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THE VILLAGE CHURCH OF YEGORIEVKA

PART II

For years, friends of *Road to Emmaus* staff correspondent Thomas Hulbert and his wife Sonia have avidly followed their chronicle of Siberian parish life in Altai, the remote region of Sonia's childhood, and Fr. Alexander Popov, the remarkable young priest of St. Nicholas Church, Yegorievka. Here is the conclusion of our two-part article.

SEPTEMBER, 2003

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for your letters of encouragement this past year. With your help, we've collected almost \$3,000, and St. Nicholas Church in Yegorievka is slowly rising. Most of the donations go to building materials and basic church goods.

The Altai Children's Home

With a borrowed car, Fr. Alexander has begun going regularly to the institution for mentally ill and retarded children. Some of these children have grown up and are young adults now, but they stay on because there is nowhere else for them to go. With the collapse of the Soviet economy, many state-run institutions have closed completely, and how this one keeps functioning, only God knows. When Fr. Alexander first asked about visiting, he was told by the administrators that many of the children were extremely disturbed and disabled, and almost impossible to work with. It was clear to him that if he went even once, this would be a podvig he would have to



Interior of newly-roofed St. Nicholas Church.

fulfill for the rest of his priesthood. He felt strongly, though, that as the area's only priest, it was his duty to minister to these children and adults, almost none of whom had been baptized.

There are almost no visitors to the home, as children come from the whole of western Siberia, and relatives interested in their welfare can rarely travel such distances. The institution is in a small, isolated community, and besides the state-paid doctors, only local villagers work here. There are more than one hundred children, and Fr. Alexander said that his first visit was very difficult indeed. One young man who impressed him deeply is now 27, with an adult head attached to the body of a young child. Although he doesn't speak, Fr. Alexander feels that he hears and understands quite a lot.

The director, doctors and workers of the institution are mostly Orthodox believers but have rarely been to church themselves as there aren't any open churches in the area. They are very positive towards Orthodoxy and grateful that Fr. Alexander is willing to come, although they forewarned him that some of the older children and adults could be physically aggressive. Baptizing most of the children was easy – many of those with Down's Syndrome are kind and helpful, and when he asks them to carry the holy water, books, or crosses, they are very happy to assist. But others were disturbed and forceful, and these the

doctors helped hold during the baptisms. Fr. Alexander visited three times in order to baptize everyone, and since then has gone regularly to give Holy Communion. He catechizes those who can understand on a very simple level. The local hospital workers tell him that they are just glad that a priest is coming, that someone remembers they are there.

When Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria first came to the Yegorievka, the villagers were generally suspicious and would turn away or make scornful comments as he approached. Fr. Alexander decided then that no matter how much he needed help, money, or materials, he would never ask anyone for anything. He began by simply working on the church, day after day. People were amazed when they saw a priest, asking for neither money nor help. Slowly, they realized that when they were troubled they could go to church to be comforted and that this priest would not ask them for anything. Finally, there were tentative offers of assistance, but because many people drink, they are unreliable, and Fr. Alexander understood that if he paid them, he would only be helping them buy more vodka. Recently, he has been able to hire a few workers who do not drink at all.

Father Alexander and Matushka Daria

It is well known in Russia that it is difficult for a man who wants to be a priest to find a good wife who is willing to share his poverty, and who can be a real friend and helper. Matushka Daria is both. When they first came to the village with two children and a third on the way, they lived in a rented room in another family's house. After some time, they were told that the family member whose room they had rented was returning from prison in three days and they should leave. With three children and nowhere to go, Fr. Alexander was very worried – there wasn't a single room or house for rent anywhere in the village. Matushka Daria quietly said, "Let's do an akathist to St. Nicholas. He will help us." Fr. Alexander thought, "Of course, she's right. We have to pray," and they said the akathist for three days. On the third day of the akathist, hours before they had to vacate the room, an amazing thing happened. A village babushka had died a few days before, and her daughter, not knowing of their difficulties, offered to let them stay in the vacant house for a few weeks. Later, she asked them if they would like to buy it. Fr. Alexander had no money at all, but the region's head priest found the



Fr. Alexander serving in St. Nicholas Church.

needed loans. The Popovs look on this as a real miracle. There had been no houses available in Yegorievka for years, until suddenly one came at the very hour they needed it. They hope to pay the loan off little by little by selling produce from the garden and milk from their newly-acquired cow.

