

Karelia and Kamchatka

Xenia Dennen

11 July 2013

Introduction

Since the turn of the century I have been involved in the research behind what at Keston Institute we call the *Encyclopaedia on Religious Life in Russia Today*, which in seven volumes covers all Christian denominations and religions in all the administrative divisions of the Russian Federation. We are now working on a second edition which will be more analytical, focusing on the most important religious groups which are significant players in today's Russia.

This year my field trips have included one to Petrozavodsk in Karelia, north of St Petersburg at the western end of Russia, and most recently one to the very opposite end of Russia, Kamchatka, which is even further east than Vladivostok. The Karelian Republic, covering 172,400 sq km, has a population more than twice the size of Kamchatka's and Kamchatka is 1½ times larger than Karelia. Both areas were the focus of virulent antireligious activity during the communist period, so that few churches were left standing in Karelia and none whatsoever in Kamchatka.

Karelia: Petrozavodsk

Church-state relations

A tradition of tolerance was established in the early days of *perestroika* by an official, Boris Detchuyev, who was in charge of official policy towards religion in 1987 when church-state relations in Karelia dramatically improved thanks to him. As early as 1989-1990 he and officials from the mayor's office visited all the main religious groups in Petrozavodsk, and apologised for all the devastation caused by the atheist campaigns of the communist authorities. He firmly supported freedom of conscience. Today Viktor Birin is head of the Department for National Policy and State-Confessional Relations, and responsible for official policy on religion. Birin continues this tradition of tolerance. The local authorities cooperate with the Orthodox, Lutherans, Pentecostals and Adventists and invite representatives from all religious groups to round-table discussions and seminars. Even an International Day of Tolerance (16 November) is officially observed in Karelia.

Roman Catholics

I will start with talking about the Catholics because it was their priest who gave us the contact number for the diocesan secretary and thus an entrée to the Orthodox Church as well as the telephone number for an Orthodox priest in a nearby town, Kondopoga.

Fr Yevgeni Gendriks (Hendricks), whom I had known 20 years earlier in St Petersburg, met us outside his church, Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy, a nineteenth-century building, quite small but well-appointed. He lived, he said, in a flat with four parrots, a cat and a guinea pig! The church had been used by the Composers' Union of Karelia until Fr Gendriks got it back in 2003, nine years after his parish had been registered. 90% of Catholics in Karelia were Belarusians, with a few who were part-Polish, very few Lithuanians and Ukrainians, and no Germans at all as they

had all left before the Second World War, and anyway most of them had been Lutherans. The Petrozavodsk and Karelia Diocese of the Orthodox Church, headed by Archbishop Manuil whom Fr Gendriks had known many years before *perestroika* in St Petersburg, was an area, he said, where you could have a 'normal religious life'. He had a children's group, but no Sunday school as this would face many problems from the Ministry of Education, but he had six to seven people a year attending catechisation lessons and a few converts each year. His church was 'a church of believers', did not encourage 'seasonal Christianity' and was growing slightly. With the help of his assistant priest, Fr Mikhail, and four parishioners the church had been restored. There were no nuns working in the parish, and as they were nearly always Polish 'they usually interfere in pastoral work' (I knew Fr Gendriks was critical of his church for having so many Polish priests in Russia): 'a parish must maintain itself', he added. There were a few young people in his congregation; some doctors and teachers too. Archbishop Manuil was '*simpaticzny*': 'our relations are excellent; I have no difficulties'; the bishop maintained good relations with all denominations, especially with the Lutherans, the largest denomination in Karelia after the Orthodox, and helped the Catholics to get back their church. The diocese, he observed, was one of the poorest: most of the clergy, however, had higher education and 'they don't have expensive cars!' He attended the Orthodox liturgy in the cathedral and was allowed to stand in the sanctuary, while Orthodox clergy attended his Christmas Mass. The local authorities promoted good inter-denominational relations and a local official had even said 'proselytism in Karelia is not a crime'. His relations with the Lutherans were also excellent: they had given his church its organ.

