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By Alfred Opp, Vancouver, British Columbia

Edited by Connie Dahlke, Walla Walla, Washington

I have been very interested in reading the various comments and reactions people have written about how pastoral work was done in South Russia. Bessarabia was similar in this regard to the other areas of Russia. Pastor Horst Gutsche has given important insights.

In my home village of Teplitz, Bessarabia, my grandfather was a "Kirchenrat" - a church consular. The responsibility of the "Kirchenrat" was to listen to all sermons and make sure they stayed in line with scripture and did not waver off too much to worldly thoughts.

It is true that our pastors in South Russia had their hands full serving all of the many villages. Some of these villages were small and did not have the resources to build a church and house a pastor. Most villages, if not all, did have a combined "Bete-" and school-house where worship services were held. The district pastor would send out the sermons which would then be read by the school teacher. Pastors would preside at "Konfirmation" and wedding ceremonies. Baptisms and burials could be lawfully performed by the "Kuesterlehrer" or Sexton. In the case of emergency baptism, bedside sacraments and burials, often a schoolmaster or village Elder performed these rituals because of the urgency of time. My parents and grandparents often said that some of the school teachers and village Elders were better than the pastor because they used heart-felt words that provided an extra spiritual depth to their sermons.

I can attest to the fact that services performed by lay people under urgent circumstances often are blessed with extra spiritual meaning. During the war there was no pastor available, and not even any grown men around. People were dying every day. As a boy of 15, I was called on to conduct burial services for three different people. The services were simple but heartfelt. I spoke only a few words, prayed a prayer my parents had taught me, then our small group sang a song or two. The spiritual feeling was very beautiful - these were the most memorable services I have ever attended. It was a time when we all leaned together heavily to reach out for Christ and salvation. God is there for us in the deepest wilderness.