Matushka Daria told Sonia, “We never planned to live in a village, but when Fr. Alexander was offered the position, we took it because we thought village life would be better for the family. The first winter I was completely alone with the children. My husband was at church all day long, and no one would talk to me. In Rubtsovsk, we had lived in a large apartment building that belonged to the archdiocese, where many of the town priests and their families lived, and I was surrounded by the other matushkas, my friends, and their children. At first I was very lonely here, but now I’m happy, I have friends, and the children are better off – they have fresh air and trees to climb.”

Fr. Alexander’s children are doing pretty well. Seraphim, the youngest, still has a heart problem, which remains undiagnosed and untreated as there are only very basic medical facilities in Altai and no funds to go elsewhere. Misha, the adopted child, has a five-centimeter brain tumor, which remains untreated for the same reasons. Fr. Alexander gives each of his children Holy Communion daily and both times that the tumor was

checked, it had shrunk by a few millimeters. Now Misha is four years old, difficult to discipline and teach because of his drug-related birth problems, but very loved.

The Church Library and Sunday School

After his Moscow visit, Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria opened a library at the church, from which anyone in the village can borrow books. He bought dozens of books, but the library shelves remain empty because as soon as a book is returned, it is checked out again within a few hours. Some have a waiting list, the most popular being the journal *Russky Palomnik* [The Russian Pilgrim] and *FOMA* [Thomas], “A Magazine for Doubters.”

The Popovs have also begun a Sunday school for children. For now, the tables and benches are in a corner of the church and after liturgy they have lessons. In Siberia, children go to public school on Saturdays as well, so any kind of church school can only be held on Sunday. After Sunday school they give each child tea and a few cookies. Some of the village children are almost always hungry, and when they come to church they ask, “Will you give us tea today? Will we have tea?” At first Fr. Alexander thought it might be better to not have refreshments, but when he understood they were hungry, he decided that no matter how little money he had, he would give these children tea and cookies...

Thomas and Sonia Hulbert

SEPTEMBER, 2004

Dear Friends,

We have just returned from our annual visit to Sonia’s family and were able to spend a few days with Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria in their village.

With your help they have made progress on the church this year, with most of the donations going for wood and labor. Fr. Alexander has invited an old classmate, a trained carpenter, to work on the parts of the church that need skilled labor. Although he is not quite a believer, this man is glad to use his talent for the church. He feels the holiness of the building, and it shows



in the care with which he handles everything, from the rough logs to delicate moldings. Fr. Alexander is very pleased to have an experienced carpenter who doesn't drink and cares about his work. The carpenter sleeps on a mattress in the narthex and Matushka Daria feeds him.

The church is a very beautiful wooden structure, with an amazingly light spirit, and the services reflect this quiet, peaceful feeling. Constructed as a square-beam log cabin, the nave is finished, and they are now working on the large narthex which will have rooms off to the side for confessions, a tiny prosphora bakery, and the Sunday school. There is also a small, beautifully constructed bookstore behind glass. The altar is large and open, built of a local, fragrant, blond pine. The materials are not expensive, but a visitor feels that every inch has been worked with care; each log and corner-joint fit together perfectly, the base boards and decorative work are beautifully done, and around the base of the dome, a circle of windows flood the church with light.

Parishioners of St. Nicholas Church

Not only older parishioners, but some active, educated young people are beginning to come to church, and are eager to discuss church life. Several of them are teachers, and their interest has made church life more interesting for everyone, including Fr. Alexander. When he first came to Yegorievka there were only five babushkas coming to services, but with the newcomers there are now about thirty adults who come weekly, another thirty that come frequently, and much larger crowds for Christmas and Pascha. Some of the young people are trained musicians who have graduated from a music conservatory and have formed a good choir.

As we mentioned last time, there is also a Sunday school for children under 12, but many girls up to fifteen continue to come as well. Christmas saw seventy-four children at the church for a concert-party with tea and cakes. Many young ones come to Sunday school without their parents, who aren't church-goers. They know what time it begins and come on their own. After Sunday school, Fr. Alexander ferries the children to the lake about ten minutes away, where they have cookouts with hotdogs and *shashlik* (skewered bits of meat). He has been teaching them to build campfires, to cook outdoors, and to make kites.