Russian Orthodox

By the end of the 1980s there were only five Orthodox parishes left in Karelia. Only in 1990 was a Petrozavodsk Diocese created with Archbishop Manuil in charge. He had been trained at the Leningrad Spiritual Academy and had spent 1977-78 at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva. Today the diocese has 78 parish, 90 churches, 155 chapels, 86 priests and 14 deacons.

Fr Vyacheslav Rasputin: Missionary Department

Unfortunately the bishop was in hospital at the time of our visit, so a meeting was arranged with the head of the missionary department, Fr Vyacheslav Rasputin. He was a Karelian who had been brought up in an atheist family. He was converted through the Salvation Army but had then been 'told mystically' to go to the Orthodox Church. Now for the past 13 years he had been involved in mission in south Karelia where there was a dearth of Orthodox clergy. The bishop's main priority was theological education, but so far no seminary had been founded - there were insufficient potential students, no qualified teachers and no funding. Nor had the university either a department of theology or a chapel. The clergy were trained in Moscow or St Petersburg, but not in Finland. Of the 90 churches in the diocese, only 40 were really functioning, the rest being 'Potemkin villages'; but there were many (100+) chapels where a lay person led the worship. His missionary department had three aims: mission to the baptised who knew little about church worship and beliefs; mission to those outside the church; and mission to distant areas, like Tuva. His department worked with Protestants on social work projects with funding from the Finnish Orthodox Church, while Orthodox relations with the conservative Lutheran Church of Ingria, he added, were 'neutral'. Society, he commented, was uncouth, people believed in anything, could not distinguish one denomination from another. Paganism still

existed among the Veps, a small ethnic group. In the schools only 15% of children had chosen to study the Orthodox course 'Foundations of Orthodox Culture, with 70% taking the course on secular ethics.

Fr Konstantin: Youth Department

During this meeting we were joined by Fr Konstantin, head of the youth department. He was particularly keen on organising groups of young people to help excavate battle zones, after which any bodies found were reburied: 'In the past we destroyed so much that was sacred... A Christian must be patriotic. I treat the ground here where blood was spilt as holy.' He worked in six higher education institutions and organised courses for which his department had bought a large number of Bibles from the Pentecostals at a discount! About 2000 students were involved in social work, visiting hospitals and children's homes. It was difficult to teach religion in schools as the Ministry of Education was trying to block the introduction of the Orthodox course Foundations of Orthodox Culture. Society in general was anticlerical and still affected by the communist past. In 2008 a church which had been restored was burnt down and yet the local authorities refused to investigate the crime. 'The gulag system was here and still has an effect. The sons and grandsons of those who were in power in the 1930s are in charge now. We have been brutalised and our area is depressed.'

Kondopoga (about 50 km north of Petrozavodsk)

Russian Orthodox

Fr Lev Bolshakov moved from St Petersburg to Karelia in 1991. He trained as an architect (his wife was a painter) and had belonged to educated Leningrad dissident circles before *perestroika*. He had regularly visited Moscow in the 1980s where he had got to know Fr Aleksandr Men', Fr Pavel Adel'geim and Fr Georgi Kochetkov. Archbishop Manuil, as Fr Yevgeni Gendriks had told us, was a tolerant bishop and someone Fr Lev clearly greatly respected; he was ordained by him and in 1991 had got a parish registered in Kondopoga. His parish council were first given a hut for their services, until in 2005 his congregation started to build a proper church which now stood in all its splendour in the evening sun. Fr Lev was concerned about education and regularly lectured at the university in Petrozavodsk and other colleges. He was also often asked to speak on the radio and television. He had organised eleven groups in his Sunday school with a total of 120 children; and ran summer camps at which the children, many street children, as well as having fun joined groups studying maths, art and astronomy. In order to help teachers connect their work with religious faith, he invited them to the library (in the parish house where we were sitting) and held seminars for them. There was little religious education being taught in the schools, and few children had taken up the Orthodox course Foundations of Orthodox Culture. Fr Lev and his parish had publicly supported the local Pentecostals and Lutherans who had wanted to build their own church. The Orthodox who campaigned against this were 'psychopaths' in his view. He condemned nationalism, adding 'this crucified Christ'.

