

Summary of and Reflections about the 2008 Friendship English Language Camp in Kondopoga, Russia (June 2-23)

by

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Our Dear Friends,

*From the day that we met you
we knew we were blessed.
For you and we to be this close
we never would've guessed.*

*You've been here for us
through the good and the bad.
We are able to vent you
when others make us sad.*

*You're all that makes us happy,
all that make us smile,
even though we have known each other
for a very short while.*

*This is for you,
our dear friends ever.
We just want you to know
we WILL LOVE YOU FOREVER.*

—with LOVE. Russian teachers

The poem in the box was read to us by our Russian teacher/translators at the celebration ceremony the last day of our two weeks of Friendship English Language Camp (FELC) at School #3 in Kondopoga, Russia. The truly heartfelt poem also reflected our sentiments to the teachers. To be sure, this relationship of trust, respect and love with the Russian teachers began last year when we with three others conducted one week of the first-ever FELC in Kondopoga. Last year was so well received that the Principal and Russian teachers asked East European Mission Network (www.eemn.org) if we could return this year for two full weeks of camp. We did so, and the familiarity and more time together firmly cemented the bonds of friendship and trust this year. And, even though their original interest was the practice of English, the teachers shared with us that we needn't be too cautious about sharing the Gospel and Biblical teachings. They value the foundation of moral and ethical principles presented in the curriculum which emanates from Christian faith. These same relationships developed quickly with our groups of kids—as one youth in Sandy's group said, “We can go to

other English programs, but here we learn about God.”

The curriculum theme this year was “Living in Hope.” The daily program included lots of singing and learning new songs with Christian lyrics; an English curriculum based on Biblical stories about David; sports time; crafts; and dramas also based on stories about David. Each week ended with each group presenting a drama telling a Bible story based on David's life and the promises made to him by God. There were about 50 youth each week, with about 8-10 students in each of the 5 classes, 5-8th grade the first week and 9th-11th grade the second week. Each class included a Russian teacher who helped us as a translator. There were six on our Kondopoga team, we from Duluth plus Rachel Siffring, formerly from Duluth, now from Tennessee; throughout the 2 weeks of Language Camp seven Russian teacher/translators plus Russian FELC Director Tatiana Ivantsova and Assistant Principal Ludmilla worked with us. (Another 24 Americans were with EEMN's FELC teams in 4 schools in Petrozavodsk.)

We also had great help from Vadim Lysenko, a young Pastor at the Kondopoga Lutheran church, who played guitar for our singing sessions. Vadim graduated from the seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia (ELCIR) in Koltischei outside St. Petersburg and is serving as “Associate” Pastor at the Kondopoga church with Pastor Jorma Sade who is from Finland; under current law, Jorma's visa allows him to be in Russia only 3 out of each 6-month period; interestingly, Vadim and Jorma must communicate through a translator because one speaks Russian, the other Finnish! Vadim also sat in on



Kondopoga FELC Mission Team and Russian teachers with the banner made during craft time, reflecting the theme of the week. Each painted wood block has a synonym word for God offered by the kids.

Paul and Carol's class and was a big hit with all the kids; his presence added much to the program and the program opened ministry opportunities for him.

We also experienced rich, meaningful interactions and conversations with our very gracious Russian host families; Sergei, the father in Sandy and Rachel's host family, was quite interested in learning more about the Lutheran Church in Kondopoga. He, as well as one member of each of the other two host families, work for the large paper mill in Kondopoga. With 7,000 of the 40,000 residents working for the mill, Kondopoga certainly qualifies as a "Company Town." Making ends meet is a struggle, since salaries are in the range of \$300-\$500/month, but the cost of living is comparable to the U.S.

Our itinerary included flying into St. Petersburg where we then bused an hour out of town to the ELCIR seminary at Kolitschei for an overnight stay, followed by an 8-hour bus trip the next day to Petrozavodsk. There our Kondopoga team was wonderfully hosted by Nadia Krongolm and her youth leaders as we stayed at the Youth Flat of the Lutheran Church for 2 days of orientation with EEMN; the two small rooms and tiny kitchen barely contained the youth group that gathered with us one evening. We then bused 30 miles north to Kondopoga where we met our hosts and the teachers for our own orientation, worship at the Kondopoga Lutheran Church, and had two non-stop weeks of FELC. It was a mile walk to school each morning and almost every evening involved some kind of activity: meeting with the "English Table" folks who wanted to practice their English with Americans; attending an organ concert; touring the Youth Center; attending a high school celebration ceremony and ball; a prayer meeting at the church; and each evening capped off by getting ready for the next day of class. We were really poohed by the time we departed by train from Petrozavodsk to St. Petersburg. After two days at the seminary for debriefing, worship, relaxing and some sightseeing—we flew home.

Other highlights, related to the N.E. MN Synod/ ELCIR Companion Synod relationship (www.nemnsynod.org/elcirmin.html), included good informational meetings with Pastor Pentti Smeds, Chairperson of the Youth Committee of the ELCIR (Alex Krongolm is under this Committee) and Pastor Arri Kugappi, Bishop of the ELCIR. These conversations amply confirmed our conviction that Alex and Nadia Krongolm (whom our church is partnering with others to support and who visited here in April/May) are emerging as important and respected young spiritual leaders in the ELCIR and that our support is essential and fruitful; the need to identify funding for purchase of a car for Alex was confirmed.

We feel very blessed by all that occurred at the Camp, sensing that there are great opportunities for future sharing of the Good News in Kondopoga and helping the church continue developing an inviting and respected presence in the community. Besides the poem above, two other anecdotes reflect our sense of gratitude and humbleness for the privilege of being entrusted with this ministry:

- Katya substituted two days for Steve's teacher/translator and her son was in Paul and Carol's class. She was genuinely moved by this experience, sharing her feelings during our daily team meeting with the teachers. She wrote a 4-page letter to each about how much she appreciated Steve, the class for her son, and the FELC and the team. She admitted that, being raised during the Cold War, she initially had a dim view of Americans, but that is now all changed. "*It seems to me if all adults are, as Steve, equal for children, our world will be better!*" "*My son said if it will be repeat (FELC) the next time he would like to change nothing! But, you, my dear friends, have changed everything! Thank you...*" She added this little poem: "*I had some locks in my heart. All joy and smiles were shut. The locks are broken now. Thank you. Thank you.*"
- Carol and Paul's translator, this year and last year wrote: "*Meeting you has become very important for me. You are the first true Christians who showed me what real faith is. I highly appreciate your lessons. Your work here is very significant. I do believe your ideas will enlighten other people as well. I have enjoyed the time we spent together. I hope we will be able to see each other next summer...Thank you for what you are and what you do...*" (note: After last year's FELC, she and her daughter took instructions, were baptized, and joined the Kondopoga Lutheran Church).

The oft stated axiom "when you go on a short-term mission trip you receive much more than you give" is most certainly true!