

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

EURASIA EPISCOPAL AREA

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HANS VÄXBY
RESIDENT BISHOP

New Year 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers,
Members and Friends of The United Methodist Church in Eurasia,

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

“Abundantly!” Who can talk about abundance in times like these? Newspapers, TV programs and talks with friends over a cup of tea rather describe scarcity, crisis and worries. However, when I look back on 2008, I see much that speaks another language.

- Six new Bible groups started in Central Asia
- Minnesota Annual Conference sends \$600,000 for a new church and annual conference center in St. Petersburg
- Our Theological Seminary has 47 students in three different educational programs
- Krasnoarmeysk UMC buys new property for expansion; Vnukovo UMC sanctuary is completed; Saratov UMC moves into a brand new church building; the building in Tyumen raises thanks to a big gift from abroad and ongoing “second mile” offerings from members; Zhetigen buys a new church center
- Offerings continue to grow in our churches
- Bishkek UMC is finally registered
- Leadership Institute from Church of Resurrection in Kansas City reaches Northwest Russia, and is followed up at the annual conference
- Samara UMC raises their pastors’ salary far beyond the minimum 10% of offerings
- The Upper Room is published in Russian
- New edition of the Faith-Sharing New Testament in Russian launched in connection with World Evangelism Faith-Sharing seminar in Kiev
- The first Walk to Emmaus in Russia is held in Satka
- Coaching for all pastors is introduced
- 25 members of the five new annual conference boards of ordained ministry in training event sponsored by General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
- 121 indigenous pastors and Bible group leaders under appointment in 116 local churches, official Bible groups, and other ministries of the church

Taking into consideration the picture many have of Eurasia, this is “far more than all we can ask or image!” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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Only the one who is fishing can catch fish

It is true that Russia and the other former Soviet republics in Eurasia not yet have experienced the Great Awakening we all waited for in the 90s. After the first wave of new interest in faith and church, Russia soon went into a blend of broad acceptance of the Orthodox Christian culture and indifference to a deeper personal faith commitment – not very different from the common Western European attitude to religion. The development in other parts of the area was similar. In recent years, we have seen how the established religion – in European parts Orthodoxy and in Central Asian parts Islam – has been used by authorities and nationalistic powers to make it difficult for Protestant churches.

Who can expect abundance for the year of 2009 under such circumstances? So-called realists, tell us that there is little of positive development to expect next year. But true (!) realists also take into consideration “the power at work within us.” Also in next year, God can accomplish “far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Some of the first followers of Jesus Christ were fishermen. We can learn something important from the way Jesus related to their profession. When he lets a miracle happen, so they get abundantly of fish, it never happens without an effort from the disciples as well. He tells them what to do, and they follow his instructions. The notion is so simple and obvious, that we often miss the point. God’s way to make miraculous things to happen is cooperation. His power is “at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20-21), not without us!

When he asked them to “fish for people” (Matthew 4:19), I cannot believe he expected them to forget their professional skill. They knew very well that only the one who actually is fishing can catch fish. So do we! We cannot just pray and wait the miracle would happen that a lot of people come to our church. We need to follow Jesus’ instructions, and add our own effort to it. When we actively are fishing for people, we will get the contacts, the opportunity to share our faith, and the possibility to lead people to salvation through Jesus Christ. Only a church that actually is fishing for people can catch people.

And the expectations on each United Methodist local church and Bible group still is to grow in

- worship attendance
- financial self-sufficiency
- increased lay leadership
- service to neighbors
- progress towards its own annual goals

You can actually walk in an escalator

The financial crisis is unfortunately not a matter only for politicians and investors in the stock market. When companies have troubles, workers lose their job. When members in American churches earn less money, they pledge less money for the coming year. When members promise less money, the churches cancel staff positions, and make changes in programs and support commitments. In a connectional church like The United Methodist Church, changes in the financial situation in one part of the world have impact on the ministry in another. The present crisis is so deep that it will influence ordinary people all over the world, including United Methodists and United Methodist local churches in Eurasia.

However, this does not mean that God or even people abandon us. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” (Hebrews 13:8) and “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:29) It just means that the working conditions may look a little different for some time.

In December, we received the three first messages about partner churches telling they are not able to continue their support in 2009. We will probably receive more messages that are similar. We need to be prepared that in most cases, it will be extremely difficult to find a new partner. Until now, when a church has missed its partner, we have drawn on the "hope" account, borrowing from other funds until a new partner is found. In 2009, this will not be possible.

What will we do?

Recently, I saw something in the Moscow Metro, from which we might learn something. It was early on a Monday morning, and only a few people were travelling. The escalator bringing people up to the exit had stopped. An engineer had already arrived to see what he could do. The interesting observation I made was that the four people at the escalator did not move. They were calmly standing there waiting for the engineer to fix it! They were so used to the escalator bringing them to next level that it did not occur to them that they could start walking. After all, the escalator is a rather ordinary staircase, even if it is moving. You can actually walk in an escalator too.

What we NOT can do in 2009 is standing still, waiting that the Russia Initiative engineer will fix it for us. We need to walk ourselves up to next level. It will not be easy, since the finance situation is not an ordinary staircase, but it is possible! Mityshchi UMC, one of the churches that got the message in December, immediately started to look into how they can increase their offerings, decrease their expenses, and postpone planned projects to a later date. This is the way to go. We need to be realistic and imaginative, trusting that He who has called us is faithful, and will make it possible (Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:24). It may mean that a small group loses its paid pastor; that a pastor needs to take an additional job; and that the ministry moves from suitable premises to smaller. This may not all be negative. It can also mean that we realize that our own resources are greater than we thought; that people will not disappear if they have to pay a little for the tea; and that there are members who are ready to contribute significantly more to the pastor's salary. All because God is at work in and through the church, in and through its members, and in and through its friends.

To all generations, forever and ever

The greatest privilege and at the same time most pressing issue for us as a church is the fact that we are called not to live for ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:15). We bring glory to God in the church, when we bring what we have "in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever". (Ephesians 3:20-21).

2009 will be a year when we celebrate what our church did for generations past. The first Methodist congregation in Russia was founded in St. Petersburg in 1889, and our denomination was recognized in Russia in 1909. Let us take the opportunity to remind ourselves and show the world around us that we have a task for present and coming generations as well.

The theme for the Episcopal Address at the Northern Europe Central Conference in February will be "A Charge To Keep I Have – To Serve The Present Age." In line with this, the theme for the Eurasia annual conferences in 2009 will be "**For God and His World.**" This also how I wish we all can live both privately and as a church through the whole year. For this I am in constant prayer for you all.

Your co-worker and shepherd,

Hans Växby
Bishop