

RECENT NEWS ON RELIGION

New Life is Springing from the Stump - The Moscow congregation St. Peter und Paul celebrates its 15th birthday

M o s c o w – On September 3, Moscow’s St.Peter-and-Paul-congregation joyfully celebrated the 15th anniversary of its resurrection. In his sermon, Bishop Siegfried Springer (Moscow) compared the congregation’s traumatic history with a tree stump. But the ELCER head (“Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia”) assured: “The tree has been gravely damaged by historical circumstances. But thanks to God’s goodness – new life is springing from the stump!” By now, the old tree’s remains have grown into a respectable tree with branches and twigs offering parishioners “plenty of space for the varying expressions of life and human development”. According to the Bishop, of vital importance for the future is that “the believers stick together and remain rooted in the Holy Scriptures and in the active trust of Jesus Christ”. In 1936 Pastor Alexander Streck and the entire church council had been arrested, deported and later killed. Following these traumatic events and decades of humiliation and deprivation, the congregation was able to reconstitute itself in 1991 and begin meeting again at its traditional location.

The congregation’s pastors, Dimitri Lotov and Gottfried Spieth, were responsible for the liturgical segments of this memorable service. They were assisted by two guest pastors: Alexander Raeder of Yaroslavl, Russia and Harry Asikov of Tblissi, Georgia. A choir directed by Eduard Hubert from the Lutheran congregation in Bayreuth-Altstadt, Germany provided the musical surroundings.

The Peter-and-Paul-Church hails back to 1626, the present cathedral was consecrated in 1905. Following its expropriation and the start of inappropriate usage in the late 1930s, the congregation’s house of worship was finally returned 15 years ago. Restoration work has been continuous since then. The main sanctuary has been sufficiently restored to offer a dignified atmosphere for worship services. The Sauer organ, a historical treasure transferred from Moscow’s destroyed St.-Michael’s-Church to St. Peter and Paul, is making glorious music following its major restoration.

Moscow’s St.-Peter-and-Paul-Cathedral is home to a congregation of the same name and is also seat of the ELCER-bishop. This church consists of 170 congregations and groups, making it the largest provincial church belonging to ELCROS, the “Evangelical-Lutheran

Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia”. ELCROS is headed by Archbishop Dr. Edmund Ratz in St. Petersburg. - *ELCER Press Release (September 7, 2006)*

Retaining the Proven – Assuring the Future

Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia

M o s c o w – The Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia’s (ELCER) 13th synod took place in the Moscow suburb of Pushkino from November 6 to 9, 2006. Its primary topic was the charitable work of the church. In his report, Bishop Siegfried Springer (Moscow) reviewed events of the past 18 months, which included more than a few meetings with representatives from partner churches as well as persons from the realms of politics and business. He mentioned building projects, church anniversaries, dedications and the installation of pastors in Moscow, Samara, Saratov, Gussev-Gumbinnen, Volgograd, Syktyvkar and Tomsk.

The delegates also met in working groups to discuss the issues of missions, children’s and youth work, marriage and the family, the role of women in the church and building construction. The discussions resulted in conclusions which should further improve and stabilize the ELCER’s organizational structure. A new version of the church’s legal statute was voted in, including the creation of a consistory, which will be a major grouping along with the synod’s presidium and the Bishop’s chancellery. The new consistory will include the Bishop, his deputy, the head of the Bishop’s chancellery, the synod president and his/her deputy as well as two elected members from the conference of superintendents.

Following lively discussions, the synod passed a resolution accepting a statement from the Bishop entitled “Regarding Same-Sex Relationships and So-Called Marriages”. The deliberations made clear that the paper was not reacting to a problem apparent within the congregations themselves, but rather that the ELCER was defining its place within the family of world Lutheranism. Not only does the paper reject formal acts of consecration for homosexual couples, it also makes clear the discrepancy between the ELCER and those churches performing such ceremonies. It states: “Synod resolutions permitting acts of consecration for homosexuals alter the root teachings and life of the church and contribute to its destruction”. The criteria for gaining access to Holy Communion were also discussed in this context.