Indigenous people: the Veps

Fr Dosifei Larionov was another Orthodox priest whom we interviewed. He had been working in the Veps area (*Vepsky volost'*) since 2000 and had created the first parish for Veps in Sheltozero.

He now looked after five churches in the area. Educated and trained for the priesthood in St Petersburg, he arrived in Sheltozero aged 20 with just his cross and a small bag, he recounted. He was offered a large building on the edge of the village which was in a dreadful state of repair, once the home of a priest who had been shot in 1937, then used as a police station and later a library. 'I am surrounded by a sense of the martyrs', he said. He had restored this building, created a church inside and added a section where visitors and pilgrims could stay. After 70 years when religion had been crushed 'you cannot revive spiritual life quickly', said Fr Dosifei. The Veps had a cult of the dead and visited cemeteries on Trinity Sunday and Easter Day rather than coming to church; in a club housed in a former church they had 'danced on the bones of their ancestors'. They were converted to Orthodoxy, he added, later than the Karelians and were less open to the outside world. Although the Bible had been translated into the Vepsian language it was not in demand. The culture was dying out and survived as folklore with an admixture of witchcraft; a Veps Society existed but it was interested only in the language and traditional customs. Luckily a local monastery, the Blagoveshchensky Iono-Yashezersky Monastery, had been founded in the sixteenth century by a Veps saint whose veneration Fr Dosifei was cultivating. The monastery had been closed in 1918 and all the monks shot; he had raised the money to start restoring the monastery with the help of rich contacts in St Petersburg and had been its abbot since 2003. The community consisted of only five monks who lived in Sheltozero while helping restore the monastery buildings, and supporting religious life in a number of villages. The area was extremely poor and sparsely populated. Last year Fr Dosifei was put in charge of all monasteries in the diocese, but most were in a dreadful state of disrepair apart from the Valaam Monastery which was directly under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch rather than the local diocese.

Lutherans

The Lutheran parish of the Church of the Holy Spirit was founded in 1970 and was run from Estonia until 1992, when the Church of Ingria was set up. We spoke to Pastor Aleksei Krongol'm who was now this church's pastor and Area Dean for all Karelia's 15 Lutheran parishes (2 in Petrozavodsk). Lutheranism had been part of Karelian religious life since the time of Peter the Great and had entered the area from Finland and Sweden. The first Lutheran church was opened in Petrozavodsk in 1873. After the Manifesto of 1905 and the Act of Toleration, Lutheran missionary work among Karelians intensified, provoking Bishop Sergi (Stragorodsky) in 1909 to gather representatives from all the Russian Orthodox parishes in Karelia and to galvanise them into resisting this 'Finnish-Lutheran expansion'. Today, however, Lutheranism and Orthodoxy coexisted with no friction, partly thanks to the tolerant policies of Archbishop Manuil. Pastor Aleksei was not a liberal but adhered to the conservative theological views of the Church of Ingria which does not accept the ordination of women. Most members of Pastor Aleksei's parish were Ingermanlandtsy (70%) who were close to the Finns but had their own dialect; few members were Karelians (many Finns and Karelians had emigrated to Finland). The young people who came to his church were Russians, however, so both Finnish and Russian were used for services. The church building was new: it had been opened two years earlier and had taken ten years to build. About 100-150 attended church on Sundays and 400-500 at Christmas and Easter. Pastor Aleksei wanted a course on Lutheranism to be taught in schools, but found this was not allowed, and no Lutherans were ever invited into schools to speak to the children. Although the local government did not create 'difficulties' for Lutherans, he found no great sympathy coming from that quarter. There was never any mention of Lutheranism on Russian TV programmes.

'We maintain a neutral position. We don't perhaps make enough fuss and we avoid conflict.' Nevertheless, there was no animosity between Orthodox and Lutherans, and some Orthodox clergy sometimes visited his church at Easter.

