s seminary. This is where I was sent in 1999 by the ELCA to teach Church History and Systematic Theology to students from Ukraine, the Volga, Central Asia, the Far East, Georgia, Belarus, and Latvia.

It was while I was teaching there that I got connected to the Crossings Community through its web site and then Thursday Theology postings, but it was only in my final year, in the final semester, that Ed and Marie Schroeder visited us and presented the Crossings Method to my students. I’m not sure how much my students took away from that presentation, but their teacher had an “a hah” moment, finally seeing how this way of reading the Bible and proclaiming the Gospel comes out of the Bible itself, as the Lutheran Confessions had also noted.



G is for *Gospel.*

In her ABC book for children, Sandra Boynton wrote that X is for Xylophone because X is always for Xylophone. Where the Crossings Community is concerned, G is for Gospel because G is always for Gospel. It’s what we do. So when Bradn asked if I could come to Russia for longer than the few days of the conference to help him lead some distance-learning



The Crossings six-step method in Russian

seminars for pastors and lay people in Siberia and the Volga region, I agreed and suggested Law and Gospel theology for the topic, at which I would present the Crossings Method. Thanks to the willingness of my congregation to free up my time for this trip (and to my father for filling in on the Sundays I was gone), I was able to go for three weeks.

After a few days in my old stomping grounds in St. Petersburg, where I finalized my presentations and my sermon for the following Sunday in the Siberian city of Tomsk, I took the night train to Moscow to attend Sunday worship at the Lutheran Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul not far from Red Square, where my former student, Dietrich Brauer is the pastor. And not only the pastor. He is also the bishop of European Russia who just the month before had been elected Archbishop of the whole Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, consisting of European Russia plus the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East.

After worship and the Russian equivalent of coffee hour (substitute tea for coffee), I gave an hour-long presentation on the Crossings matrix and its usefulness for reading the Bible for its Gospel content. The audience was mostly interested lay people from the congregation, but there was one pastor, a few seminarians, and a Russian Orthodox seminarian also in attendance. I had no translator for this, and discovered just how rusty my spoken Russian had become. But I got my point across, I think, and it was a good warm-up for my presentations to come.

I flew to Omsk that night, departing just before midnight and arriving at about 5:30 a.m. local time. This was my fourth trip to Omsk, so I knew the drill. I arrived at the new church complex, built in the 1990s with help from the German Lutheran Church, was shown to my room, and then slept until mid-afternoon. The seminar began that evening after dinner. In attendance were lay leaders from a number of congregations within several hundred miles of Omsk, and one pastor from the Urals who had been a student during my first year in St. Petersburg.

I presented the Crossings matrix the next day. I had made a Russian translation of the matrix graphic that we use at Crossings pre-conferences and seminars, and I used Marcus Felde’s insightful mapping of faith, hope, and love from 1 Corinthians 13 onto the matrix in order to clarify its three levels. Both the attendees and Bradn found this compelling. In subsequent sessions we worked through some texts using the matrix.

Other presentations were given by Pastor Anton Tikhomirov, another of my former students, who after graduating from the seminary went on to get his doctorate in theology in Germany and returned to become president of the seminary in Novosaratovka. Anton’s presentations were on the history of the Lutheran confessions and subsequent developments in Lutheran theology. The final session of the seminar was a survey of modern attitudes to

Right: Seminar participants in Ulyanovsk. Pastor and Dean Vladimir Provorov is the tallest in the center middle row.



Below: St. Mary's Lutheran Church in Ulyanovsk, just blocks from where Vladimir Lenin was born and raised.



Confessional subscription and an open discussion on the relevance of the Law and Gospel theology to the church today. One of the objections presented against Confessional subscription is that modern people ask different questions than Luther did in his search for a merciful God. For many people today, we were told, the main question is whether God exists at all. In making a case in favor of the Confessions, I suggested that the question of God's existence is not really a different question, but a preliminary one. Should one decide in favor of God's existence, Luther's question of God's disposition toward us remains as relevant now as it ever was.



is for Simbirsk.

During Soviet times, many Russian cities were renamed. St. Petersburg was renamed Leningrad, Tsaritsyn became Stalingrad (now Volgograd), and Yekaterinburg became Sverdlovsk. The city of Simbirsk was the birthplace of Vladimir Lenin. In 1924 it was renamed Ulyanovsk after Lenin (his family name was Ulyanov) and for some reason it has not reverted to its prerevolutionary name. Ulyanovsk was the site of the second of our two multi-day seminars, which took place the week following

the seminar and conference in Omsk. In the mean time I had traveled by train to Tomsk to preach and lead services for a congregation that has been without a pastor for more than a year, and from there by bus to Novosibirsk, the third largest city in Russia after Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In Novosibirsk I met up with Slava, a friend of Bradn and a member of the Ingrian Lutheran Church mentioned above, who in addition to his regular work in construction does prison ministry for the church. I went to Novosibirsk only because I had never been there before and it was on the way from Tomsk to Ulyanovsk.

Slava showed me around town, including a visit to his church, and then that evening I set off for a 36-hour train ride through Western Siberia and the Urals to Kazan on the Volga, where I was met by Vladimir, yet another former student who is now the pastor (and dean) in Ulyanovsk. Bradn had flown back to St. Petersburg from Omsk to be with his family (including newborn son Lukas) and then met up with me in Kazan, which we picked because neither of us had ever been there. We got a tour of the newly-restored Lutheran church in the center of town near the Kremlin (many cities have kremlins, i.e. fortresses), and then Vladimir drove us the four hours down river to our destination.