The issue of women's ordination was covered briefly and debated. Short reports described the ELCER's charitable activities. These are to be tied into a central structure with the long-term goal of founding a charitable foundation. Delegates agreed that the ELCER must address the evangelistic challenges of the 21st century. The conference of superintendents was asked to develop a concept for sustainable, future-oriented activities.

Referring to Job 14:1-6 in the closing communion service, Bishop Springer spoke on the underlying fears of humankind stemming from the unresolved issue of meaning. Salvation from eternal lostness is found only in the cross of Christ.

Despite trying external conditions and the regrettably-inadequate funding of pastors and building projects, this synod showed that the ELCER, which is the largest provincial church belonging to the St. Petersburg-based ELCROS, the "Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia", desires to stay its course in total obedience to God's Word. The ELCER consists of 170 congregations and meeting groups divided into 12 superintendent's districts. The Bishop's seat is located in Moscow's St. Peter- and Paul-Cathedral. - *Pastor Gottfried Spieth, ELCER Press Release, Moscow, November 10, 2006.*

Films on Social Topics Sought - St. Petersburg film forum scheduled for late March

by William Yoder

M o s c o w – A Russian film forum is searching until 1 March for high-quality films no older than 2003 on social topics. From 30 March until 8 April 2007, "Vremya zhits" (Time to Live), Russia's first major film forum on topics of social relevance, will be holding its events in St. Petersburg. The programme is geared to viewers under 30 years of age and deals with issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, Aids, prostitution, smoking, child abandonment and poverty. The very first forum held 31 March and 9 April 2006 featured 120 films from 20 countries ranging from China to the USA; 38 showings were held. The first forum attracted a mostly-young audience of 24.000 persons; an additional 10.000 had seen some of the films by 20 April.

The 10-day event involves much more than non-stop movie showings. Concerts, seminars and discussion forums with filmmakers and public personalities complement the showings. Its makers intend to be more active than reactive: The initial forum included an art exhibit and a day for athletes on the topic of healthy living.

St. Petersburg seems ideally suited to films of this nature. Very high rates of addiction are coupled with local politicians, universities and non-governmental organisations committed to helping solve the country's social ills. Coordinator Alexander Belenkii (Moscow) states: "Raising funds is always a highly problematic endeavor. But a year ago the Petersburg municipality donated much advertising and offered us one of the city's largest movie theatres." Until now, the forum has had to survive without paid employees. No honorariums are paid to those who offer films, yet the top prize includes a cash payment of 5.000 Euros. The best short film in 2006 was "Leroy Cleans Up", produced by the German Armin Velkers. Stefan Spielberg also entered films in the contest a year ago.

Following the forum, much effort is placed into showing the best films throughout the country. Usually in conjunction with seminars and discussion forums, the prize-winning films of last year were shown in cities such as Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Yaroslavl, Krasnoyarsk, and even in Habarovsk and Sakhalin in the Far East.

Belenkii reports that films clearly evangelistic in character – the "Jesus" film for example - usually face locked doors in today's Russia. Access to schools is becoming increasingly difficult, yet prisons and jails remain open for the showing of films on self-betterment. The forum for this reason appeals to general spiritual and moral values. That makes it possible not only for Orthodox priests, but also for Rabbis and Imams to contribute. The forum's leadership has strong Charismatic and Baptist ties. Yet Metropolitan Vladimir of St. Petersburg gives the forum his blessings and sees to it that Orthodox clergy are involved.

The forum's President is V. I. Holodov of St. Petersburg. Coordinator is the Moscow Baptist and classical percussionist Alexander Belenkii. Film offers and queries should be addressed to: Forum Time to Live, ul. Karavannay 12, 190011 St. Petersburg, Russia, tel/fax 007-812-572-1063, 007-950 027 1058 or 007-917 539 2925 in Moscow, E-mail: newvolna@inbox.ru, webpage: <http://Time-to-live.ru>.