Pastor Vadim Lysenko, in his 20s, was in charge of the Lutheran church in Kondopoga, a new building paid for by Finnish Lutherans who continued to fund maintenance costs. He was born in Kiev and came to Karelia when he was five. He had joined a Lutheran youth group in Olonets when he was 14 with a Finnish pastor in charge. Although not interested in national differences - 'we make no distinction between one nation and another' - he said that Finnish culture permeated his church (Church of Ingria) and he included Finnish in parts of Sunday services; for example the Creed and the Lord's Prayer were said in Finnish which the older generation loved. He also ran a Bible study group in Finnish—all the members were OAPs. But most Finnish speakers had left for Finland three years ago, so that now the majority of his congregation spoke only Russian; no one spoke Karelian (it was not taught in school and no one was interested in the Karelian translation of the New Testament). On a regular Sunday he usually had a congregation of about 60, with 87-100 on Christmas Day and 150 at Easter. There was no youth group as few young people remained in Kondopoga after school; the town offered only a technical college and the young went elsewhere to study. But he ran a Sunday school with two groups, one for pre-school children, the other for older children. His church also had a 10-member choir and an effective diaconate whose members cared for the elderly. But when he and his colleagues visited children's homes they were banned from speaking about God. Lutherans were not allowed to teach in schools, although he added the comment that were a Lutheran religious course offered some schools might accept it. A local tourist company which organised trips to Valaam, Solovki and Kizhi regularly brought groups to visit his church's café where he would chat with them and answer their questions about religious faith. Relations with the Orthodox were extremely friendly: the Orthodox had joined up with the Lutherans in a service for disabled children and those from deprived backgrounds, while some Roman Catholics came to their Christmas service. He was a good friend of the young Catholic priest in Petrozavodsk who worked with Fr Gendriks. The consultative committee in the Kondopoga town administration included representatives from his church, but no Catholics, he added.

Church of Ingria

What was distinctive about the Church of Ingria in Petrozavodsk? Although the Ingrian church had not existed during the Soviet period, it was now rooted in the area, and had unusually cordial relations with the secular authorities; it was considered a 'half-traditional' religion unlike the Charismatics; it had now become mainly Russian; unlike the Roman Catholics with the sharp divide between Polish attitudes and Russian 'mentality', the Lutherans held together different ethnic groups.

Schismatic Lutherans

A Karelian group of Lutherans who supported the ordination of women existed in Sortavala. A woman deacon, Valentina Petrovna Eliseyeva, and Pastor Raimo Yakkinen founded the Karelian Evangelical-Lutheran Church in 1998 after they fell out with the Church of Ingria's leadership, accusing them of behaving like dictators and ignoring Karelian national interests. The members of this group (about 150, with 30 children) were all in the north and supported financially by the

descendants of fellow Karelians who had emigrated to Finland from Sortavala. We gathered that this group had become 'lethargic', but thanks to the recent ordination of a new pastor, Aleksandr Kuznetsov, an educated man, by a Finnish bishop, there were hopes that the group would be revived.

Salvation Army

The Salvation Army in Petrozavodsk had about 40 regular members under the command of Leonid Vasil'yevich Badanin who was grateful for the official ban against antisectarian articles in the press. He and his colleagues distributed humanitarian aid throughout the republic, worked with down-and-outs, collected clothes for the needy and gave out food. The local authorities allowed them to collect money on the street to help single mothers, but they found that their uniforms were the subject of some local jokes. Nevertheless, Badanin believed that he and his colleagues would soon be able to organise Salvation Army parades when they would all be dressed in their uniforms.

Pentecostals

The Pentecostal church, part of ROSKhVYe (the Russian United Union of Evangelical Christians), was run from Finland where its leader, Vasili Vladimirovich Butov, a Senior Presbyter, had lived since 1984, with his deputy Andrei Vasil'yevich Timofeyev living in Petrozavodsk. The church had been founded in Sortavala by Finnish preachers in 1907 but was destroyed by 1937. After the Second World War, with the return of many from the Gulag, groups of Pentecostals reappeared. They were forced to join the Baptist All-Union Council in 1967, but later either joined the *Initsiativniki* (Reform Baptists) or formed independent Pentecostal congregations. Since 1998 Butov had built up 11 congregations which were registered as part of an independent Karelian association; these included a Bible Institute in Sortavala where missionaries were trained. Butov was suspicious of Western values coming in from Finland, and particularly of the Charismatic movement; he felt more at home with traditional Russian Baptists. In Petrozavodsk the Pentecostals had now built a church which could hold 500.

