



# EAST-WEST CHURCH & MINISTRY REPORT

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## Ukrainian Baptists: Coping with Change

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### East-West Church Partnership

In 1992, shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian Evangelical-Christian Baptist churches welcomed the assistance of Minnesota General Conference Baptist churches in the work of re-establishing Protestant churches in Ukraine, mostly in the Cherkassy Region south of the capital of Kyiv. The majority of East-West partnership activities have focused on jointly conducted Bible, drama, sports, and English-language day camps that reached nearly 16,000 children and youth in the summer of 2007. American ministry teams of mostly lay people live for two weeks in the homes of Ukrainian Baptist church members. U.S. sister churches partner with a variety of Ukrainian local community services in health care, agriculture, business, social work, and education. Orphanages and prisons also have been common places of ministry partnership. Today, fruits of common labor are increasingly evident and involvement has spread beyond Minnesota and the Cherkassy Region.

Participating churches from both cultures have learned a great deal about cross-cultural relations and the similarities and differences in theology, practices, and worldview. While all participants are Bible-believing Protestant Christians, they recognize at the same time that differences exist which are best respectfully accepted. Much of the experience has been one of embracing, rather than excluding, one another because of differences. As one Ukrainian interviewee noted:

American pastors never pressed us to believe in things that were different from what we believed. They protected us from these differences. We've noticed many beliefs that are not acceptable in our culture. For example, we have strict rules about marriage and divorce. Americans have solved these problems very diplomatically. They are wise not to press us, just to support their belief with Scripture. [They] come to us for our advice and our opinion before they begin a project. This is good.

Still, both sides seem to hold some critical judgments of the other's beliefs and practices and, perhaps, hope that the other eventually will "see the light."

Field research for this study took place in August 2004, primarily in the Cherkassy Region of Ukraine. This author interviewed 14 Ukrainian pastors concerning church discipleship, leadership, practices, and beliefs.

### Defining and Describing Salvation

Western Baptists emphasize faith and grace in understanding salvation. Ukrainian Baptists, in contrast, emphasize faith lived out in action, maintained through church discipline and tested for its authenticity. It is the responsibility of the pastor and elders to test believers' true repentance through the lives they lead. The consequence for those who fail the test is excommunication.

Interviews indicate that for Ukrainian pastors surveyed, repentance is action-oriented. As Table 1 documents, these pastors consider public profession of faith a significant component of repentance.

**Table One: The Meaning of Repentance**

confessing sins privately
confessing sins publicly to a group of believers
authenticating the sincerity of a person's conversion for a group of believers
entering into a probation period for baptism and church membership that is determined by a group of elders in the local church
[obtaining] the salvation of one's soul
emotionally expressing sincerity to a group of believers
emotionally expressing a contrite heart to a group of believers
marking the beginning of one's lifestyle change and demonstrating fruits to a group of believers

While Ukrainian pastors who were interviewed clearly believed that salvation is God's work alone, they also affirmed that salvation must be expressed publicly to begin testing its authenticity. "Public repentance is not required, although preferred, for authentic salvation," explained one pastor.

In Ukraine, the greatest obligation of the local body of believers is to disciple new believers in an understanding of Scripture and, under the leadership of their pastor, to monitor necessary changes in lifestyle. Consistently, interviewees asserted that sincere repentance can be recognized by one's fruits (Matthew 7:16). One interviewee went so far as to use the word "surveillance" when describing the activity of the local church pastor as he is watching a new convert for a 180-degree change in lifestyle.

In Ukraine, fruits demonstrated through a believer's lifestyle include what Western Baptists view as legalized salvation controlled by the local church. Answers to the interview question, "How do we know that a person experienced a sincere repentance?" (Table Two), are very telling and a

*(continued on page 2)*



**Table Two: Fruits of a Christian Lifestyle**

Fruits demonstrated through a Christian lifestyle in addition to those listed in Galatians 5	not beating spouse or children
	not abusing alcohol
	not drinking alcohol
	not eating, working, or even entering an establishment in which alcohol is served
	attending church
	taking on a service role in the church as encouraged or designated by the elders
	willingly singing, praying, or preaching in a service, whenever asked, to give evidence of one's fruits
	making personal resources available to the pastor for church-related purposes
	asking permission from the pastor before attending any questionable societal event, such as a classical music concert at the city theater
	men wearing white-collared shirts and long pants in church
	women, on all occasions, wearing modest-length dresses or skirts with sleeves, head coverings if married or widowed, no jewelry, and no makeup

source of tensions between East-West cross-cultural partners. Western Baptists would agree with Christians from both cultures on the first few attributes, but differences become more apparent lower down the list.

For Ukrainian Baptists, words are not enough. Consistent righteous action, as partially defined in Table 2, is the sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation.

**Church Discipline**

What is the role of the body of believers in another's salvation? All interviewees agreed that it is significant. As one interviewee explained, "Every person is responsible for his or her salvation, but every believer should have good relations with others. We should bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2).

What the interviews make clear is that one of the most powerful forces in Ukrainian Baptist culture, at least in the Cherkassy Region, is the church's perceived need to judge the authenticity of an individual's conversion prior to membership in a local church. In order to stay alive, church members in the Soviet era literally had to insist on such screening of new members because of the prevailing distrust, deception, persecution, and secrecy.

In general, the range of acceptable lifestyle behavior is much wider for U.S. Evangelical Baptists than is true for Ukrainian Baptists. One Ukrainian pastor carefully summarizes the process of church discipline, specifically the decision to excommunicate a member, which, in his congregation, occurs an average of once per year:

If a church member is living in sin, church brothers confront this person. If the person repents, the person is instructed in love. It is also a warning. If change is evident, the person's membership in the church is renewed. If no change is evident, the person is excommunicated. The person can still attend church and participate and is welcomed, but may not take part in communion or represent the church. It does not mean that we do not forgive the person's sin. Our attitude toward this person is still to bring the person to repentance. Excommunication is a testimony to

the community to show that the church takes its words and beliefs seriously. We do not want to be hypocrites.

**The Pastor's Strong Hand**

Generally speaking, the local pastor holds the final say in decisions and is not required, for example, to give an explanation to a candidate for the denial of church membership. This authoritarian leadership style clearly goes back, as one respondent remarked, to "Orthodoxy, Communism, and the Russian Empire." While the Ukrainian Baptist church might hesitate to admit that it holds similar values and practices to that of the Orthodox Church or former Communist collectivist ideology, Ukrainian Baptist church practice is clearly aligned more with Orthodox than with Western Evangelical church practice. One Ukrainian pastor remarked, "In Slavic culture, the church is a special place. It is a place of mystery, calm, and spiritual holiness. This atmosphere that we want to maintain comes from the Orthodox tradition."

One pastor seemed to see clearly the connection and influence of the collectivist influence of Communism, the theology of the Orthodox Church, and the new influence of the West. He readily admitted the influence of Orthodox theology on Baptist beliefs and practice.

How can we as humans truly describe God? This understanding is mystical and so an emphasis and inclination has been toward mysticism and superstition. This is also simply a characteristic of old traditional Ukrainian culture. Even in the Baptist and Protestant churches there is no systematic theology to speak of. Why? This is due to the influence of Orthodox beliefs but also to our closed and limited circumstances for opportunities and resources. But this is changing now that we are free and able to do more. It is also due to our exchange with the West and our sister churches.

**A Taste for Democracy . . .**

This East-West exchange has also given Ukrainians a taste for democratic and participatory decision-making in the life of the church. Ukrainian political developments, though turbulent, affirm

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this democratic approach. The fall 2004 Orange Revolution demonstrated this growing confidence as hundreds of thousands of people camped out in the center of Kyiv and other city centers. For the first time, Ukrainians of secular persuasion and members of diverse churches took a joint stand in favor of a democratic national vote.

### ... Versus Strict Discipline

In many cases, Ukrainian Baptists stayed alive as a result of their emphasis upon church discipleship and discipline. Otherwise, the church would not have survived the many decades of persecution. Yet, Western Baptists see strict discipline as legalistic and a hindrance to welcoming potential believers into the church. What happens when Western ministry partners suggest that Ukrainians change these traditions in favor of more emphasis on the doctrine of “salvation through faith and grace”? Could the result of this teaching decrease or minimize the emphasis on righteous and authentic Christian living?