When the church is finished, Fr. Alexander hopes to plant a garden with trees and benches where people can just come and sit. There is also an old house on the church property that has sunk into a swampy patch of ground. To be made usable, the ground will have to be drained and the house razed and rebuilt – hopefully as a place for parish gatherings and classes.

One of the biggest problems with church attendance is that everyone in Yegorievka has known each other from birth, and those with Soviet “pasts” are often afraid of being mocked, “Oh, I know you, you old Commie – so now you're coming to church!” From the altar, Fr. Alexander often sees people peek in, or come for a few minutes to stand quietly in the back, and says, “I know that when we finish the narthex and there is room for people to slip in without being noticed, more will come.”

Six months ago, a woman came to Fr. Alexander from a neighboring village and said, “Please come to me. I have an icon that is destroying the walls of my house.” She explained that decades earlier her mother had taken an icon of St. Panteleimon for safekeeping when the Communists destroyed the village church. It was quite a large icon (100 x 72 cm), and difficult to



Altar, St. Nicholas Church.

hide. The woman eventually died, and the house and icon passed to her daughter. It had been in the house for almost seventy years, hanging securely on the wall, but soon after Fr. Alexander opened the church, strange things began to happen. The daughter would wake up at night hearing loud knocks, to find that the icon had fallen off the wall. She had it braced with thick, weight-bearing iron nails, but over and over again, the icon fell, tearing off huge chunks of the wall. Finally, she came to Fr. Alexander, "Please take this icon. My walls are being destroyed and the saint doesn't want to stay with me." When he saw the icon, Fr. Alexander was very surprised at its size because, although one can see many large, old icons in Moscow churches, there were few in Siberia, particularly in Altai before the 1917 Russian revolution. When they turned the icon over, an inscription on the reverse side says that it was painted in the early 19th century on Mt. Athos. This is an amazing treasure for a Siberian village and it is now kept in St. Nicholas Church with a lampada lit before it continuously.

Thanks to your generosity, Fr. Alexander was also recently able to purchase a used car for \$3,000, a large Nissan, as big as a jeep, which holds about seven people and is able to cover rough terrain. The car is important as Fr. Alexander is the only priest for Yegorievka and about twenty smaller

villages in a fifty kilometer radius. A few people had secret house churches during the Soviet period for local believers, where they read prayers without a priest, and some of these are still in use. Few people outside his own village are able to come to church because almost no one has a car and long winters with heavy snowfall make it difficult to travel. Now, Fr. Alexander is able to visit each of these villages monthly, to serve molebens and panikhidas, hear confessions, and give Holy Communion. Twenty kilometers from his own village is another church, which a local administrator wants to reopen. The building is in ruins, but Fr. Alexander serves there once a month. This is a fairly large village, but so far only one old babushka and the administrator come regularly. Each time the old babushka comes she cries, "Oh, what a village, what people we have. No one wants to come and pray." However, the village administrator begs Fr. Alexander to keep coming, and he does. It was, after all, a consecrated church.

A Village Miracle

A miracle has happened in Yegorievka! Fr. Alexander's village looks like a beehive, or a hornet's nest, depending on which side you are on. Half of the village, mostly his parishioners, are adopting or fostering neglected local children, while the other half of the village, people who aren't believers, are screaming at them, "Why are you taking these children? Are you crazy?"

Because the village is so small, everyone knows these neglected children of alcoholic parents. A two-year-old was recently found living on the street, forgotten by his mother. In another instance, a four- and five-year-old brother and sister were discovered last winter who for weeks had had nothing to eat except frozen green tomatoes left on the window sill from the fall, and no warm clothes in -35 C temperatures. Fr. Alexander and the neighbors brought a policeman from a nearby town, and other villagers attested to the neglect. They had spoken with the children, preparing them to live with some other "aunties and uncles," but as they were about to put them into the car, their drunken grandmother came shouting from a neighboring house, "What are you doing? You are stealing our children!" The children were so terrified that the adults felt it would cause greater damage to take them forcibly, so they have been left, with parishioners from the church coming daily to check that they have food and clothes.