Charismatics

The other main Pentecostal church in Karelia was the 'New Life' Charismatic church, led by Senior Presbyter Fedor Vladimirovich Akimenko, which had a congregation of 500 in Petrozavodsk and a Sunday school of 150 children. Throughout Karelia it ran 50 churches and groups, three of which had congregations of about 200. Twenty of these groups had created their own churches out of former shops or school buildings, while in Petrozavodsk the mayor's office had given them land to build a prayer house. Although the leadership had initially come entirely from Finland, now the church leaders were all Russian. They worked closely with the Church of Ingria on social work projects, and ran an Alpha course which the Russian Orthodox missionary department supported. The Orthodox had also helped 'New Life' to organise a summer camp for wheelchair-bound young people. Fyodor Akimenko was received by Archbishop Manuil whose Christian beliefs impressed him deeply.

Kamchatka

Russian Orthodox

Under Patriarch Kirill the Moscow Patriarchate has become even more centralised; the Keston Encyclopaedia team now find that generally no priest can meet you without his bishop's blessing (Karelia was unusual). This time the Bishop was away in Moscow, so we had a long wait while his press secretary got in touch with him to find out whether any clergy could meet Sergei Filatov and me. Eventually, after a day and half, the message came back 'get the most articulate clergy together and tell Sergei Filatov and the English woman all that is best in the diocese!' We were greatly relieved.

We were received in the Bishop's council chamber in the new Trinity Cathedral which stands imposingly above Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the capital. The diocesan secretary, the head of social work and the abbot of a new monastery in charge of all religious were there to meet us.

There had been 64 parishes before the Revolution, all of which had been closed by the mid-1920s; now there were 25 and 40 clergy. Because of the very low standard of living (food is very expensive as most has to be brought in by air or sea) parishes could not support a priest, but churches and clergy in district centres were funded by the Governor (V.I.Ilyukhin). They claimed that 10% of those in isolated northern villages, mostly with populations of no more than 500-600, were Orthodox, while in the cities the figure was only 7-10%. Their missions to villages, many of which were accessible only by air, consisted usually of a priest and a seminarian from the Belgorod seminary with which the diocese had close links. The two would spend three to five days in a village. The abbot, Fr Fedor, believed that many of the indigenous people (Karyaks, Aleuts, Evenki) had a 'genetic memory' and remembered Russian Orthodox rituals; many remembered the place where a priest had been murdered by the Soviet authorities; many were keen to build chapels, he said. Although they went on to claim that the population as a whole in Kamchatka was 80% Orthodox, they admitted that only 23% of children had opted to do the school religious studies course, Foundations of Orthodox Culture – a useful yardstick for assessing the number of Orthodox believers. Eight young men were studying for the priesthood, some in Moscow some in Khabarovsk. Those clergy with children were keen to found a Russian Orthodox secondary school where the children could be nurtured in the Orthodox faith, but it was proving difficult to find suitable teachers. There seemed to be few members of the intelligentsia who were interested in the church, except for one who ran a local library. This was very different from most provincial cities where we found educated people who were keen supporters of the Orthodox Church running the local museum, for example, or some cultural club. Nevertheless, there were plans to found a religious-educational centre, the Nicholas the Wonderworker Centre, next to the cathedral. The priest in charge of social work, Fr Viktor Muzykant, told us about a sisterhood of 25 women, the Martha and Mary Sisters, who helped care for the disabled, the elderly and those in hospital. This community of women (they were not nuns) had existed for ten years. In the centre of the city the church ran a youth centre, founded in 1999, which had a chapel, and a youth camp for 9-18 year-olds out in the country on land belonging to a convent. Some work was being done with prisoners: a priest regularly visited inmates and ran a community for former prisoners in the countryside where members of the community helped locals with building and repairs. The church helped at three feeding stations in the city where medical help and clothes were provided, and planned to found a centre for single pregnant women with a view to preventing abortions. The local authorities welcomed the

Orthodox Church's help in the social field and were able to provide some funding with state grants for non-commercial organisations.