Some of the most faithful Baptists who endured years of persecution, find the Western emphasis unsettling and even offensive. They are the ones who carried the candle during the dark Communist years and who still have a difficult time showing joy during worship. They know first-hand the contrast between the suffering they endured and the new freedom of public worship. Ukrainian Baptists believe church discipline has proven itself through time. Perhaps more importantly, if a Christian sister is not wearing a head covering, or a brother takes a job in an establishment that serves alcohol, or sisters perform in public concert halls, then church members will not be able to tell authentic believers from pretenders.

### New Church Practices

Many Ukrainian Baptists ask why they should experiment with new church practices or adjust their theology to replicate Western ways. Yet other Ukrainian believers have made changes and see the fruits of these changes. Christian women may wear jewelry and make-up in church without the genuineness of their faith being questioned. Contemporary praise choruses are being sung, and it is acceptable to clap to the music. People from all walks of life, especially young people, are accepted into church services, regardless of dress or lifestyle. Support groups for alcoholics and drug addicts are offered through the local church. And in some churches, converts are accepted into membership without public repentance, while others are baptized without a formal probation period or the approval of church elders. A few of these churches are rapidly planting daughter and even granddaughter churches. The pressing question is whether these new Ukrainian believers will be as faithful and strong as those Ukrainian church members who handed down the traditions that are the foundation for Ukrainian Baptists today.

### Balancing Tradition and Innovation

When asked, “What is your greatest concern for the church of Ukraine in the next years?,”

Baptist pastors acknowledged the need for change, despite the tension between past and present church practices.

- I’m dreaming about a more attractive Christianity, not legalistic, but still proper and careful. Not so sullen. So, if Christianity were more attractive, more people would become Christians. Then we have a dilemma because we must also show church discipline so that we are not known as hypocrites.
- We have new people in the churches, so we have new ideas. Now the youth and future pastors are from non-Christian families. Some hold on very tightly to traditions as a way to be careful. But I believe that there must be development. At the same time we must be careful. I am afraid of liberal theology, theology that teaches that only part of the Bible is a revelation of God and some is not. We must teach our churches to believe in the Bible, in its authority and revelation.

During discussions on grace and forgiveness, a number of respondents described the pastor’s role as judge. Neither Ukrainian nor American churches are free from this tendency. However, in Ukraine it seems to be a more common experience, respondents noted, because of the Communist model of leadership. Ukrainian history also gives evidence of a relatively low value for human rights. While Ukrainian Baptists clearly abhor these abuses and consider them sinful, a pastor’s abuse of the role of judge often goes unchecked. “Some pastors clearly see themselves as judges of people,” one pastor said. “They suffer from a ‘Moses complex’ thinking they are the only ones who see the deepest and judge the wisest.” This respondent believes, however, that as more leaders gain theological training and see the fruits of accountability, this abuse of leadership will decrease.

Ukrainian Baptists have to carefully evaluate the deluge of Western ways and values to translate them into their own context. They have to be careful not to compromise the church discipline practices that have kept them strong. Their challenge is to continue their emphasis on integrity and, at the same time, to strengthen their message of grace and forgiveness. Those in leadership also have to recognize the growing voice of democratic and participatory decision-making and accountability. Facing these challenges with encouragement and support from Western partners may be the most productive way to protect and nurture the health and longevity of the Christian church in Ukraine.

“We need you to share with us,” said one Ukrainian pastor, “what you have learned from your centuries of experience so that we can consider how that might translate into our situation.” In turn, Western Evangelicals are forced to consider the integrity of their proclaimed state of grace as they observe the lives of their Ukrainian brothers and sisters. These mutually beneficial fruits are what nurture and strengthen this East-West partnership. ♦

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Those in leadership have to recognize the growing voice of democratic and participatory decision-making and accountability.

## New, Western-Oriented Evangelicals in Ukraine

Esther Grace Long

A history of religious diversity has set the stage for a degree of religious freedom that, more than a decade after independence, has led to the growth of all religious faiths represented in Ukraine.

Transnationalism – those cultural, economic, and demographic processes working across territorial boundaries – can take the form of neocolonialism. In such cases, the heavy weight of transnational capital tramples and destroys local social and economic structures. Some critics may wish to apply this label to the relationship between wealthy Western churches and poorer Ukrainian ones. However, while the effects of Western churches sending large amounts of money to Ukrainian churches are significant, Ukrainian Protestants are not unwilling recipients. In some instances they are the initiators. At other times they act as gatekeepers, controlling the nature of their relationships with Western partners.

### A Background of Religious Diversity

Of special importance for processes of religious transformation in Ukraine is its background of religious diversity, in contrast to the predominance of one faith in many other post-Soviet republics. While Belarus and Russia are both dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church, in Ukraine three distinct Orthodox jurisdictions have not been able to agree upon a merger. As a result, no one church has state support. Complicating matters, Ukraine also has a substantial Catholic minority. Thus, the country has been called a “model of religious pluralism among formerly socialist societies.”<sup>1</sup> A history of religious diversity has set the stage for a degree of religious freedom that, more than a decade after independence, has led to the growth of all religious

faiths represented in Ukraine. These include three main divisions of Orthodox Christianity, two forms of Catholicism, and historical Protestant churches. Moreover, the diversity of organized religious expression in Ukraine continues to grow.

### The Expansion of Religious Ties Abroad

The arrival of religious freedom led directly to the development of transnational linkages between religious organizations in Ukraine and religious organizations in other countries. This has happened in virtually all faith communities, from Orthodox to Protestant to Jewish to Muslim. Although Ukrainian Baptist churches have a history of interaction with the West that dates back to the nineteenth century and that continued, albeit in a limited way, during the decades of the Soviet Union, transnational networking has flourished at a new level since the era of *glasnost* and Ukraine’s independence in 1991. This transnational access has fundamentally influenced Ukrainian religious life. For people involved in religious organizations in Ukraine, transnational affiliations do not remain in the purely religious arena, but can affect all areas of life. Examples of this include education, as more people study at religious colleges and seminaries funded by international partners; economic, as jobs are created in church construction, humanitarian aid, and religious publishers; social, as Ukrainians develop

### Registered Christian Communities in Ukraine, 1994-2007

Church	1994	2007
Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate	5,998	11,085
Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarchate	1,932	3,882
Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church	289	1,155
Other Orthodox Churches		134
Old Believers	80	71
Armenian Apostolic Church	9	20
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church	2,932	3,480
Roman Catholic Church	588	890
Evangelical Christians-Baptists	1,364	2,541
Other Unions of Evangelical Christians-Baptists	204	286
Transcarpathian Reformed Church	91	114
Lutherans	13	106
Seventh-day Adventists	380	1,072
All Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christians (Pentecostal)	798	1,490
Church of the Full Gospel (Charismatic)	33	566
Other Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches	44	1,365
Other Protestant Churches	30	558
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,776</b>	<b>28,815</b>

**Sources:** Reports of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, as published in *Ludina i Svit*, 1994-2003; Religious Information Service of Ukraine, posted on Portal-credo.ru, 10 August 2007. Totals include places of regular worship, administrative centers of registered and unregistered religious organizations, monasteries, missions, and theological educational institutions.

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friendships and even establish families with foreign visitors; and medical, through the work of visiting medical teams or through humanitarian projects to send needy Ukrainians overseas for complicated surgical procedures.

A common thread that ties the disparate collection of Ukrainian Protestant churches together is their pronounced transnationalism. That is, even relatively longstanding Ukrainian Baptist churches (not to mention newer churches founded by Western missionaries) are highly integrated within transnational networks of people, ideas, finance, and theological training.

### A New Missionary Presence

When the Soviet parliament declared freedom of religion on 9 October 1990, a new era of church life began. The 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations gave legal standing to religious groups, allowing them to be involved in religious education, publishing, and charity. This freedom brought many changes to established Protestant churches and opened Ukraine to missionaries from abroad. Missionaries came from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, including some sent by denominationally based churches (like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in America), those sent by non- or inter-denominational mission boards (like SEND International), and those who came independently or were sent by one or two home congregations. Some missionaries partnered with existing Ukrainian congregations, while others formed new independent churches. Churches begun by missionaries included such diverse traditions as Charismatic, Baptist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Methodist, and independent evangelical. These new post-Soviet Protestant churches have some commonalities with Ukraine's older Evangelical Christians-Baptists, and at times even collaborate with them on specific projects. But, by and large, the younger churches are quite different from the more traditional ones.

