

Minority report: Lutherans and Methodists in Russia

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



Saints Peter and Paul Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral, Moscow.

Read [Amy Frykholm's interview with Dietrich Brauer](#), archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia.

In 2012, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia chose 29-year-old Dietrich Brauer to be its archbishop—the first Russian ever to serve in that post. The same year, the United Methodist Church elected 42-year-old Eduard Khegay to lead the church's Eurasia Episcopal Area—the first bishop of the region to hail from one of the lands of the former Soviet Union. Khegay is pastor of the Raduga United Methodist

Church in Moscow and has served in numerous administrative positions in the denomination. Brauer, in addition to being archbishop, is pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in Moscow.

Brauer and Khegay represent the new faces in Russia of what in the West would be called mainline Protestantism. Although small in numbers and negligible in social and political influence, the Lutherans and Methodists offer an important theological alternative both to Russian society's secularism and to traditional Orthodoxy. As young Russians seek greater democracy and pluralism in their society, inevitably the nation's religious landscape will shift. These churches could suddenly look interesting.

For the time being, Brauer and Khegay face immense challenges. Russian Protestants are not even 1 percent of the nation's 140 million inhabitants. Moreover, Evangelical Lutherans and United Methodists are tiny minorities among the million or so Russian Protestants, most of whom are Baptists, Adventists and Pentecostals. The Evangelical Lutheran Church has perhaps 20,000 members; the United Methodists have about 5,000.

The resurgence of religious life since the collapse of communism has greatly benefited the Orthodox Church, the nation's most important religious body. The gold and silver onion domes of 13,000 Orthodox churches and 400 monasteries dominate the landscape. Protestant churches are few and far between, sometimes hidden in courtyards or on the edge of town.

Orthodox symbols and narratives are shaping a new civil religion: Orthodox priests bless Russian soldiers and their weapons, and Russian political leaders appear next to the Orthodox patriarch at nationally broadcast Christmas and Easter services in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. Protestants have little access to state leaders or the media. They celebrate Christmas and Easter not in line with the Orthodox but rather according to the Western Gregorian calendar.

Average Russians have no idea what Protestantism is, because most have never encountered it. If they hear about a Russian who has become Protestant, their typical reaction is less disappointment or suspicion than bafflement. Why would a Russian, especially an ethnic Russian, not want to be Orthodox?

Seventy to 80 percent of Russians have been baptized in the Orthodox Church and see it as an essential element of the nation's identity. While constitutional

separation of church and state gives Protestants space to worship, educate pastors and parishioners and conduct social work, they sometimes feel relegated to the margins of society. Protestants have not always helped their claims to legitimacy in Russian society, for they have received funding and training from Western European and North American churches and have sometimes rejected Orthodoxy as vehemently as it has rejected them.

Ethnic heritage further complicates the picture for Lutheran and Methodist churches. Lutherans have been associated historically with German immigrants, while Russian Methodism originally served Swedes and Finns. Even today, Russian Methodists belong to the Northern European Central Conference of the United Methodist Churches, which is dominated by Scandinavian churches.

The North American part of the United Methodist Church has been especially active in supporting Russian Methodism. As Sergei Nikolaev, president of Moscow's Methodist seminary, has stated: "The primary Russian Orthodox frame of reference in relation to Russian Methodism, even though stated anecdotally, is 'Methodists are good Christians; let them go back to America.'"

Similar perceptions have plagued the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia. Until Brauer's election, the church was headed by German-born bishops, and the pastors of the historic Evangelical Lutheran churches in Moscow and St. Petersburg almost all came from Germany and returned there upon completing their service. German theologians headed the church's seminary in St. Petersburg.

The fate of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia has been closely tied to its German heritage. German immigrants began pouring into the Russian Empire in the 18th century at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Many were farmers who settled in the northwestern part of the empire or along the Volga River. Free to practice their faith, they constructed large churches whose spires dot the countryside to this day.