The seminar there began the next day. Where we had 10 or 11 church leaders in attendance in Omsk, we had nearly 30 people in Ulyanovsk. Half of those present had come from other cities in the area, including Saratov and Samara further down the Volga, as well as one from Ufa, a day's journey by train to the east (who brought fermented goat's milk with him, so now I can say I've tried that). The other half were from the



Bishop Dietrich Brauer in his office at the Moscow cathedral church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

congregation in Ulyanovsk. I gave similar presentations to the ones I had given in Omsk and they were well received. One of the women of the congregation seemed particularly engaged by the Law/Gospel dynamic and was effusive in her praise at the oral evaluation at the end of the seminar, declaring that this is exactly what the church needs.

I flew from Ulyanovsk to Moscow for the final two days of my trip, where I met up again with Bishop (now Archbishop) Brauer and we discussed possibilities for future collaborations and trips to Russia. I have a visa that is good for three years from my first entry, so I'm hoping to use it again before it expires. In that connection I am hoping and praying for a de-escalation of the tension between our two countries and a peaceful and just resolution of the situation in Ukraine. I am hopeful, but not optimistic.

This trip was not sponsored by Crossings, but I think it is an example of what is possible when those of us who have been bitten by the Crossings bug exploit our existing connections to take the show on the road. I ask your prayers on behalf of the Lutheran churches in the former CCCP, that the Gospel might be proclaimed there in all its fullness, and I give thanks for your partnership in the Gospel.

Peace and Joy,
Chris Repp

Note: More pictures and blog entries of Chris's trip can be found at: rushinroundrussia.blogspot.com. He can be reached at: acr529@mac.com.

Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.

From Steve Kuhl, Executive Director...

Several developments are in the works at Crossings that you should know about.

New Crossings Website Soon... *we are in the process of developing a new Crossings Website that will be cleaner in look, more transparent in navigation, more user friendly in searching resources, and feature new descriptions of the law-gospel Message and Method of Crossings. Our hope is to launch it for Pentecost.*

Crossings Text Study Group... *A Crossings Text Study Group is beginning in Milwaukee in March at Ascension Lutheran Church. The Group is led by Steve Kuhl and started in conjunction with two new comers to Crossings, both who were first-time participants at the January 2015 Crossings Seminar: Logan Vang and Pedro Acosta. Logan is a seminarian in the ELCA and pastoral intern of the Hmong congregation that meets at Ascension Lutheran Church, Milwaukee. Of Crossings he says, "When Pastor Steve invited me to come with him to the Crossings seminar I did not know what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised. Crossings provided me with a new way of looking at the Bible that makes the gospel of Jesus Christ clear. I'm not yet confident in my use of it, but I certainly want to learn it. When Pastor Steve said on the way home from the seminary that he would be willing to do regular Crossings Text Study with us, I was eager to participate."*

Pedro Acosta is a transitional deacon in the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee, works as a chaplain for Columbia-St. Mary's hospital, and will be ordained in to the priesthood in April. "I found the Crossings Method very interesting. Simple yet very deep. I like how it keeps you focused on interpreting a text, not based on what simply comes in your mind, but on the whole message of the gospel as good news for sinners with Jesus' cross as its basis."

An invitation went out via listserve to both the Greater Milwaukee Synod and the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee to join us in study. We wait and see who will respond.

Bertram-Schroeder Crossings Legacy Fund... *One of the development goals of Crossings is to grow this fund for expanding the ministry and outreach of Crossings to others for little or no cost. We who are in the autumn of our lives have benefited greatly over the years from the generosity and labors of Robert Bertram and Ed Schroeder. Their single-minded focus on necessitating Christ by distinguishing law and gospel has kept us grounded over the years. Please consider Crossings in your Estate Planning or contribute directly to the fund. It is managed through InFaith Community Foundation and contributions are tax deductible. Click here <http://www.infaithfound.org/crossingsfund> to find out more.*



Left: Participants in the January seminar “Unearthing Gospel Gold.”
 Above: Candice Stone sharing “Crossings and Me.”
 Middle: Bill White crossing himself in “Football Fandom.”
 Below: Marty Lessmann sharing “Crossings and Me.”

Unearthing Gospel Gold Report on the 2015 Seminar

Recall that “community” is part of our name: The Crossings Community, Inc. Community is a large part of what happens when we gather together as we did this past January for the seminar **Unearthing Gospel Gold**. We had a happy blend of new people and goldie-oldies (including me!), of lay folk and clergy, of young and old. Forty-eight of us altogether, equally appreciative and excited to learn (or re-learn) and practice (and re-practice) using the Crossings six-step method of crossing the Word and the world.

Jerry Burce introduced the seminar Sunday night with “Gospel Gold: Remarks on What It Is, and How to Find It.” Monday morning was spent presenting and practicing the six-step method. The rest of the time was spent using the six steps to cross the Gospel with individuals’ daily lives, led by Candice Stone, Sherman Lee, and Marty Lessmann. Marcus Felde shared how cartoons can be helpful diagnostic tools especially for unearthing “the human problem.” Steve Albertin and William White crossed our American fetish with sports. In addition, there were many community worship opportunities, headed by Chris Repp (note, same as our featured writer). Chris then wrapped up the seminar with “How I learned to Trust the Crossings Method.”

Almost all the seminar presentations are now posted on our web site, you can find them under “Library” and then “Conferences.” Whether you attended the seminar or not, they are most definitely worth reading or re-reading. While you’re at it, notice the treasure trove of works in the other parts of the library, including a comprehensive compilation of the works of Robert Bertram and Edward Schroeder.

We want to thank several of you donors (you know who you are) for making it possible to give free tuition to all seminarians and first-call pastors. Your generosity enabled many to attend, and they were grateful.



We now have a planning team working on the 2016 conference. As an insider, I can tell you it’s going to be incredible.....can hardly wait to announce it. In the meantime, reserve January 24-27, 2016 on your calendars.

Cathy Lessmann

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