Ukrainian evangelicals fondly recall the early years of independence as the most fruitful era for their churches, when large numbers of people attended evangelistic meetings that were only minimally advertised. Churches could invite an American evangelist and on short notice fill a large hall with seekers. All evangelistic activities were well-attended; churches were full and were multiplying.

### Protestant Growth

Although the percentage of Ukrainians who identify as Protestants remains small, especially compared to traditional Orthodox churches and the Greek Catholic Church, the 1990s saw real growth. According to sociological surveys, while in 1994 only 0.6 percent of Ukraine's population identified itself as Protestant, by 2001 that figure had risen to 2.5 percent.<sup>2</sup> From 1994 to 2003 the number of Protestant communities more than doubled, growing faster than most other groups.

Only the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church grew faster (by 74 percent). The number of registered Protestant communities grew 53 percent; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (both Moscow and Kyiv Patriarchates) by 40 percent, the Roman Catholic Church by 30 percent, and the Greek Catholic Church by 11 percent.<sup>3</sup> Today, Protestant churches make up about one quarter of all registered religious communities in Ukraine.

### Missionary Support for Ukrainian Baptists

Most Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) churches work with American groups in a variety of evangelistic, humanitarian, educational, and building projects. It is not uncommon for large urban ECB churches to receive hundreds of thousands of dollars from Western supporters, primarily for church building projects. Most Ukrainian cities, and many small towns, now boast new Baptist church buildings constructed primarily with Western funds and Ukrainian labor. Western short-term teams have worked alongside Ukrainian Baptists in children's camps, evangelistic projects, English classes, medical ministries, and construction projects. Some missionaries have worked with ECB churches for longer periods, helping establish Bible colleges and seminaries (such as Tavriskiy Christian Institute in Kherson) and other ministries.

### Charismatic Megachurches

In line with recent patterns of church growth around the world in which Charismatic churches have tended to grow faster than other forms of Christianity, one of Ukraine's largest and fastest-growing congregations is a Charismatic mega-church in Kyiv, the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations. Its Nigerian-born pastor, Sunday Adelaja, started the church in the early 1990s, soon after graduating with a journalism degree from the Belorussian State University. He moved to Kyiv to work for a television station and began the church in early 1994. The church website ([www.godembassy.org](http://www.godembassy.org)) claims 25,000 worshippers in Kyiv, 40 weekly services in Kyiv, between one and two thousand people fed daily in soup kitchens, 600 churches planted in 45 countries, and status as Europe's largest evangelical charismatic church. Victory Christian Church is another large Charismatic congregation in Kyiv, also with an African pastor who studied in the Soviet Union. Henry Madava, from Zimbabwe, who started Victory Church in 1992 with five supporters, now ministers to several thousand worshippers, advertising more than 40 ministries, 700 small groups, plus a vision of establishing churches "in every city and village of Ukraine as well as in large cities abroad" ([www.victorychurch.org.ua/en](http://www.victorychurch.org.ua/en)). Other Ukrainian cities also have at least one sizable Charismatic congregation established since independence. For example, a large Charismatic church with an African pastor meets every Sunday at a sports arena in Vinnytsia. Kherson has a Charismatic

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One of Ukraine's largest and fastest-growing congregations is a Charismatic mega-church in Kyiv, the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations.

church, Great Commission Church, whose pastor is a former Ukrainian Pentecostal. The church began in 1992 and now, according to its website has more than 2,000 members, making it the largest evangelical church in the city ([www.gcc.kherson.ua](http://www.gcc.kherson.ua)). It is a member of the Independent Charismatic Christian Churches Union of Ukraine.

#### Independent Missionary Church Plants

A second category of new churches consists of relatively small, independent, often Baptist, congregations started by foreign missionaries. These are what Mark Elliott has called “unaffiliated” churches.<sup>4</sup> L’viv, for example, is home to at least four independent evangelical churches. One church started by Americans meets in the center of L’viv in a rented hall, is led by a Ukrainian pastor, and typically has 80 worshippers in attendance. The second, New Life Church, with an all-Ukrainian pastoral staff, has purchased and is in the process of renovating property in a former factory. Some American missionaries attend the church, but do not work there *per se*. New Life, with attendance around 50, is involved in prison ministry and the building is being remodeled so that it can be a halfway house. Two additional independent churches in L’viv include Gethsemane, with about 100 members, their own building, and an all-Ukrainian pastoral staff, and Christ’s Living Word, a congregation led by an American missionary and attended by about 30 people.

#### The Nazarene Church

Finally, new churches have been started through the efforts of missionaries representing other established denominations from abroad. Many of these efforts are relatively small scale, with just one or a handful of churches started by each mission to date. The Nazarene Church in Vinnytsia would be an example. This mission-minded, holiness church traces its roots to the Wesleyan revival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century holiness movement. According to the website of this American-born denomination, the church has two Western missionary families working in Ukraine ([www.nazarene.org](http://www.nazarene.org)). No American missionaries are working at the Nazarene church in Vinnytsia, but one U.S. Nazarene missionary in Kyiv recruited a Ukrainian to lead a church planting team for that city. The new Ukrainian pastor, a former prison inmate and drug addict, his wife, also a former addict, and another Ukrainian couple moved to Vinnytsia in 2001 to begin work there. Within one year the congregation numbered about 100 members and was continuing to grow. The church bought its own property and is constructing a worship center and drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. (See the website for Nazarene churches in Ukraine: [www.destinationukraine/index.html](http://www.destinationukraine/index.html).) The first time I visited this Nazarene church, I was accompanied by Vika, a young woman of about 20 who had been raised in the Baptist church. She recently had come through several years of hard

living, with a husband in prison, no job, and a child to support. Vika and her five-year-old son had been attending the Nazarene church faithfully since her conversion and had spent time at the church nearly every day of the week for Bible study, prayer, worship, or some other event. She never suggested that she received any financial or humanitarian aid from the church – it seemed to be spiritual and social reasons that drew her to the group.

The worship style and physical appearance of the congregation at the Nazarene church were quite different from the ECB church in the same city. The Nazarenes had adopted a worship style commonly called “contemporary” in Western churches, as opposed to “traditional.” They had no choir, they replaced the piano with an electric band, and they sang new songs and choruses instead of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century hymns favored by the Baptists. This kind of worship is increasingly practiced by young Protestants of various Ukrainian denominations, but is not yet widespread among Ukraine’s Evangelical Christians-Baptists, who see it as Western and not “holy.” The physical appearance of the Nazarene worshippers also differs from that of the ECB congregation. Most of the women wear pants, makeup, and jewelry, all of which are forbidden in the Baptist church. Some men dress in blue jeans – worship attire frowned upon by Baptists. Nazarene worship has a joyous, festive atmosphere, in strong contrast to the somber tone of the Baptist church. ♦

*The concluding portion of this article will be published in the next issue of the East-West Church & Ministry Report.*

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Wanner, “Missionaries of Faith and Culture: Evangelical Encounters in Ukraine,” *Slavic Review* 63 (no.4, 2004), 736.

<sup>2</sup> Alexei D. Krindatch, “Religion in Post-Soviet Ukraine as a Factor in Regional, Ethno-Cultural and Political Diversity,” *Religion, State and Society* 31 (no.1, 2003), 42.

<sup>3</sup> State Committee for Religious Affairs, as published in *Ludina i Svit*, 1994-2003.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Elliott and Robert Richardson, “Growing Protestant Diversity in the Former Soviet Union” in *Russian Pluralism; Now Irreversible?*, ed. by Uri Ra’anan *et al.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 19.

Nazarene worship has a joyous, festive atmosphere, in strong contrast to the somber tone of the Baptist church.

# Baptist Church Planting in Odessa, Ukraine

Dale Alan Ledbetter

## Urbanites Overlooked

Within the city of Odessa, Ukraine, several areas feature high-rise apartments in close proximity. In one specific area, more than 300,000 people live within a one-kilometer radius. This section of the city, Taierova, is home to only one small Baptist church. In the late 1990s, this church experienced internal leadership problems and, as a result, more than 50 members departed. Church members have done very little to evangelize the area.