The situation changed with the two world wars and the years of Stalinist persecution. Tens of thousands of Russian Germans were exiled to Siberia and Central Asia. Entire villages were abandoned. By the end of the 1930s, every Lutheran church had been closed and every Lutheran pastor had been removed from office. More than a third were executed or died in prison camps. What survived of the church was in the Baltics, traditionally a stronghold of Lutheranism, and

among lay brotherhoods in the areas of deportation.

Ironically, even these remnants were largely extinguished with the collapse of communism in 1991. The Baltics became independent. Within Russia, many who claimed German heritage took advantage of liberal immigration policies to move to Germany. A church that at the beginning of the 20th century boasted 3.5 million members had only a handful of elderly parishioners a century later. Where they still gathered, services were conducted in German, but the grandchildren no longer knew the language and Russian began to make its way into the liturgy.

When Russian Lutherans think about their church today, however, they argue that it was never simply a foreign body in Russia. Rather, it has been an essential part of the nation's development and rebirth. At the end of the 19th century, the Romanov rulers married German nobility. Both the last czarina, Alexandra Feodorovna, and her sister Elizabeth were German Lutherans who converted to Orthodoxy. Elizabeth carefully weighed her decision, waiting until seven years after her marriage to convert. Even then, her Protestant sensibilities remained strong. When her husband was assassinated in 1905, she abandoned her life of wealth and privilege and founded an Orthodox sisterhood that devoted itself to prayer and physical care for Moscow's poor, sick and elderly.

The story of Elizabeth is inspiring to Russian Orthodox believers today. Historic photographs of Elizabeth hang in many Orthodox homes; in several Moscow churches, her icon has a central place.

Elizabeth is also an inspiration to Russian Lutherans. They believe that it was the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers that impelled her to take leadership in the church. Protestant concerns for social welfare shaped the distinctive emphases of her monastery. Even the church that she had built on the grounds of her monastery has a Protestant spirit in comparison to Moscow's historic Orthodox churches. The interior is filled with light; the icons are simpler and more dynamic in style than is typical for traditional Russian Orthodox iconography; and huge murals of Jesus, Mary and Martha adorn the walls of the nave.

Russian Lutherans also see the influence of their tradition in the Orthodox Church's recent efforts to promote religious education and parish life. The historic Lutheran churches in the center of Moscow and St. Petersburg had famous preparatory schools attached to them prior to the Russian Revolution; today Orthodox parishes

are organizing Sunday schools and parochial schools. Small-group study of scripture, an emphasis of German Lutheranism under the influence of pietism, is beginning to interest Orthodox priests, especially in parishes with large numbers of young professionals and their families.

German historian Hans-Christian Diedrich has argued that the churches suffered together under Russian communism; therefore, they are now called to “grieve, remember and pray together. For the dead no longer know any confessions, dogmas, traditions or divisions. They are encircled by the great bond of the unity and the peace of those who stand before God.”

A shared history of suffering gives Lutherans, Methodists and other Protestants a secure place in Russia alongside the Orthodox. The Orthodox Church had the greatest number of martyrs under communism, but Lutherans and Methodists have also identified and honored their martyrs. These martyrs declare that Protestants as much as Orthodox believers belong to Russia.

The sensibilities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Methodist Church are evident in their commitment to being Russian churches while maintaining close relations with Western churches. In recent years, leadership in the seminary of each church has passed to a Russian who received his doctoral degree in the West.

The commitment to being a church in and for Russia is further reflected in each seminary’s academic program. Because many students are already serving in churches located across Russia’s 11 time zones, residential programs have not proved successful. Instead, students come to their church’s seminary for intensive one- or two-week courses.

While both seminaries still make extensive use of Western professors, Protestant theological literature is increasingly available in Russian; St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological Institute in Moscow has an especially impressive translation program. Critical interpretation of scripture, analysis of contemporary culture and familiarity with new theological developments as well as the Reformation heritage are part of the seminary programs.

