

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

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# Confessing the Faith in Print: From Mongolia to the Muslim Diaspora and Beyond

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**Abstract:** Lutheran missions have a great deal to offer seekers in this smaller, global world, where borders have shrunk, and formerly exotic lands like Mongolia are more readily accessible to the Gospel. Whether followers of shamanism, Islam, or tribal religions, more and more non-Christians are coming to the faith through the spoken and read Gospel. I offer some thoughts on encounters I have had with these seekers from my service with LCMS World Mission and now as executive director of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation.

The great behemoth had fallen, and it wasn't going to get up again. So it was as the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and the doors to churches, long closed began to open again. Many of those church buildings had been reconstructed as theaters, film depositories, even swimming pools. Some older parishioners who had kept the faith during the spiritual drought of the communist years began to filter back into the pews. But for most Russians, the language of Christianity had become foreign. Accustomed to a school curriculum of scientific materialism with Marx, Engels, and Lenin as the textbooks, they were eager to become reacquainted with the historic faith that had been brutally purged from the country in the intervening years.

In 1993, the Lutheran Heritage Foundation (hereafter LHF) founder, Robert Rahn, along with a Russian professor, Konstantin Komarov, took advantage of the new freedom to distribute Russian-English New Testaments on Red Square. Hope



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and a new air of fresh possibilities filled the land as if the Russians were awakening from a long, spiritual slumber. They were not alone, as other Westerners distributed Bibles too, while yet others slyly added their own books and pamphlets to the distribution mix: the Book of Mormon, Watchtower tracts. Had LHF not been there, such cults were prevalent and more than eager to “explain” the Bible and add their own delusive theology to the equation. It was an important lesson that if we Lutherans do not teach our theology, there will be others who will fill the spiritual void.

In the Russian context of the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, children’s Bible story books, Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* and C. F. W. Walther’s *Law and Gospel* were essential translations at first. Citizens of the former communist state needed to return to the basics of the faith, and LHF had the unique opportunity to reach ethnic Russians, which in the past had been out of bounds since the Lutheran church had been allowed to embrace only certain specific ethnic groups within the country: Germans, Finns, Latvians, Estonians, and Swedes. These were individuals who were considered ethnically “Lutheran.”

But quite often I noticed ethnic Russians, who may have possessed perhaps a few drops of Finnish or German blood, flocking to the Lutheran churches. It seemed apparent that some simply wanted to emigrate to the West, while others desired to reconnect to a language of their youth, often German or Finnish, that had been forbidden by Joseph Stalin as the language of “Fascists.”

I especially remember the elderly parishioner, Alexander Konstantinovich, a member of the Lutheran congregation in Tver. Alexander was ethnically Ukrainian and German, but he wanted to learn German, and so he came to the rented room where the fledgling congregation was meeting. Alexander soon gave up hope of learning the language at his age but was nevertheless baptized and confirmed. In the new and fast-paced Russia, he clung to the promises of the Gospel, finding comfort in the Word after the death of his wife and the murder of his only son. Alexander remained a staunch parishioner until his death at the age of 84.

Stories like Alexander’s were not uncommon, as beginnings were made towards openly confessing Christ again within the context of a nation that had possessed a vibrant, influential Lutheran church since the mid-sixteenth century. In the early 1990s, Russians were generally open to Protestantism, but the window would soon close.

Therefore, as Russian Lutherans trained up a new generation of pastors and servants of the church, it was important for LHF to translate Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*, as well as the Lutheran Confessional writings in the *Book of Concord*. Even before I started working for LHF (2014), I found these resources quite valuable, and I was grateful that I could utilize them while teaching at the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia (2003–

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2013). They were put to good use, as students mined the Word of God in their native tongue, even as they learned Greek to dig directly into the New Testament. The Lutheran church was held in high esteem by Christians of all denominations because it was seen as the church which “taught” the faith.