For over a decade prior to 2001, the pastor of Odessa's Central Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church (ECB) oversaw all evangelistic and church planting endeavors within the city limits of Odessa. In those years, in a city of 1.1 million, only two ECB churches were organized, and the Central Church pastor was not directly involved in either. His church of more than 2,000 members had the highest level of education of any of the denomination's churches in the region, yet in all those years no one emerged as a church planter for urban areas.

A genuine psychological barrier existed among the leadership of the ECB in targeting urbanites. It was simply easier to start churches using an established small-town and village model. In addition, a geographically oriented philosophy dominated the strategy of the local ECB leadership. One church in a given area was seen as enough, regardless of how many people lived there.

For a number of years, several men were assigned to church planting in the Odessa Region. Not one of them, however, was specifically assigned to any of the urban areas of Odessa, but rather, to various small villages and towns throughout the region. Most of these church planters, who lived within the city limits of Odessa, traveled four or five hours in one direction to carry the Gospel to villages of a few hundred people. These few hundred people needed to hear the Gospel, but so did the 300,000 in Taierova. What is most remarkable is that many of these church planters had never been to Taierova, even though it is less than an hour away by public transportation from any location in Odessa. As an American Southern Baptist missionary working in Ukraine, church leaders frequently approached me asking for help in finding funds for travel expenses for these church planters since they could not afford to travel to these villages. Yet, fares for public transportation to Taierova cost a very affordable 28 cents.

## Short-Term Missions

In these same years many short-term mission teams from the West were coming to Odessa. During the year 2000 alone, more than 25 groups of volunteers visited the Odessa Region. With

this in mind, it was necessary to address their involvement in any new approach to church planting.

Although most volunteers had good intentions, often their efforts were not very effective. Ignorance of the culture and religious worldview and the giving of financial help that led to dependency limited their effectiveness and, in some cases, actually hurt existing ministries. When Western volunteers came and saw the extreme poverty in Ukraine, they naturally wanted to help. The easiest way to make a quick contribution and to ease the conscience was to give money. But many times what was meant as a "shot in the arm" contributed to dependency and stifled initiative.

## Money Misspent

On many occasions I observed money given with good intentions leading to disastrous results. Buildings have been built with the use of outside financial help, only to discover that the congregations could not afford to pay utilities. Enormous building projects were started with plans to seat four or five times the current membership of churches, simply because leaders thought the supply of foreign financial aid was limitless. One church began a huge construction project, knowing that its resident membership had decreased by eight percent the previous year. In the Odessa Region specifically, at various points prior to completion, 16 buildings came to a halt because anticipated funds never materialized.

Financial help from outside sources has had a major negative impact on the rate of church growth in Odessa. Contributions from the West have limited potential growth and stifled incentive. This type of financial aid is in direct contradiction to the counsel of church-planting advocate Donald A. McGavran: "It is generally agreed that the less physical and financial support the missionary gives the indigenous Christians and congregations the better."<sup>1</sup>

## Debilitating Dependency

An interesting example of the debilitating effects of dependency occurred in the area of Taierova during our evangelistic outreach in 2000. Western Christians gave Calvary Baptist, the district's only existing Baptist church, \$150,000 to purchase a building that would be renovated for its use. The church had been meeting in a rented movie theater for several years. After obtaining the new building, however, the congregation quickly ended its agreement with the theater and began meeting in the new facility. Moods were joyous and activity was lively – as long as the weather remained warm.

As fall approached, however, church leaders began to approach all the Westerners they knew

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Villages of a few hundred people needed to hear the Gospel, but so did the 300,000 in Taierova.



## Urban Church Planting – Odessa (continued from page 7)

about a new, urgent problem. The building did not have a furnace, nor a natural gas connection. The estimate for such an endeavor was an additional \$5,000. The mind-set which would consider the purchase of a building without heat in the first place perfectly illustrates the issue of dependency and the stifling of incentive. The church knew about the problem but fully expected a Western sponsor to bail it out when the need arose. Very little thought was given to living within one's means.

Therefore, in structuring a new model for church planting in Odessa, I sought to find ways both to reach the unreached in the city itself while, at the same time, not contributing to dependence on outside financing. In 1999 and 2000 I arranged for American short-term teams to collaborate with Ukrainian church planters in reaching urban Odessa, including a group of seven from Brandon, Mississippi, led by Dr. Lannie Wilbourne, and a team of 14 from First Baptist Church, Springdale, Arkansas, led by Rev. Doug Sarver.

### Densely-Populated Districts Without Witness

After several visits to the Taierova section of Odessa, it became clear that God intended for one "micro-region" to be the top priority area in the project. Physically, the area along Alexander Hevskovo Street is no more than 300 meters square, bordered on two sides by streets and on two sides by private homes. Local authorities stated that more than 30,000 people lived in this small area, which included approximately 25 high-rise apartment buildings, ranging from nine to 16 stories each. A person can walk from one end to the other in less than 10 minutes.

A second district chosen for focused outreach was in the vicinity of Marshall Zjukovo Street. Here, approximately 30 high-rise apartment buildings housed an estimated 40,000 people. This area of no more than 400 meters square is bordered on three sides by private homes.

A third district chosen was adjacent to Korolova Street, the principal meeting place and shopping bazaar for the 300,000 people in the Taierova region. Several thousand people shop there daily. Our focus was a compact area directly across the street from this bazaar containing more than 40 high-rise apartment buildings with an estimated 50,000 residents.

Finally, we also included Glushko Street in our church planting efforts. Located directly behind the Korolova Street bazaar, it is the most densely populated of the four areas chosen, with over 60 high-rise apartments and an estimated 72,000 residents in an area of approximately one-half-square kilometer.

### Orientation and Evangelistic Resources

Two resources that proved invaluable in the orientation of volunteers were *Guidebook for*

*Volunteer Missionaries in Ukraine* and a brochure I prepared on Orthodoxy entitled *Rabbit's Foot Religion*. These were forwarded to American group leaders who in turn shared them with their team members prior to their departure for Odessa. The guidebook had been previously produced by a joint effort of several missionaries in Ukraine. It helped answer many logistical and cultural questions and stressed the need for flexibility and for a people-oriented rather than task-oriented approach to witness. It also contained helpful information on the subject of giving financial aid in such a way that it does not hurt the mission effort. In addition to various evangelistic tracts, American and Ukrainian team members distributed the Russian translation of Charles Brock, *Good News for You* (Neosha, MO: Church Growth International, n.d.) and *I Have Been Born Again: What Next?*

Our evangelistic outreach in the Taierova district of Odessa involved collaboration between American short-term missionaries and selected Ukrainians with a heart for spreading the Gospel. At the outset of the urban outreach in Taierova, translators and Ukrainian national workers escorted American team members to the four assigned locations. Evangelistic efforts included street witnessing, preaching, distribution of tracts, and use of the Campus Crusade *Jesus* film. "Prayer-walking, praying on site with insight," also played an integral part in this process.<sup>2</sup>

On numerous occasions, members of our American short-term teams shared the Gospel directly with individuals or small groups. These special times proved to be most fulfilling for the participants personally. As instructed, team members did not pressure people for a decision. While only three or four persons actually prayed the sinner's prayer during street witnessing, these few appeared to be genuine and, in each case, the individuals were introduced to one of the Ukrainian church planters for future follow-up.

### The Jesus Film

The *Jesus* film played an important role in this evangelistic effort. The Evangelical Christian-Baptist district office loaned the outreach team a small generator, a portable sound system, and a video player, while the group brought a portable video projector from the states. The teams used word-of-mouth as the only method of advertising the event, making a special effort to invite people they had met during the week. As the site for the event they chose the courtyard outside the centrally located neighborhood administrative offices, obtaining permission from local police and administrators to show the film on the outside wall of the administration building. Shortly before dark, team members set up their equipment and showed a children's Bible cartoon film as a means of gathering a crowd. Team member Sergei Reyus

Evangelistic efforts included street witnessing, preaching, distribution of tracts, and use of the Campus Crusade *Jesus* film.



## Urban Church Planting – Odessa

then briefly introduced the *Jesus* film, based on Luke's Gospel.

