

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and Lutherans in Eastern Europe. Part 2

Colleagues,

Our posting of two weeks ago, ThTh145, offered documentation and comment on the work of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (primarily its Ft. Wayne, Indiana, seminary) in Eastern Europe these days. That prompted some response from seminary profs in the Baltics and in St. Petersburg, Russia. The item below comes from Russia. It is actually a year old, but still newsworthy at this late date, I think. Its author is Stefan Reder, president of the Luth. Seminary in St. Petersburg. Reder is also one of the bishops of ELCROS [= Evang. Luth. Church of Russia and Other States]. Our correspondent noted that the English name ELCROS does not correspond exactly to the official Russian name which is, “Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia.” Reder’s report was included in the seminary’s newsletter of June/August 2000.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

REPORT ON MY VISIT TO CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN FORT WAYNE, INDIANA (LUTHERAN CHURCH MISSOURI SYNOD), MARCH 8, 2000

In a conversation with Rev. Dr. Dean O. Wenthe, President of Concordia Theological Seminary, and Rev. Dr. Timothy Quill, Director of their Russian Seminary Project, I put forth the following points of discussion on the instruction of and in

agreement with ELCROS Archbishop Dr. Georg Kretzschmar:

1. The lack of any conversation whatsoever between Concordia Theological Seminary and the ELCROS concerning the following questions:

- a. There are problems with those people from the ELCROS who received a theological education at Concordia Seminary and upon return to the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States = all States of the former Soviet Union not including the Baltic States) wanted to work as pastors in our church. The church administration of the ELCROS did not even know that these people were studying in Fort Wayne, but they suddenly appeared "on our doorstep." The ELCROS was not prepared for them and there have been considerable difficulties in several congregations.*
- b. There are problems of ELCROS students in Fort Wayne who after finishing the second year are sent to the CIS to work there in a one-year internship. Since the Church administration of the ELCROS in most cases did not know of these students, it could not supply internship sites or coordinate internship programs.*
- c. There are problems caused by the fact that Concordia Seminary offers seminars in Russia and the CIS without notifying the ELCROS administration, even though members of ELCROS congregations are invited to attend these seminars. In some cases such seminars were held against the will of the local ELCROS leaders or without notifying them.*
- d. Problems are also caused by the fact that during such seminars the Novosibirsk Seminary has been*

publicized among the participants and consequently ELCROS church leaders have been asked to give recommendations to study at the Novosibirsk Seminary or students have simply enrolled without notifying their ELCROS leaders. In Saratov, the situation arose that two people who had not received the congregation's endorsement, because they were evaluated as being unsuitable for the ordained ministry, have nevertheless been enrolled at the Novosibirsk Seminary without any reservation. In another case (Bishkek [in Kyrgyzstan]) the congregation lost its pastor and almost perished.

2. There is the impression that Concordia Seminary more or less ignores the existence of the ELCROS and considers Russia and the CIS as its broad field for mission work. The ELCROS feels as if Fort Wayne does not take the ELCROS seriously as a church and is not recognized as a worthy partner for dialog.
3. The activities of Concordia Seminary import American inter-Lutheran differences to Russia and the CIS and in consequence it tries to create a third church in Russia and the CIS (apart from the existing ELCIR [i.e. the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia] and ELCROS). This third church should conform to the teaching of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. In the end, this will lead to a division of the Lutheran minority in Russia, which is a bad witness for Lutheranism.

In his statement, President Wenthe suggested that Concordia Seminary is interested in and ready for communication and cooperation with the ELCROS, but he also pointed out that communication and cooperation go only so far as the doctrines of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod are upheld.

During the talks it was agreed that Rev. Timothy Quill and a representative of the ELCROS administration should meet twice a year so that Concordia Seminary can report on the planned activities for Russia and the CIS in the following six months. The first meeting will take place in St. Petersburg on May 11, 2000.

Furthermore it was agreed that Rev. Quill will give me a list of those students who are at present working for one year in Russia/CIS and who will finish their studies next year at Concordia Seminary and afterwards will return to Russia/CIS. I received this list during my visit in Fort Wayne. Other graduates from Concordia Seminary cannot be expected, as their Russian Seminary project will be continued only until the middle of 2001.

Concerning the ELCROS graduates of the Fort Wayne Seminary, it was suggested that we, together with the Novosibirsk Seminary administration, negotiate the conditions for acceptance of these ELCROS students. President Wenthe and Rev. Quill told me that Fort Wayne Seminary started their activities in Novosibirsk only at the request of Vsevolod Lutkin [Our correspondent comments: Lutkin is now the front-man for the activities of Fort Wayne Seminary in Russia and the CIS. This gets complicated, because officially Lutkin has been sent to Russia by the Lutheran bishop of Estonia.] and that within Russia/CIS Fort Wayne Seminary would not carry out a church-planting policy.

President Wenthe and Rev. Quill expressed their support of the Novosibirsk Seminary so that the group around Vsevolod Lutkin could build up an indigenous Lutheran Church in Russia. While the ELCIR gets massive support from Finland and the ELCROS from Germany and the United States, the group around Vsevolod Lutkin is driven by the desire to be Russian Lutherans. Concordia

Seminary wants to support this goal. However, in further talks it became clear that the intention of Concordia Seminary is to embody "true historical Lutheran theology." And it became clear that in the view of Concordia Seminary and the Seminary in Novosibirsk, the ELCROS on several points does not stand on the ground of this "true historical Lutheran theology."

I would like to conclude my report with a personal remark. On one hand I was glad that we were able to open avenues for communication in my talks in Fort Wayne. On the other hand, I recognized with dismay that in the long run the postulated "historically true Lutheran theology" will separate the Lutherans in Russia and the CIS into two camps divided by a deep unbridgeable chasm. I am afraid that the convictions of those Russian Lutherans who are theologically determined by Fort Wayne, that is, they think they are the only representatives of "historically true Lutheran theology," will make that inter-Lutheran dialog and the approach toward Lutheran unity impossible. This prospect causes much pain because the Lutherans in Russia and the CIS thus will not be good witnesses to the Gospel and the Lutheran confessions.