

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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**Called and Ordained - p.5**

**The Gospel Ministry—In the Lutheran Confessions - p.8**

**Confessing the Name of the Triune God - p.10**

**The Keys: Christ's Word of Law and Gospel - p.12**

**Living by Faith - p.14**

**In the Field - p.16**



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P R E S S

# CONTENTS



page 6

page 10

page 8

page 12

page 14

page 16

## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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## FEATURES

**3 From the President**

**4 Letters to the Editor**

**5 Called & Ordained**  
by the Rev. Chad L. Bird  
Pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church  
Wellston, Okla.

Those who, in the stead and by the mandate of Christ, absolve, preach, catechize, and celebrate the Sacrament are His priestly ministers.

**8 The Gospel Ministry**  
—In the Lutheran Confessions  
by the Rev. Prof. Kurt Marquart  
Assoc. Professor Systematic Theology  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Ind.

The Lutheran Confessions maintain the full integrity of the public ministry of the New Testament.

**10 Confessing the Name of the Triune God**  
by Elizabeth A. Fluegel  
Research Director  
LCMS Office of Government Information  
Washington, D.C.

The task of handling eternal things is that of the Christian pastor. He is called to preserve and preach unspoiled, undisturbed and undistorted the image of the Eternal One: the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**12 The Keys: Christ's Word of Law & Gospel**  
by the Rev. Prof. Lawrence Rast  
Asst. Professor Historical Theology  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Ind.

The keys carry the Gospel, in the broad sense, forward, condemning self-assured people of their sin and assuring the contrite of their forgiveness.

**14 Living by Faith**  
by the Rev. Scott Klemsz  
Publisher, *For the Life of the World* and  
Director of Admission & Public Relations  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Ind.

For the men and women of the former Soviet Union, living by faith is more than an act of personal devotion or piety—it is the reality of their lives.

**16 In the Field**  
by Pam Knepper  
Managing Editor  
*For the Life of the World*

Features the Rev. David Mumme,  
Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church,  
Marseilles, Ill.



# F A I T H

By the Rev. Scott Klemsz

*This past July I was invited to participate in a number of seminars held in the former Soviet Union. Given the task of teaching the children who attended these seminars, I was also able to spend time with the people, interview them, and write down their stories. The following is the first in a series of stories that will detail these experiences. These stories will appear in future issues of For the Life of the World.*

**F**or the men and women of the former Soviet Union, living by faith is more than an act of personal devotion or piety—it is the reality of their lives.. Stripped of the security of their former political and economic systems, living by faith has become the center of their lives. They demonstrate this faith to the world by showing that it is not something that can be manufactured by personal piety or discipline, but rather it is forged by the lack of necessity of everyday goods and resources

It would be wrong to say that the people are lacking. In fact, they have much more than many because their trust and faith can only come from God, not from their own efforts. In the town of Belarus, Russia, I met a young man who had recently finished college. Unable to find any meaningful employment and living on less than \$20 a month, he had dedicated his time to the church and the spreading of the Gospel. Asked about his life and future, the young man's reply was quite simple, "I live by faith."



For these people, the reality of the presence of Christ in the Divine Service—the place where heaven meets earth—is a real and constant companion to their everyday life. Praying the liturgy is the place where their souls respond to the presence of Christ. It is in these prayers that you find the heart of the people. The prayers are not filled with chatter about the weather, instead they are filled with petitions for the hearts of the lost, for those with less than they, and for the spreading of the Gospel.

No two-dimensional view on the television news or a photo spread in a magazine can give a person a complete picture of this world. It would be flat and miss the vitality of life. The third dimension is found and offered in the churches that I had the opportunity of visiting. Their vitality comes from Christ's presence. Christ who comes to give life to the world.

The Lutheran churches of the former Soviet Union are filled with Russian men and women, not transplanted Westerners or Germans. Their language and life is different than ours, yet the church and her culture permeates them as the same culture envelops our gatherings. The culture of life found in the church,

versus the culture of death found in the world.

The country of Belarus has the heart of a young child. Only in the beginning stages of forming their synod, the churches work in a loose conference with a commitment to the confessions and





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Scriptures. This small band of churches struggles to build and survive in the harsh reality of a post-Soviet economy. Today, they often meet in homes or rented halls, pray the liturgy, proclaim the Gospel and partake of heavenly food. Many of the places that they meet cannot hold the number of people attracted to the Gospel. Caught between the Lutheran Confessions that have reawakened them and the liberal rule of vast state churches, they struggle in their work. The people of Belarus wait for God to present their future to them through His own intervention and with the help and generosity of others. This growing body of believers continues to find their hope in Christ.

For the young people in Eketerinburg, Russia, the groundwork is in place to begin building a congregation where Christ will be proclaimed to a world that was closed to the west until 1993. Western Pentecostalism and Baptist theology are major forces in the growing Christian movement. Growing hostility is evident between the nationalist movements tied to the Russian Orthodox Church and those who want further freedom in the state and the church. In addition to Christian movements, cult activities are growing at an alarming rate. Tolkienism, based on the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, has become a religion that claims several thousand members. In it, hobbit-like creatures are believed to inhabit the region with wisdom and comfort for the faithful. Another movement is based on a book about a fairy princess named Anastasia who lives in the woods. She is thought to give peace, guidance, and tranquility to those who trust in her power. These often bizarre and destructive groups flourish because of the sudden opening up of a region that had no access to the outside world for such a long time.

Novisibirsk, Russia, is the site of Concordia Theological College, a school whose main mission is to train men for the pastoral ministry. The college's existence was assisted by the Russian

Project. Concordia Theological Seminary's Russian Project is helping the Lutheran church in Russia and neighboring countries to teach men the Lutheran Confessions after suffering 70 years of persecution. They are taught both in Russia and on the Fort Wayne campus.

Bible Lutheran Church in Novosibirsk hosted a weeklong seminar in July for over 100 people from all over Siberia. The Rev. Vsevolod Lytkin, pastor of Bible Lutheran Church, works throughout Siberia. He often travels hundreds of miles to offer the Sacraments to those who hunger. Bible Lutheran Church would be the envy of many in the West with the average member in their 20's and close to 100 people worshipping each Sunday. Why? The young people find comfort in the liturgy and hope in their Lord as He comes to them through the Means of Grace. And because of this reality Russian homes and families with Christ at their heart are being created and nurtured by the church.

Nearly four weeks of travel and countless hours of conversation still flood my senses as I look back at the pages of my journal. God provided me with an opportunity to enter into a world that is foreign to that found at the Fort Wayne seminary. The people of the former Soviet Union have found life in what so many in our church finds as boring repetition. The liturgy of the church, baptismal water, and our Lord's body and blood nurture them-in that they find their faith and hope. My sadness in leaving was like the sadness of those that are left behind who marvel at the peace of those who have entered heaven. In the same way, I sit as one left behind as these people have entered into heaven on earth in a land far from Indiana.

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