### Launching Bible Studies

As the film progressed, children and youth crowded near the front while adults tended to observe from a distance. This separation allowed older viewers to watch the film without appearing to be involved. As a result, team members had ample opportunities to witness to onlookers as they showed interest during the film. When the film concluded, Sergei Reyus spoke briefly on the meaning of repentance, thanked everyone for coming, and invited those interested to attend the Bible study to be held the following night in the same courtyard. He instructed those who wanted to speak with someone about spiritual matters to remain afterwards, and then closed the event with a brief prayer. Of the roughly 200 people who watched the film, approximately 10 adults remained afterwards. Team members spoke with these individuals and distributed New Testaments and Bible study materials to them. These interested persons were encouraged to attend the Bible study the next night.

In addition to children, approximately 10 older teenagers and young adults attended the first Bible study. While the children were provided with a program of their own, Sergei Reyus conducted the Bible study with the older attendees. Although he began with the *Good News for You* study, in just a few minutes the inquisitive nature of the young people led to a revised format of questions and answers. Even when the meeting was brought to a close after more than an hour, some young people remained with more questions. The figures for the combined teams for the week were impressive. General contacts numbered over 1,000, with lengthier interchanges numbering 172. The Gospel was shared in a serious manner 15 times with ten professions of faith. As a whole, the groups averaged 146 people in attendance at various events each night.

### Funding Follow-Up

As for follow-up, indigenous believers continued to work in these areas with no means of support or payment for expenses. They had happily agreed to do so and gave no indication that money was an issue in their decision whether or not to continue. However, though unspoken, it was known that this was a financial burden to them. The strategy of not using outside funding for this project presented a dilemma. Although indigenous workers probably could not perform their duties for long without funding, the desire was to avoid setting a precedent, creating dependence, or stifling initiative. After much prayer and seeking advice from a number of sources, the decision was made to give each worker a monthly stipend of \$100.00. This would be taken from a gift of \$5,000 that had been

donated by Doug Sarver's group from Arkansas. The team agreed to the standard of working a minimum of twice per week in their respective areas.

In reference to the subject of outside funding for indigenous workers, church-planting specialist David Garrison argues that it is acceptable in cases where the Gospel is being introduced from the outside for the first time. He writes:

Money is not inherently evil. It has a vital role to play in the support of missionaries and promotion of things lost people or new believers cannot do for themselves. Any time the Gospel is introduced to a new people group, external support is required.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, Ukrainian workers were told that this stipend would be limited and would only be used for evangelizing the unreached urban population of Taierova. This was to be an outreach stipend only for the purpose of introducing the Gospel, and once achieved, it would cease.

### Judging the Effort

Starting a church within the scope of this project was probably not possible. The goal, instead, was to establish ongoing small-group Bible studies that could one day mature into churches. This was accomplished in two of the four selected districts, Alexander Hevskovo Street, with its 25 high-rise apartment buildings, and Korolova Street, with its more-than-40 high-rise apartment buildings. Was the project a success? The simple answer is yes. The stated goal of starting small-group Bible studies using indigenous and reproducible methods was achieved. At the conclusion of the project, two vibrant Bible studies were being conducted on a weekly basis. ♦

*Edited excerpts published with permission from Dale Alan Ledbetter, "An Urban Evangelism and Church Planting Project for Odessa, Ukraine," Doctor of Ministry dissertation, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001.*

**Dale Alan Ledbetter** is director of missions, Maury Baptist Association, Columbia, Tennessee.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *The Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick, *Prayerwalking: Praying on Site with Insight* (Orlando, FL: Creation House, 1993), 10.

<sup>3</sup> David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 1999), 51.

Was the project a success? The simple answer is yes. The stated goal of starting small-group Bible studies using indigenous and reproducible methods was achieved.



# The Modernity of a “Backward Sect”: Evangelicals in Dniepropetrovsk under Khrushchev and Brezhnev

Sergei Ivanovich Zhuk

*Editor's note: The first half of this article was published in the previous issue of the East-West Church & Ministry Report 15 (Fall 2007): 3-5.*

Despite police measures, the evangelical movement in Dniepropetrovsk not only became more modernized but also more radicalized. In 1976 young Baptists became active participants in “Resurrection,” a special theatrical production performed in all Baptist congregations of the region. During the 1970s, youth (25 years of age and younger) made up 25 percent of all evangelical congregations in the Dniepropetrovsk Region. At first, some youth joined bands or choirs without any serious involvement in other religious activities. But later they became interested in the religious content of lyrics. Noting this tendency, Soviet officials commented on the gradual evolution of interest from mere musical and theatrical forms to the religious substance behind these forms.

In 1968 KGB officers reported that Christian believers of different denominations also listened to foreign radio broadcasts. As a result, more than 300 local Christians tried to “establish written correspondence with leaders of foreign religious centers and their radios stations.” What especially bothered KGB officials were letters to the World Council of Churches and the United Nations describing religious persecution in the region.<sup>1</sup>

## “Jesus Christ Superstar”

The rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” by Andrew Lloyd Webber, released in England in 1970, appeared on the black market in the Soviet Union that same year. By 1973, this two-record opera album had become the most popular item of cultural consumption among Soviet intellectuals. The jazz-rock band “Arsenal,” formed by Soviet jazz musician Alexei Kozlov, began its career in 1973 with a cover of the most famous arias from this opera. Webber’s opera, according to Kozlov, expanded the cultural horizons of Soviet youth. Young people began to discuss not only the music, but also the forbidden religious themes of the lyrics. Tapes with music from the opera played everywhere, while in Dniepropetrovsk local rock bands such as VIA performed some of the arias from “Jesus Christ Superstar” in dance halls and restaurants.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical story behind the opera triggered an interest in the history of Christianity among thousands of rock fans. They went to local libraries in an attempt to learn about the Gospels and Jesus Christ. Since the Bible was officially banned from Soviet libraries, young fans of Webber’s opera could use only atheistic books to read about the Gospels. Suddenly, dusty and boring pieces of atheistic propaganda became best sellers in local book stores and were put on

waiting lists in libraries. Old issues of *Nauka i religia* [Science and Religion], a Soviet atheistic periodical, became very popular among young readers who spent hours in the reading rooms of local libraries looking for information about the Gospels, Jesus, crucifixion, Judas, and Mary Magdalene.<sup>3</sup> This Jesus hysteria also resulted in new fashions: besides long hair, jeans, and t-shirts, big crosses worn around the neck became an important element of the new image of young rockers.

The new religious interest of rock fans resulted in visits to Orthodox and Protestant churches, especially during major Christian holy days such as Easter. While many young people, out of curiosity, were onlookers at Easter services, police harassment lent a sense of adventure to attempts to participate in Easter celebrations at St. Trinity Cathedral in Dniepropetrovsk.

## Rock Fans Versus Police at Easter Services

Mikhail Suvorov, later a prominent figure in the discotheque movement, recalled that on Easter Eve, 28 April 1973, he and friends who had just made tape recordings of “Jesus Christ Superstar” and who were fascinated with this music, came to St. Trinity Cathedral to observe the service. They met hundreds of other young rock fans, recognizable by their long hair, jeans, and metal crosses. They whistled tunes from Webber’s opera and showed each other their crosses. But they could not break through police cordons. Instead, police arrested rock fans, some of whom were very drunk. By such strong arm methods, Soviet officials were able, over time, to reduce the numbers attending Easter services at the cathedral. The police recorded 11,400 young people visiting the church, Easter, 1972, but only 8,500 people managed to get through police lines to the church at Easter, 1973.<sup>4</sup>

## New Converts Through the Medium of Music

Many young people whose interest in the Gospels was stimulated by Lloyd Webber’s opera later became Christian believers: Orthodox, Baptist, and Pentecostal. As Mikhail Suvorov and Eduard Svichar noted, those who were involved in the Jesus hysteria eventually discovered the real text of the Holy Scripture either through Christian relatives or friends. Young rock fans tried to compare the biblical description of events with their portrayal in “Jesus Christ Superstar.” They made hand-written copies of the opera lyrics, read the Gospel of St. John word for word, and compared the Russian text with the English lyrics. Many students of English from Dniepropetrovsk University spent hours of

“Jesus Christ Superstar” triggered an interest in the history of Christianity among thousands of rock fans.