That window of opportunity to have an impact on society has closed to some extent, as the Russian Orthodox Church has reminded Russians that they were historically, ethnically Orthodox, and that they should not forget this if they wanted to remain Russian. And yet, in the burned-out interior of the historic St. Anne’s Lutheran Church in St. Petersburg, visitors to the church undergoing reconstruction are greeted by tables laden with books from LHF. The work most requested today?—Bengt Hägglund’s *History of Theology*, which gives readers a broad scope of theological history, especially from the viewpoint of the West, which is something Russians often lack.

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During my own years of missionary service for LCMS World Mission in the former USSR (1994–1996, 2001–2014), I found that the *Small Catechism* resonated with many seekers. I was often greeted with the response, “I like it because that’s what the Bible teaches.”

At the same time, LHF was also receiving requests from nations in the 10/40 window that had little to no Christian tradition. They needed to begin at the very beginning, so to speak. In Southeast Asia, for instance, nations like Cambodia had long-standing Buddhist traditions and had more recently been traumatized by Pol Pot’s vicious Khmer Rouge. Now they were open to hearing the sweet chords of the Gospel. In other Asian countries, there were other spiritual seekers who found no hope or solace in Buddhism or traditional local religions.

In Mongolia’s capital, Ulanbaatar, a 15-story building in the downtown area stands abandoned—prime real estate, never occupied. A rumor began to circulate that it was haunted by evil spirits, and so it remains desolate. In lands where the spirit world is real and frightening, how comforting it is to hear from Luther’s *Small Catechism* in the “Explanation to the First Article of the Creed” that “He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil.” In the Western world, these words are often passed over with knowing nods of the head, but to those trapped within the context of Buddhism or shamanism, these words are life-changing because they assert that believers are never alone. God protects His people.

Mongolian Lutherans now possess copies of *A Child’s Garden of Bible Stories* from Concordia Publishing House in their native language, and Pastor Purevdorj Jamsran is currently working on the *Small Catechism* so that each person will have

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access to its biblical teachings. This is how we Lutherans can expel the ghosts of spiritual bondage that hold so many Asian nations in their clutches.

However, Asian nations are not alone in their search for Truth. In lands that have been traditionally Muslim, a spiritual ferment is growing. We no longer have to “imagine” what is occurring within the Islamic Republic of Iran, because many Iranians have emigrated to Europe, Canada, and even the United States. From their witness, we know that there is a budding underground church within Iran. I have met many of those who risked their lives to follow Christ in Iran and have now landed in asylum centers, especially in northern Europe, where they are eagerly studying God’s Word.

Last fall I had the opportunity to visit several Iranian Bible study groups in Denmark’s Lutheran churches. Traveling through barren, depopulated Danish towns, we arrived at one such refugee center. Gathering up several carloads of refugees, we drove to the Lutheran church in Bording, where a Bible study was to take place with about 40 Iranian refugees. We have distributed LHF books there and, in tandem with the Danish Balkan Mission, have helped support translations of devotional materials to comfort and help Iranians grow as they read about God’s love and care in their own language, Farsi. Addressing a packed room of about 60 in Holstebro, I heard simultaneous translations into Arabic and Farsi, while my own translator, an Iranian fluent in Danish and English, translated for me. This partnership, which includes LHF work, makes clear confession in mission today in northern Europe.

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In Germany, missionary Pastor Hugo Gevers of the LCMS’s partner church, SELK (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church), holds Bible studies in Borna and services in Leipzig and Chemnitz. The irony is that these formerly Lutheran cities have seen an exodus of native Germans from Christianity, only to see their churches increasingly filled with Iranians and Afghans.

In the village square in Borna, one can find a statue of Luther portrayed as Junker Jörg, since he preached there a few times incognito. That historic town has undergone many changes recently as German “alt-right” organizations like PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) have actually paraded around the apartment building where Pastor Hugo holds Bible studies with a predominantly Afghan group of seekers and believers.

One of the devotional books that LHF is preparing in Farsi will be of great benefit to seekers and believers, as it provides comfort via daily devotions focused upon God’s Word. In the dangerous neighborhoods where former Muslims live, not

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only do they have to worry about locals, but primarily about radical Muslims who tell them they cannot leave Islam without consequences, often violent.