In both churches, women serve in pastoral leadership. Both churches also embrace intercommunion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia has signed the Leuenberg Agreement, which brought Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe

into eucharistic fellowship, and Russian Methodists practice the wide eucharistic hospitality of their mother church.

In 2011, the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, originally affiliated with the U.S. embassy but now an independent church body, joined Evangelical Lutherans for Christmas Eve services in the Peter and Paul Cathedral. The liturgy alternated between Russian, German and English. The traditional high point, "Silent Night," resounded in all three languages simultaneously.

The Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy and the Peter and Paul Cathedral have joined forces to provide medical care for African refugees in Moscow. These young men and women are often in the country illegally and subject to racial harassment. Perhaps the most significant form of social outreach for the Peter and Paul congregation is its regular organ concerts and musical series. The largely Western repertoire proclaims the gospel to Muscovites who would otherwise have no contact with Protestants.

When communism fell, Baptist and Seventh-day Adventist groups reemerged with new vitality. Some Adventist groups were quick to establish social ministries, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs. Meanwhile, conservative evangelical groups from the West rushed into Russia until laws enacted in 1997 restricted missionary activity. The Missouri Synod Lutheran Church allied itself with the Ingrian Lutheran Church, traditionally associated with an ethnic group related to the Finns.

While sometimes experiencing public opposition to building churches or conducting evangelistic campaigns, conservative Protestant groups have typically cultivated good relations with state officials. When a new political opposition swelled in size during the presidential campaign of 2012, Baptist and Adventist leaders, like their Orthodox counterparts, publicly declared their support for Putin.

Evangelical Lutherans and Methodists have reestablished themselves under different circumstances. Western Reformation churches, which had long related to the Orthodox in such ecumenical bodies as the World Council of Churches, did not try to establish a physical presence in the new Russia but rather supported the already existing church bodies.

Russian Lutherans and Methodists have sometimes experienced triangulation. While their Western partner churches have related to both them and the Orthodox, the Orthodox have related only to the Western partners. The Evangelical Church of Germany has held dialogues with the Russian Orthodox Church for several decades,

but there is no formal dialogue between the Orthodox and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia. Similarly, North American United Methodist leaders responsible for ecumenical dialogue have related officially to the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas Russians Methodists have had no entry point.

This pattern may be slowly changing. Russian Orthodox leaders have expressed interest in cooperating with Protestants of all stripes in social ministry and the preservation of Christian values. Nevertheless, the sheer difference in the number of members and theologically trained leaders between Orthodox and Protestant churches means that Russian Lutherans and Methodists will continue to battle for a seat at the table with the Orthodox.

The historic significance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia gives it a leg up on the Methodists. The most recent session of the German Evangelical Lutheran-Russian Orthodox dialogue in December 2012 included Archbishop Brauer as an observer. In January 2013, Brauer was invited by the Orthodox Church to the anniversary celebrations of Patriarch Kirill's enthronement. In April, Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the department of external church relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, appeared at a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in the Lutherans' Peter and Paul Cathedral.

Anyone who joins an Evangelical Lutheran or United Methodist congregation in Russia is going against the stream. In these circumstances, the first concern of these Russian Protestants is to secure a social space in which they can proclaim the gospel. They wish to relate the special theological emphases of their traditions to the Russian context.

Protestants in Russia are apt to be more conservative on social issues than their Western counterparts simply because Russian society is more conservative. We should not expect Russian Protestant leaders to take bold public positions on such matters as politics and democratization.

Nevertheless, their witness is important in a society that is less Christian than it first appears. Only 3 to 4 percent of Russians participate actively in church life. Orthodox priests in Moscow openly acknowledge that many of their parishioners know little about the Christian faith and practice it superstitiously. The things that Lutherans and Methodists care about are increasingly the things that Russian Orthodox leaders care about: a thoughtful, critical Christianity that responds creatively to changes in society and intellectual thought. The fate of these churches may turn out to be a

barometer for Russian Christianity as a whole.