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their free time doing translations of the opera’s lyrics and checking this translation against the biblical text in Russian.<sup>5</sup> Some of these students later entered church schools and became either Orthodox priests or Baptist ministers.<sup>6</sup>

Alexandr Gusar recalled that classmates from his high school in Pavlograd met at his house to compare the text of the Gospels, which belonged to Alexandr’s grandmother, with two Russian translations of “Jesus Christ Superstar” lyrics. They listened to these records every evening during the entire year of 1974. Interest in the biblical stories led some of Alexandr’s friends further than the rules of Soviet schools permitted. Two of his friends joined the local Baptist community, two others became active in the local Pentecostal church, and one friend later became a prominent Adventist preacher.<sup>7</sup>

A similar development was the case in a neighboring town when close friends of Vladimir Solodovnik began their biblical studies by comparing Webber’s opera with the Russian translation of its lyrics. Five of these friends converted to the Baptist faith by the end of the 1970s. All of them began as ordinary participants of the Jesus hysteria, but eventually substituted purely Christian symbols for images of Western popular culture. New elements of religious piety and a Christian ethos, rather than rock and roll music, came to shape their identity.<sup>8</sup> Causing officials additional concern, in January of 1980, the KGB discovered an underground Christian printing press with thousands of audio tapes of religious preaching and stacks of religious literature, some of which was used for instruction in an underground Bible school.<sup>9</sup>

As we see, despite official criticism and prohibitions, young people of the Dnipropetrovsk Region linked prohibited music and religion together in such a way that it contributed to a new style of life and cultural identification. Paradoxically, by the end of the 1970s, songs from Webber’s opera were included in Soviet mainstream popular culture. Even Soviet TV aired Soviet musicians performing songs from “Jesus Christ Superstar” in Russian.<sup>10</sup> The initial enthusiasm of 1972 and 1973, which led to the so-called Jesus hysteria, emphasized anti-Soviet and anti-atheist elements in local popular culture. Later, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” despite its partial incorporation in Soviet establishment entertainment, contributed to a rising interest in popular Christianity and Western religion among Dnipropetrovsk youth.

### Faith Resilient Despite Odds

Neither Communist ideologists nor KGB operatives were able to annihilate religion in the region. In 1984 organized religion held basically the same position and infrastructure it had had 20 years before. In 1982, among 146 new converts

to the Baptist faith in the region, 44 were young people between 18 and 30 years of age. In 1984, among 165 new converts, 53 were young people.<sup>11</sup> Despite various restrictions and prohibitions, more than a third of all new evangelical converts in the region were young people. As KGB interviews attested, the increasing number of young evangelicals in the region resulted in part from appealing new ways of disseminating the gospel story, in contrast to Komsomel meetings which were regarded as boring by comparison.<sup>12</sup> As a result, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, neither official ideological indoctrination nor police persecution were able to destroy popular religiosity and organized religion in the Dnipropetrovsk Region. ♦

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*Published with permission from Sergei Ivanovich Zhuk, “The West in the Closed City: Cultural Consumption, Identities and Ideology in Soviet Ukraine during the Brezhnev Era, 1964-1984,” forthcoming.*

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> State Archive of the Dnipropetrovsk Region [Derzhavnyi arkhiv Dnipropetrovsk oblasti], hereafter, DADO, f. 6465, op. 2, d. 4, 1. 239, 242-45; author interview with Mikhail Suvorov, 1 June 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Author interview with Aleksandr Gusar, 4 May 1990; author interview with Mikhail Suvorov, 1 June 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Author interview with Eduard Svichar, 20 June 2002; author interview with Mikhail Suvorov, 1 June 1991. My mother also confirmed the fact of this growing interest in Christianity among youth.

<sup>4</sup> Author interview with Mikhail Suvorov, 1 June 1991. Compare with official description in DADO, f. 6465, op. 2, d. 4, 1. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with Sergei Pulin, 15 April 1990; author interview with Mikhail Suvorov, 1 June 1991; author interview with Eduard Svichar, 20 June 2002.

<sup>6</sup> DADO, f. 6465, op. 2, d. 37, 1. 235-36.

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Aleksandr Gusar, 4 May 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Author interview with Vladimir Solodovnik, 21 June 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Alexei Kozlov, *Dzhaz, rok i mednye trubny* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2005), 278-80, with author’s interview with Eduard Svichar, 20 June 2002.

<sup>10</sup> DADO, f. 6465, op. 2, d. 42, 1. 33.

<sup>11</sup> DADO, f. 6465, op. 2, d. 23, 1. 175-76.

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Igor T., KGB officer, Dnipropetrovsk, 15 May 1991.

Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, neither official ideological indoctrination nor police persecution were able to destroy popular religiosity and organized religion in the Dnipropetrovsk Region.

## Religious Conversions in Ajaria, Georgia

Mathijs Pelkmans

*Editor's Note: The first portion of this article appeared in the previous issue of the East-West Church & Ministry Report 15 (Fall 2007): 6-8.*

### Tamaz

Tamaz, who had been teaching at the Christian lyceum since 1991, was the only one in his family who opted for Christianity. His quest for a satisfactory worldview, which eventually led him away from Islam and toward Christianity, had been long and, in view of his continued ambivalence about his decision, difficult. Born in 1958, Tamaz grew up in what he called a "true atheistic period," although his parents continued to observe Muslim rites even then. Tamaz himself, however, refused to participate in these practices, and his parents sometimes half-jokingly called him "our little heathen." After Tamaz completed high school, he entered the pedagogical institute in Batumi. After four years, Tamaz returned to Khulo and married a girl from a neighboring village.

Shortly after my wedding in 1982, my wife and I visited Tbilisi. By chance we passed the Church of David. The doors of the church were open, and the sounds of the choir filled the air. It struck me as very beautiful, and I told my wife that I would have a look inside. It was one of those exciting moments. I was completely taken aback by the peace and beauty of the scene. It was as if I had found peace, and I understood that this was what I had been looking for all of my life, that this was part of my life, *my* culture.

On their return to Khulo, his sudden interest in Christianity slackened. In 1991, however, the local boarding school was turned into the Spiritual Lyceum of the Apostle Andrew. Tamaz found employment in the lyceum as a teacher of Russian. Although teachers were not required to adopt Christianity, working at the lyceum involved being exposed to Christianity:

During the period that I worked here, I came to a point – and I don't say this to portray myself as better than others – that step by step I returned to the old religion to which my forefathers three centuries ago had adhered. The final decision to be baptized was not an easy step, but the [historical] works and sources I read convinced me that my forefathers had been Christians. In 1999, with the help of Father Iosebi I finally managed to break the barrier. With his assistance I managed to rid myself of the Muslim rites and customs that were in my flesh, and I returned to my native religion.

### Badri

Badri was a student of veterinary medicine in Tbilisi in the early 1980s:

At that time I visited churches as if they were museums. I did not know anything, and I did not have strong beliefs, neither in Islam nor in Christianity. Once, my friends made plans to go out. I joined them without asking where we were going until it became clear we were going to attend a church service. At the time this was, of course, strictly forbidden. The KGB kept an eye on everything. After we had entered [the

church], I watched how the others received blessings. I found out how I had to act and decided to go myself as well. I was insecure, of course; I didn't know if what I was doing was allowed. But the priest did not ask me any questions and drew a cross on my forehead with wax. After this event I went more often, also without my friends, and every time I became more intrigued. I also started to read literature about Christianity.

After his studies, Badri returned to Khulo and had no further opportunity to continue the quest he had started. He became a teacher at the Christian lyceum in 1991, but he was not baptized until the church in Khulo was opened in 1996:

I didn't get baptized earlier because of my neighbors. They can't even comprehend such a move; it is not part of their understanding. From their perspective, Islam is the proper religion. I felt they were giving me strange looks. Don't think that it was an easy decision; there were unpleasant responses from neighbors who told me that I had made a big mistake. But I always replied that I had made the right decision, that I had chosen the path of our forefathers.

Convinced that Ajaria's future would be Christian, he enrolled his two children in the Christian lyceum and later decided to have them baptized, without consulting his relatives.

### Ketevan

Ketevan was still very young when her father died. She was raised by her mother and grandmother. When she was about 11 years old, a neighbor of Georgian-Christian origin told Ketevan and her mother that she wanted to baptize Ketevan. Although her mother declined the request, Ketevan presented the event as a turning point in her life. After this, she stressed, she became very interested in Christianity. When she was in the eleventh grade, Ketevan wanted to be baptized. However, her grandmother was against it, and there was no way Ketevan could make such a decision without her grandmother's consent.

