

# Lutheran Worship and Witness in Russia

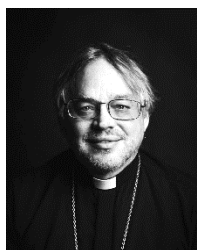
## Leif Camp

Right off I must admit that I hesitate to write this article—I am not up on the latest jargon and am dated in my studies. I have served as a frontline missionary in Russia for over 20 years, first as a volunteer, then through LCMS World Mission and then directly through the LCMS partner church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia.<sup>1</sup> It is from this experience that I make the following observations. My approach is not scholarly, but practical; not researched in current books and debates but founded on simple biblical principles—an urgent need to reach people with the Gospel so that they, in thanksgiving for their salvation, worship and praise God and live as His children.

As different as the situation in Russia might be from the US, I think there is much in common. The goal to reach the lost is the same, the Gospel is the same, and some of the other circumstances are similar: a population that is largely not Christian, is inundated with all sorts of misinformation about the Bible, the Christian Church, what Christians believe, and so forth. In such a context the basic and clear task of getting people to truly hear the Word (since faith comes by hearing the Word of God), seems more and more difficult. As a result, it seems so to me, there is a tendency coming out of the sincere and urgent desire to reach the lost, to complicate what is simple, obscure or confuse what is obvious, separate what should be kept whole, and blend, join or mix what might be better kept separate. The Lutheran Church here in Russia has made a few simple changes that are bearing fruit—not changes in worship style, not changes in the content of the Gospel, but some minor adjustments in recognition that those around us really don't know and yet need to know. I discuss those adjustments nearer the end of this short piece.

### **Complicating and confusing what is simple and obvious:**

Nothing is simpler and more straightforward than the Gospel in John 3:16 or any short explanation of it such as: God loves you and sent His only Son to die for you so that you don't have to fear death, do not have to die eternal death, but rather through faith in Him can live in His eternal kingdom. Nothing is more basic than the content of our message



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confessed in our Lutheran Confessions: that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Nothing is simpler and more straightforward than the Great Commission: Go and make disciples of all, teaching and baptizing. Nothing is more basic than the goal of seeking and saving the lost and nothing is more direct and freeing than the method: all things to all people that some might be saved. (Jn 3:16, Rm 3:28, Mt 28:18-20, Lk 19:10, 1 Cor. 9:22)

### **Separating what might be better kept whole:**

In the broad sense of the terms, separating Mission from Worship may lead people to misunderstand what it means to be a Christian.<sup>2</sup> Talking about worship as a separate act apart from faith and life, apart from confessing and witnessing to our faith, defines worship as form and ritual rather than everything we do as Christians living out our faith in the presence of God, *Coram Deo*. Emphasizing the worship service may lead people to think of our gathering together for worship (in the narrow sense of the word) as the goal, center or identifying factor of what it means to be a Christian. In the broad sense of the word *mission*, the “mission” of the Church is the whole process of bringing people into the family of faith, growing them in that faith and equipping them to live out and confess their faith—and this includes both evangelism (mission in the narrow sense) and worship (in the narrow sense)—but it includes more. Above I referred to myself as a “frontline” missionary, but in truth, all Christians in today’s world are frontline missionaries. The “mission” of the Church then not only brings people to faith, but must include equipping all believers to witness, live in the presence of God, and remain faithful on the frontlines. Worship in the narrow sense of the word in whatever style is just one tool given to strengthen and equip Christians to thus live and remain faithful.

### **What should be kept separate:**

Multi-tasking sometimes works, but often when we multi-task, we really don’t do all the tasks as well as we could have if we focused on just one task at a time. Or one might say, when trying to kill two birds with one stone, we simply scare all the birds away. In my experience, as admittedly limited as it is, I see this in the attempt often made to blend outreach (mission in the narrow sense) with corporate worship. Growing the flock and feeding the flock are two different functions. You can’t serve two masters well. Of course, when Jesus says this, He is referring to serving the World and serving God, but I think the principle applies. Outreach is demanding, and as simple as I think this is, does take a lot of energy and effort. Feeding the flock is also not so complicated. Knowing each member of the flock and then preaching and teaching specifically to that flock to strengthen and feed each member so each grows and matures is not complicated, but takes a lot of work, energy, and effort.

If I might use another common image from Scripture: Sowing is not the same as tending the fields, and tending the fields is not the same as harvesting. In a broad sense they are all part of farming, but in the narrow sense they are each a separate and distinct step which needs to be done separately and in sequence if the seed is to take root, grow and

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come to a more fruitful harvest. To me, it makes sense when outreach is intentional and focused and kept separate from the worship service. Worship then can also be intentional, focused on feeding solid food to those who already believe.

When we keep the two tasks separate, we avoid many sticky situations that arise when we mix the two. For instance, during corporate worship, I want to celebrate the Sacrament, but if I am mixing my worship with evangelism, it means that many who are in attendance are not Lutheran, not confirmed, and possibly not even baptized. The faithful, those sheep already in the flock and mature, desire and want the Sacrament, but those who are not yet reborn into the flock, have no business at the table. When I am mixing evangelism with worship, then, I either must skip the Sacrament to the detriment of the faithful or offend those I am trying to reach and chase off those I am trying to bring into the flock.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some practical illustrations of what we do in Russia:**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria is growing in faith and number—number of members and number of congregations. Most, if not all, of our congregations use a traditional Lutheran Liturgy. Contemporary forms are used in special events and special services, but not as an every-Sunday practice. Although the doors are open to visitors for services, our worship service is designed and focused on our members, for those who have been initiated, educated and understand what they are doing and Whom they are worshiping—and why. Outreach is intentionally focused to reach unchurched non-Lutherans, unbelievers, and even atheists.<sup>4</sup> Outreach is part of the process leading them from unbelief to faith, from faith to worship and from worship to involvement. Of course, coming to faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, and as we confess, He is using the means He always uses: the Word and the Sacraments—specifically in growing the Church, the Word and the Sacrament of Baptism. We are simply the instruments through which He is using those means—and He has both called and equipped us to use them.