Fr. Alexander and family.

As the parish has grown, villagers have understood that as Christians they must do something, and many families have taken in these children, although most of them have offspring of their own, old parents living with them, and little or no cash income. The situation is even more difficult as the alcoholic mothers often demand money for vodka, threatening that if it is not given, they will take the children back. These are usually good children, who are happy to live in a clean house with enough food. Most just want to be loved. Like other village children, they've never watched much TV, so they have a simple wholesome outlook on life, and respond well to kindness and good care. With older children, of course, it is more difficult.

This willingness to help is all the more remarkable in Russia, where there has been a cultural bias for decades against adopting children unless they were close relatives. Russians have long known that babies born to alcoholic parents often have physical and psychological problems. Adding such a child to a home with limited space and income could destroy a family. Another problem was that Soviet orphanages had to maintain a certain quota of children to qualify for government subsidies. In many cases, they couldn't afford to let these children be adopted or it would have meant the end of the institutions and their jobs, and in small rural villages there was often nowhere else to work.

Fr. Alexander's Family

Fr. Alexander and Matushka Daria had a long-awaited baby girl of their own this spring whom they've named Ekaterina. Matushka's pregnancy was extremely difficult as she was on bed rest much of the time, and they were forced to give up their cow and pigs, at least until Dima is old enough to help with the animals. Their family now includes eight year-old Dimitri (Dima), five-year-old Mikail (Misha), three-year-old Seraphim, and five-month-old Ekaterina (Katia). Misha, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor, isn't growing normally, but he is extremely active. Just a little bigger than his three-year-old brother, he seems to have somehow remembered his natural parents' inability to care for him, even in the womb. Although he has been with the Popovs since he was a month old, and was held continuously for his first two years, he is still desperate for love. When Fr. Alexander was taking us back to Sonia's parents' home in Rubtsovsk late one evening, Misha came running to the car, "Kiss me Papa! Kiss me Papa!" Fr. Alexander stopped the car and said, "But I already kissed you." He said, "Yes, but kiss me again!"

When Fr. Alexander mentioned Misha's intense need for affection to a doctor at the local orphanage, she told him that she has seen, time and again, that the moment a mother signs away her rights to a child, even though the child may be in another room, seemingly a barely conscious infant, something psychologically breaks inside the child, and that Misha's desperate need for affection could very well be a result of that rupture.

Fr. Alexander is a warm, quiet man. Kind and tender to everyone, he has a depth that people feel and respond to, and his intuitive interaction with villagers is quite moving to watch. He is not just building a church in Yegorievka, he is building the Church, strengthening the souls of the people, and doing this for God.

Here is a letter we recently received from Fr. Alexander to send on to you. The bracketed comments are ours.

In Christ,

Thomas and Sonia Hulbert

JUNE, 2004

Dear Brothers and Sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Thank God, everything is alright with us. We send greetings and bows from our village. We had a little girl on the 26th of February. She is named Catherine. The work on the church is going on. In the winter we put on the roof and laid the floor in the narthex, sealing it with olefa [a hot drying oil] so that it won't decay when the rains start. Now we are preparing the sheet metal for the roof, and building the bell tower.

I am sending you the latest photographs and a picture of my car, which I bought with the money that the Brotherhood and other people sent. This is a Nissan, which is made for difficult terrain, and can carry seven people. It cost \$3,000. I couldn't have found a better car for less money – that is, a car that wouldn't need urgent repairs. This allows me to visit the sick, and baptize and catechize in other villages, as well as visit the mentally ill children in the orphanage. The rest of the money that has been given for our church I spent in this way: with 20,000 rubles [\$650] I bought three candle stands and other church supplies. Another 19,500 rubles were spent to hire an Orthodox church builder who is working with us now. For 5,000 rubles [\$160] I commissioned three large wooden kiots [a traditional three-dimensional frame, with a glass window in the front] to protect our old icons of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Great-Martyr and Healer Panteleimon, and St. Sergius of Radonezh. Soon they will be finished and I will take a photo. All of our parishioners are very glad you have helped us. They are very happy to see the new candle stands.

Greetings to all of you from my family and the entire church. We hope that someday you will come and see us.

Asking for your holy prayers, may God help you in everything!

Protopriest Alexander Popov ✝