In southwest Berlin, Dr. Gottfried Martens' congregation in Steglitz has ballooned over the past four years from 80 parishioners to over 1,500, predominantly Iranians and Afghans. I almost always spy a member/seeker looking at LHF's Farsi translation of the *Small Catechism* during a worship service. The organist has even begun to incorporate Farsi hymns into the service.

Not surprisingly, most former Muslims wrestle with understanding the complexity of God. In Islam, Allah is distant and, in practice, not as merciful as some may attest. That is why it is a revelation for them to read Luther's explanations to the Commandments that begin with "We should fear and love God." Fear of God or spirits, as in shamanism, is something Muslims can readily comprehend. But a God of love? That is a foreign word to many Muslims today. One Muslim from Iran, when told by Lutheran missionaries that "God so loved the world...", responded by saying: "I have never heard this before. Please, tell me more!"

As they adjust to a new society in Europe, many former Muslims have emphasized to me that they see Christianity and freedom as synonymous. While they may often understand this concept in a political sense, they are very much intrigued by the spiritual freedom that Christ brings, as opposed to the bondage that is all too apparent in Islam. They know the Law very well. But it's the Gospel—God's unconditional love expressed through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus, and grasped by them through faith irrespective of their good deeds—that has been a revelation to them.

I would submit that this is a unique moment in Iranian history, as well as that of Muslims in general. They have suffered under the prescriptions of the Law for so long—in some cases, even Sharia law. But they are ripe and ready for the Gospel.

My cousin reminded me of the road traveled by former Muslims, as she related her experiences in 1970s Iran. She and her husband befriended an Iranian at Michigan State University in the mid-1970s; and, as they were students in the film department, he invited them to join him on a journey across Iran to explore his homeland and its culture. She noted, even then, increasing numbers of women beginning to veil themselves. Bibles were available, but few people were interested. By the end of the decade, Ayatollah Khomeini led a fundamentalist Islamic revolution, and the Shah's country disappeared.

In the early years of this century, I lived in Eastern Europe. Once when I invited several Iranians to my apartment, I was surprised that they wanted to show me a video of the 2500th

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celebration of King Cyrus' Persian Empire back in 1971. "That was when we had a real leader!" one of the Iranians exclaimed. I was surprised, knowing the shortcomings of the Shah in the department of human rights. But in their 20s and 30s, these Iranians had known only Sharia law and the brutal rule of the ayatollahs. Since my colleagues and I were trying to evangelize them, we recognized that if they were representative of the younger generation, then the time was right for the Gospel of Christ to penetrate that land and its people.

Confessing within all of these contexts encourages us to know whom we are addressing. Paul gives us a marvelous lesson in Athens. He comes prepared, knowing the Greek poets, making connections between them and a knowledge of God all the while leading them to the Savior.

We need to be equally prepared, as we look to books that will speak to spiritual seekers with the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, when preparing the *Book of Concord* in Korean, it is best to call it a *Summary of Christian Doctrine*. The original phrase doesn't mean as much to them, so we adapt to the society without changing the content of the message.

In the Asian world, humility is highly valued as a virtue so that even a catechism that has Martin Luther's name attached can seem like "worship" or excessive praise to an individual. So, once again, on certain occasions we will leave his name off the book and refer to it as a statement of Christian faith. I have no doubt that Luther, echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 and 3, would gladly refrain from using his name—he, a "poor stinking bag of worms"—if it would serve the cause of the Gospel. It is the substance of the confession, not the labels, that brings life in mission.

In conclusion, it seems that some ethnic groups make the connections to the Christian message more readily than others, given recent persecutions for their faith and their past history, as in Russia. But the greatest growth of Christianity today is coming from those lands where the Gospel and Christian literature has rarely been heard or read but is now greedily devoured. It fits sociologist Philip Jenkins' thesis in *The Next Christendom* that the Christian world is once again returning to the southern hemisphere (although not exclusively). As Christians of the Western tradition, we need to be mindful of their specific congregational and pastoral needs as we provide them with good, sound Lutheran doctrine so that they too may be in mission and confess the Christian faith in all of its beauty and truth.

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