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Here I will share how we are using these means in Russia. I am sharing this not so much as a program to follow, but as an example of some simple ways your Russian brothers and sisters are using to reach the lost and bring them into the kingdom. To make disciples through teaching and baptizing, our Church has put the process under three headings: information, confirmation, and ordination. This last term is used in a very broad sense, which I will explain below. And all of this, when you read it below, you will realize is nothing new. Each step is separate and distinct but is part of the whole—to bring the lost to faith, to worship, and also to equip them to live out their faith.

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1. **Information.** We live in an information age with new and growing avenues for spreading information—social media, the web, as well as the usual print media, or putting up signs and posters. The current Russian law is that one can only present religious propaganda, in other words, evangelize, inside a Church space. So as far as evangelism, the first goal is to get the lost into the Church any way possible. Of course, we inform or advertise the formal worship services and Bible studies for the already baptized. But for outreach, each congregation thinks up as many other events, seminars, discussion groups, clubs, and the like, to bring people through the doors. As some of our Church buildings are actually historical monuments, those congregations offer “tours” and set up small museums about their history—witnessing to tourists. In short, all things to all people. Once people are in the door for whatever activity, they intentionally will hear the Gospel. For example, one of our congregations has actually become quite a well-known venue for classical music and jazz concerts. Part of the “contract” for any concert, however, is that the pastor or his delegate gets the first 10 minutes of the concert to address the audience—a short history of the Church, a Gospel presentation, and although worship and Bible study times are mentioned, the emphasis is a specific invitation to unbelievers and the unchurched to attend what I outline in the next step.
2. **Confirmation.** This would be better termed “instruction,” but I didn’t pick the terms. At all events, everyone is invited to come to what we have called, “basic Christianity class.” This is really not much more than a simple change in vocabulary. The classes are basically Catechism class but calling it “confirmation” is confusing to those outside the Church. Calling it “new member class” or “baptismal instruction” scares away those who might be interested in learning about Christianity, but not ready to commit to baptism or membership. The invitation goes something like this: “If you are interested in finding out what Christians believe straight from the horse’s mouth rather than from other sources, we offer this class free of charge. If you are an atheist, you are most welcome to come to find out more about what you are against so you can better argue against it.” The content of these classes is mainly the Small Catechism but vectored toward the unconverted—a bit more on Scripture, a bit more of Church history and a bit more explaining vestments, holy space, and so forth. One session is specifically devoted to explaining the meaning and purpose of each part of our formal Liturgy—after which those in attendance are invited to “view” a Church service. Only near the completion of the course are those in attendance invited to take an exam, which after passing, allows them to be baptized or confirmed if they are interested. This simple renaming of Catechism classes has proven most fruitful. By the way, we do still offer formal “Confirmation” classes and programs, but those are designed for Lutherans already in the Church.
3. **Ordination.** OK, the use of this term irks me a bit, but again I didn’t choose it, and there are more serious battles to fight. The term as used here is in a very broad sense and does not even refer to the laying on of hands. A better term might be “involvement” or “inclusion” as in inclusion in some ministry or activity of the

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Church. For a few, this has led to seminary study and ordination as deacon or pastor, but the overall idea is to plug the newly baptized and converted into the life of the congregation. As with someone who is born into a family, as soon as they are able, they are given their chores, their part of the mutual care a family provides. This also means that a congregation is always looking for ways to expand its ministries and services—so that there are more and more volunteer opportunities available for new and existing members. We also then have continuing training for volunteers, and those with aptitude we invite to formal study at our Theological Institute. A result of “ordination” activity has meant that there is always someone at the Church with always something going on.

I suppose at this point I should find something profound to sum all this up. But in truth, there is nothing profound here. All that said, this is work, it takes time, energy, flexibility and thinking on one’s feet, but it is not really complicated. It is not a result of analysis and research, it is simply applying Scriptural directives: Unconfused, unmixed, but applied as a whole to grow and feed the flock, to lead people from unbelief to faith and then feeding them, helping, equipping and strengthening them to live out their faith as salt and light in an ever-darkening world.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria is an LCMS partner Church in Russia brought into full altar and pulpit fellowship by synodical vote in 1998 after four years of full doctrinal review and consideration and has been a faithful partner of the LCMS ever since. The name “Ingria” is the historical name of the region in which the Church has its historic roots, much like the Missouri Synod has its roots in Perry County, MO.

<sup>2</sup> One of the first steps the Soviets took in persecuting the Church was to define religion as public worship, taking away all social and educational ministries from the Church. Freedom of “religion” existed since freedom of “worship” was allowed to exist, at least initially.

<sup>3</sup> In recognition of this, the traditional Liturgy I use in my English language service at St. Anne’s in St. Petersburg is organized in such a way that if at the last minute a number of visitors show up and I haven’t had time to explain closed Communion to them, we skip the Sacrament. My regular members know this, and the signal is using the Apostles’ Creed instead of the Nicene Creed.

<sup>4</sup> We actually have several non-Lutheran congregations wishing to join our Church. That is another issue and another process—although it does involve confirmation instruction of the congregations and re-training of their pastors.