We visited Fr Fedor's St Panteliemon Monastery with 13 monks plus another 12 men, many former sailors, who were helping flatten out the ground for the foundations of a new church. This would one day look out over the sea and would be dedicated to the memory of all sailors lost at sea. From there we were taken on to the only convent in Kamchatka, dedicated to the Kazan' Icon of the Mother of God, where a rather scary former army commander now turned Orthodox priest, Fr Aleksei Alpatov, ran the church's summer camp for teenagers along military lines with strict discipline. The youngsters were dressed in camouflage and handled guns, while also being taught hand-to-hand combat. 'We aim to produce citizens', said Fr Aleksei, by which he meant Russian nationalists ready to defend the motherland against the dreadful West.

Catholics

High up on the hillside above Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky is a tiny Catholic church founded in 1999 and dedicated to St Theresa, standing in a recently created garden beside a mountain stream. You reach it along a dirt track. There Fr Jan Radoń, a Polish priest who belongs to the Polish Charismatic movement, serves a small community of about 30 – mostly Lithuanians and Ukrainians as well as a few Russians. Some of his parishioners are the children of those exiled to Kamchatka during the communist period. Fr Jan had worked before in Ukraine and Magadan and had now been in Kamchatka for five years. He planned to build a youth centre and a centre for children on land next to the church, as he saw a great need for working with the young. He had tried many times to see the local Orthodox bishop, but to no avail. Not once had been received. His own bishop was based in Irkutsk. He told us how he had formerly been a professional volleyball player for seven years – thus he was, not surprisingly, extremely tall! He worked alone after the visas for two nuns were taken away. He found that many young Russians were interested in joining the Catholic Church as it was more 'approachable'; they had been put off Russian Orthodoxy by its rigidity on how you should dress. Kamchatka, he said, was 'different' from other areas of Russia after all forms of religion had been destroyed by the communists, leaving all religions on the same level in the eyes of the younger generation, who did not see Orthodoxy as superior to other denominations. The young were delighted to find a priest who liked to play sport, was not always in a cassock and smiled, unlike the Orthodox clergy whom they found always looked grim. He thought the Orthodox were afraid of the modern world. He was regularly invited by the local government to attend a quarterly meeting of representatives from all denominations, apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Reform Baptists (who on principal have no contact with state bodies) but was regularly checked (eight times a year) by the Procuracy and the FSB, who once called at 1a.m. to look at books and journals in order to see whether they contained anything critical of Putin.

Protestants

Apart from some small congregations of Baptists and *Initsiativniki* (Reform Baptists) as well as members of the highly conservative Pentecostal group the *Fedorovtsy*, the fastest-growing Protestant group in Kamchatka we found to be a Charismatic church, the Full Gospel Church or Good News Church which for ten years had been building a vast modern church on the edge of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, large enough to hold at least 2000 worshippers. One of their pastors,

a former marine called Dmitri, introduced us to members of his church from the indigenous peoples, the Karyaks, Aleuts and Evenki, who said that they were treated as equals by the Full Gospel Church, unlike the Orthodox who visited their villages and treated them as inferior. Andrei, half Aleut and half Mordovian, a champion dog-sleigh driver, had become an effective missionary visiting isolated villages in the winter and staying in each for at least three weeks. Because he neither drank nor swore, the villagers, he said, would begin to ask him 'why are you like this?', whereupon he would talk about his Christian faith. As we were shown round the vast new church, I noticed many young people, some preparing to play in a band, others gathered round a table in a side room and having a lively get-together.

Conclusion

My experience of many different parts of Russia has made me wary of making generalisations about the religious situation in Russia, but one I have often made in recent years after visiting the Far North, Siberia and the Far South, is that the further away you get from Moscow, the more tolerant are interdenominational and interfaith relations. However, my experience in Kamchatka has not supported this theory, alas. Karelia, in the European part of Russia and therefore rather closer to Moscow than some of these other areas, turned out to be one of the most tolerant areas, whereas in Kamchatka, the farthest east that you can get, the Russian Orthodox diocese was intolerant and had nothing whatsoever to do with either Catholics or Protestants.

Xenia Dennen is a Russian specialist and Chairman of Keston Institute which studies religion in communist and formerly communist countries. xd@keston.org.uk