Only later, after Ketevan enrolled in the school of music in Batumi and had lived with relatives in the city for several years, did she start to think more concretely about adopting Christianity:

My friends, although not all of them were Christians, shared that same lifestyle. At school we often sang religious songs, and because of the acoustics we often practiced in the church. Then I realized that I wanted to lead this life with these friends, but that would be impossible without being baptized. I then remembered what my neighbor had said ten years before. For me it was a confusing period. I even started to have dreams in which I entered the church to be baptized, but I always woke up before the ceremony was completed. I was unaware of it then, but now I know that these were messages from God. When I

The [historical] works and sources I read convinced me that my forefathers had been Christians. With the help of Father Iosebi I managed to rid myself of the Muslim rites and customs that were in my flesh, and I returned to my native religion.

## Religious Conversions in Ajaria, Georgia

was in the second year, we talked about the issue in my family. Mother was not against it, or at least she didn't say that she disagreed.

Her grandmother, however, was against Ketevan's plan from the first moment. "Although she didn't threaten me with reprisals, she never gave her approval. But she has come to accept it."

### Marina

Marina explained to me that she had recently gone through a difficult period in her life. Since her conversion in 1998, she had been separated from her husband, but they were planning to get back together. She emphasized that her marital problems were, to a great extent, caused by the Muslim clergy: "They have tried everything to get us divorced, simply because they fear that [if we stay married] it would speed up the decline of Islam; they were afraid to lose their control over the community. But you know what is so interesting? My husband is now himself preparing to be baptized. He tells me that he is ready for it now." Marina was one of the first people in Khulo who converted. This, in addition to the difficulties she experienced following her conversion, made her a kind of heroine for other converts. During a two-hour session we spoke about her experiences:

Of course it did not just come out of the blue. When I was young I often had to travel and I remember very well visiting a church in Sverdlovsk [in the late 1980s]. Then I already understood that only Christianity saves one's soul. Later, when they opened the lyceum and Father Grigori came here [he later became the director of the Christian lyceum], I got more involved. [Besides him] there were also a few nuns, and I often talked about my feelings with one of them. She would give me things to read, and we discussed them. But at that time I still could not

decide to make that step.

Marina hesitated for a second before she told me about the incident that prompted her decision. She had joined the priests from Khulo on a trip to the church in Skhalta, where sermons were being preached. After the sermon had ended she went out for a short walk:

I was walking around, captured in my own thoughts, when I saw something between two trees. It was as if there suddenly was a wide, shining path through the forest. On the middle of that road, I saw an old man in a black cassock. He stood there, or rather was waiting, with a staff in one hand and a cross in the other. He looked up to me and told me, "Don't wait any longer with what you have to do." He turned around and disappeared as suddenly as he had arrived. Then I became aware that he was my ancestor. It was even as if I had known his face all along. You see, my ancestors used to be priests. The last priest in Ajaria was one of my forefathers. I know that it was he who had sent me on the right track. The next day I was baptized.

These conversion accounts tell us something of how new Christians explain and defend their decision to be baptized. ♦

*The conclusion of this article will be published in the next issue of the East-West Church & Ministry Report.*

*Edited excerpts reprinted with permission from Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).*

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## Letter to the Editor

The articles [in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 15 (Spring 2007)] constitute a rather important set of themes to ponder seriously. The two papers on Russian Protestant conversions to Orthodoxy (Maria Kainova), and Russian Orthodox conversions to Protestantism (Geraldine Fagan), together with the piece by Evgeniy Yur'evich Knyazev on Russian public opinion becoming increasingly negative toward Protestants, are not only an important statement of what has changed in 20 years, but suggest reasons for that shift. Three comments come to mind: 1) Positive attitudes toward Protestants around 1988 had to do with the respect Russian Evangelicals had earned during the Soviet era and the public's hope that more influence from them would heal the sickness in society; by 2007 *Protestant* tends to mean Western ways, i.e., the public image of missionaries, and hence scape-goating as social conditions are now much worse than they were in 1988; 2) Cases of the American cultural style of preaching that "dilute even the gravest moments with jokes" were the most obvious of many cultural signals that Protestantism is alien when compared to the feeling of "coming

home" when Russian Protestants participated in the Orthodox liturgy; 3) Maria Kainova said little about the shift of the Russian intelligentsia away from Orthodoxy after too many unattractive encounters with obscurantist hierarchs and priests in the present Russian Orthodox Church, nor about the rather limited number that appear to have turned to Protestantism (Podberezky's essays are an exception). Still, what comes through is that the nature of Orthodox worship and ritual fosters a mystical encounter with the reality of the Trinity and a more sacred experience of the Eucharist than Protestant worship offers (though less true of Russian Evangelicals, as Kainova notes). This seems to be true in spite of the clergy. But an Orthodox concern for a Christian presence in society is not commented on, in spite of the continuing ways Metropolitan Kirill and others keep making speeches and fostering conferences on the Russian Orthodox Social Concept statement of 2000.

### Walter Sawatsky

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary  
Elkhart, Indiana

Muslim clergy tried everything to get us divorced, simply because they fear that [if we stay married] it would speed up the decline of Islam.



## Book Review

Payton, James R., Jr. *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. Reviewed by Donald Fairbairn.

This book does not attempt to evaluate or critique Orthodoxy, but simply aims to help Western evangelicals learn from the Eastern Church. Payton concentrates on Orthodox theology and practice, and each chapter describes the major differences between East and West on the issue at hand and concludes with several specific lessons that Payton believes Westerners can learn from Eastern Orthodoxy.

Payton's significant research in Eastern sources and his long-term personal interaction with Orthodox leaders give his book a wealth of helpful insight. For example, Payton's historical sketch (chap. 1) includes an outstanding short summary of the differences between the Greek and Latin mindsets that helped to foster diverging Eastern and Western Christian traditions. In his discussion of grace (chap. 9), he notes the Western focus on what grace does vs. the Eastern focus on what grace is, and this distinction brilliantly encapsulates the differences between Eastern and Western theology. Similarly, Payton helps the reader to understand differences in Eastern and Western debates about religious art when he points out (chap. 11) that what the Medieval West affirmed (and thus what the Reformers criticized) was only a small part of the Eastern Church's much more comprehensive theology of the visual. Payton also offers very helpful descriptions of Orthodox practices, perhaps the best of which is his extensive analysis of the content and the spirituality of the Jesus Prayer (chap. 13).

However, when one attempts to help Western evangelicals learn from Orthodoxy, there seem to be two major ways in which one is prone to distortions. First, in an effort to make clear distinctions between evangelicalism and Orthodoxy, one might tend to exaggerate the differences in order to give Westerners clear lessons to learn *from the East*, lessons they allegedly could not learn from Western theology. From time to time, Payton seems to fall into this trap. For example, when he asserts that Orthodoxy can help the West explain the *good* that unbelievers do (p. 117) through its insistence that fallen humanity remains God's handiwork, he is affirming nothing but what Western theologians also affirm. Almost all serious theologians admit that something of the original goodness remains even in fallen human beings. What Payton claims is a lesson the West

needs to learn from the East is actually a lesson that popular Christianity needs to learn from mature theology, whether Eastern or Western.

A second pitfall that Payton falls into is the reverse of the first one. In places where Orthodoxy is particularly problematic, he tends to minimize the differences between East and West, to put the best possible spin on an Eastern teaching that in fact is rarely so acceptable. For example, in his discussion of the fall, Payton asserts that the Orthodox emphases are legitimate interpretations of the biblical texts (p. 108), an assertion that minimizes the chasm that separates Eastern and Western understandings of this issue. Some of the differences (for example, the Western view of the fall as *guilt* vs. the Eastern view of the fall as *mortality*) are indeed differences of *emphasis* that may be complementary, but others (such as the Western assertion that the serpent tempted Eve with something that *could not* be gained at all, vs. the Eastern claim that he tempted her with a shortcut to a goal that she *should* reach in another way) are virtual contradictions. Here Payton seems to gloss over an aspect of Orthodox theology that most evangelicals would regard as *very* problematic; he depicts Orthodoxy as closer to evangelical faith than it actually is.

