

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

Lena Bondarenko, a member of the Lutheran Church in Russia, works in St Petersburg as a translator. She is a theologian in her own right and believes that she is called to ordination, something her Church does not yet accept. We do not yet have her script. What follows is one participant's account of Lena's presentation. Any misunderstanding or misrepresentation are entirely ours and not Lena's!

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia Today

Historically the Russian Orthodox Church claims the whole of Russia as 'sanctified' and so sees itself as the one Church for the nation. The Roman Catholic Church is not looked on very favourably as its allegiance is to the Pope and not to Russia. Protestant churches are tolerated among the ethnic minority and expatriate communities such as the German speakers. This happened during the reign of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, in the 16th century, who allowed merchants from the Baltic countries into Russia. They brought with them the ideas of Luther and other Reformers. During the time of Peter the Great in the 18th century, Russia annexed former Finnish land in the area in which the Tsar created his new capital, St. Petersburg. The local people were Lutheran and other Protestants were encouraged to come and help the growth of the new city. Tsar Peter proclaimed that there were two State Churches, Orthodox and Lutheran. This was reinforced by dynastic marriages with princesses from Western European royal households so that most imperial palaces had a Lutheran as well as an Orthodox Chapel. Lutheran pastors trained in Estonia.

During the Soviet era the whole structure of church life was destroyed. The Orthodox suffered greatly, but the Protestants more so because they represented non-Russian influences. No Lutheran ministers survived and only 10% of all Protestant pastors remained after persecution and labour camps. The biggest Lutheran church building in St. Petersburg was turned into a swimming pool! But the Lutheran church continued underground throughout this period of persecution, concentration camps and executions.

Revival began in 1988 in the Baltic States. Theological seminaries reopened in Riga, then in St Petersburg. Gradually, in other cities where there had been congregations, families re-emerged to restore and rebuild. The Lutheran Church in Russia is a member of the Lutheran World Federation and has an Archbishop and regional synods with their own bishops. Smaller, local groups have a Probst, or dean.

At the time of our conference this Russian Lutheran Church included the Lutheran churches in the former Soviet block countries which are still linked to Russia for defence and other purposes, for example in Khazakstan. However, Lena was very concerned that the National Synod's latest agenda includes a proposal to make the church solely Russian. There would be two

dioceses, one Western and European, the other Siberia and the Eastern States. There is a strong move to be a national church, but this would leave the 'satellite' congregations in a vulnerable position. Lutheran Christians are already a minority denomination in a minority religion in the Central Asian States and would feel very isolated and vulnerable.

Another outcome of division would probably mean separation from the LWF and an alliance with the Missouri Synod, which is seen to more conservative, like the Orthodox Church. It will be interesting to see what happens.

Although a minority group, the Lutheran church in Russia is strong in the social work it does, in outreach, in Bible study, youth work and confirmation classes. It provides a home for ethnic, traditional Lutherans and for disaffected Orthodox members. The Orthodox Church does not seem to involve the laity in theological education, and though there have been catechism classes in St. Petersburg recently, this is unusual. Social work with street kids and AIDS victims is done jointly with the Orthodox. The Orthodox Church has a big influence at State level, while Lutherans operate on a local basis. This is seen to be a good way to raise the profile of the Lutheran community too.

Relationships with the majority Orthodox Church are mainly neutral to good, because Lutherans are thought of as working only with an ethnic minority group.

A weakness within the Lutheran church in Russia is that it is not pure Russian ethnically. This makes for tricky relationships within the church. Most of their pastors are trained in Germany, but only full Russian citizens are allowed to vote, even in church elections. This law came into force after the appointment of the present Archbishop, who finds that he has no vote in his own synod! The language of the liturgy is German and Russian, either or both. At present the official hymnal is in German, but there is to be a new Russian edition which has not yet received full approval of synod. It is felt that this may be process of 'Russianisation' may strain existing links with the Lutheran World Federation and, indeed, the World Council of Churches.

So Lena feels there are many negative aspects to the future of the Lutheran Church in Russia, and many difficult decisions to be made. Yet it has survived the horrors and trauma of the twentieth century and we pray that its work for Christ will continue.