Both the places where Payton exaggerates East-West differences and the places where he minimizes them are the unintended consequences of his purpose to let Orthodoxy teach us, without also seeking to critique Orthodoxy from a Western perspective. The reader thus needs to be alert to the places when Payton is unable to avoid these natural pitfalls. Despite these problems, I believe Payton's work makes a very helpful contribution to the West's understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy and to the crucial task of understanding our faith more comprehensively. This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of Protestant literature interacting with Eastern Orthodoxy. ♦

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Payton's work is a welcome addition to the growing body of Protestant literature interacting with Eastern Orthodoxy.

## Polish Nuns Resistant to Secret Police Pressure

Jonathan Luxmoore

Polish nuns withstood pressure from Communist secret police better than male clergy, according to Mother Jolanta Olech, president of Poland's Conference of Superiors of Female Religious Orders. Nuns who researched Interior Ministry files found that no more than 30 people associated with women religious had been recruited by secret police during the 1980s, when collaborators were most active.

"Documentation shows nuns were much tougher to recruit than priests," Mother Jolanta said. "We can certainly say that in this very difficult situation, the sisters passed the test." At least 10 percent of priests are estimated to have acted as informers under

Communist rule.

Most of the country's 44 dioceses and at least 30 religious orders set up commissions to investigate possible collaboration following the 7 January 2007 resignation of Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus of Warsaw after he admitted working with Communist secret police. According to church historian, Jan Zaryn, religious sisters were harder to blackmail than male clergy because of their stronger rules and traditions of obedience. ♦

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## Book Review

*Mapping Baptist Identity/Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity: Listening to the Churches in Armenia, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Moldova, North Caucasus, Omsk and Poland.* Edited by Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev. Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006. Reviewed by Roger Chapman.

*Mapping Baptist Identity* is arranged around the findings of a 2002-2003 survey of “baptistic” leaders and seminary students of various countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia as administered by the Institute of Systematic Study of Contextual Theologies at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS), Prague.

Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev, the editors, define the term *baptistic* as believing communities (“gathering” fellowships) that share in the practice of adult baptism and “radical moral living” and are part of churches neither under state sponsorship nor oriented around ethnic identity. In actuality, most of the survey respondents are Baptists, under the umbrella of the European Baptist Federation, but the editors also count Pentecostals and Adventists as baptistic. IBTS undertook this research of baptistic identity by taking advantage of its contact with seminarians and conference participants from some 52 Baptist unions and member churches across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Each chapter offers cursory information on the specific country or region under focus and usually something about the existing Christian context. This is followed by information on how the specific survey was conducted, the number of respondents, their ages and gender, as well as theological background. The findings, covering five broad categories (theological issues, moral issues, leadership areas, church issues, and church and

state/culture issues), constitute the bulk of the book.

Collectively, spiritual life (e.g., prayer, reading the Bible, fasting) ranked as one of the top theological concerns in the surveys. Under church unity, respondents regarded marital issues and speech (e.g., gossip, slander) as major moral topics in need of addressing. Under leadership, chief concerns included education of church leaders, misuse of power, and leadership transition within congregations. Mission work, church programs for select groups, and church/denominational unity were ranked most important under the subject of church issues. Finally, registration of churches with state authorities, teaching Protestant education in schools, and freedom to evangelize were main topics of concern under the church and state/culture category.

The editors acknowledge that this research is a preliminary sketch at best. The most serious shortcoming is the scant number of respondents for large swaths of geography: North Caucasus (Russia), 15; Armenia, 20; Bulgaria, 44; Central Asia, 21; Moldova, 23; Omsk Oblast (Russia), 24; Poland, 23. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that the concerns of seminary students match those of rank-and-file church members. ♦

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### Retrieving the Sacred (continued from page 16)

religions outside of the frame of the law, simply because they meet in private homes. In the Northern Caucasus, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in the world, Islam is playing a role that leads both to stability and to radicalization. It is practiced not only by a small but devastating group of rebel warriors and “black widows,” but mostly by men and women hoping to quietly re-familiarize themselves with a religion long closed to them. It is clear that religion, through a variety of institutions and confessions, has become a vital and vibrant force in the region.

### Cold War Neglect of the Study of Religion

During the Cold War, Westerners barely thought to study religion in the Soviet Union. It was, after all, an atheistic state and, in any case, the questions that interested students of the region clearly clustered around themes of high politics and international relations. When the Soviet state collapsed, scholars had unprecedented chances to sort through the many sides of life that had been left out of the scholarship examining the Soviet Union. Still, we in the West who try to understand and explain the region often seem much more comfortable talking about oligarchs

and parliamentary negotiations than considering the content of Islamic and Pentecostal sermons. Yet, the political may be the least dynamic aspect of post-Soviet life.

When the Kennan Institute was founded 32 years ago, it may have been hard for some of the finest scholars of the Soviet Union to imagine a time such as this, when the region was actively reinventing itself in important ways, especially along cultural and religious lines. Even if conflicts in the region appear to cluster around religious identities, it is crucial to remember in these dynamic and sometimes very troubled times that religion and the fact of religious diversity can play a positive role in individual minds, hearts, and communities. It seems crucial to pay respect to that positive function as we strive to understand this vast, rich, and complex region. ♦

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*Edited excerpt reprinted with permission from Blair A. Ruble, “Director’s Review,” Kennan Institute, 2005/2006.*

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## Retrieving the Sacred

Blair A. Ruble

Fifteen years ago one simply did not speak of religion in polite company, especially when engaging in political analysis.

Just a few months after the Soviet Union collapsed, a leading “Sovietologist” was invited by a group of even more distinguished Soviet-hands to imagine the “table of power” in the Kremlin a decade-and-a-half hence. Who would be at that table? The leaders of various democratic political parties? Business leaders who competed with equal deftness with their Western counterparts on the great global markets that would surely rule the world?

The speaker began by observing that *how* people gathered around the table would be as important as *who* they were. Would members of this elite be elected? Alternatively, would they find their way to power via personal networks? Would they all be ethnic Russians, or would there be a place at the table for representatives of other nationalities? Would women be in the room? Continuing on, he suggested that while the process was unclear, undoubtedly some of those present would be wearing expensive business suits, others would be wearing the uniforms of various security and military forces, and others still would don clerical garb.

The audience audibly gasped and spent the evening trying to explain to the discussion leader that there would be no clerical garb at the Russian table of power. The Soviet Union had been an atheistic society and state, one that had been thoroughly secularized. In addition, the forces of a burgeoning global economy would propel others to the fore. Despite the role that religion might come to play in the private lives of individual Russian citizens, several in the room argued, there would be no public institutionalized religiosity in the former Soviet Union.

Whatever aspects of Russian reality were illuminated that evening nearly 15 years ago, even more light was shed on mainstream

Washington, D.C. think-tanks. One simply did not speak of religion in polite company, especially when engaging in political analysis.

### Religious Resurgence

How different the world – and Washington – seems today. Since the fall of Communism in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries once part of the Soviet Union, religious affiliations and identities have experienced a rapid resurgence. Religion emerged as an affiliation of growing prominence. An increasing number of people today look through the framework of religion in order to understand the world around them. In fact, it is fair to say that religion touches upon all spheres of social, political, and cultural life, and its resurgence has profoundly affected the definition and shaping of broader social movements as well as individual behaviors.

Within such countries as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, we find vast and varied examples of the wide-ranging influence of religion in its many facets. In some cases, religious practices prove to be part of what could be a new cultural dynamism, one that responds to shifting social reality. For example, over the past couple of years, mullahs in Tatarstan have begun to read their sermons in Russian rather than in Tatar. They have done so in response to the arrival of increasingly large numbers of migrants from the Caucasus region who are seeking religious sustenance in the language they share with local clergy: Russian. Some observers of this phenomenon detect an increasing radicalization of the content of local sermons, so that Russian may in fact become the language of Islamic fundamentalism in the Central Volga. At the same time, because the sermons are in Russian, they offer a new, wider access to the sacred texts of Islam – a process which can serve to demystify Islam for Russians, an important step on the way to growing tolerance.

In another example, the new mayor of Kyiv – Leonid Chernovetsky – was an unexpected candidate and an even more surprising electoral victor, given his religious affiliation. Chernovetsky is a follower of Pastor Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian Pentecostal minister who has built up a congregation in Kyiv’s left-bank neighborhoods that is said to now total 25,000.

Within the thorny question of church/state relations in the region, several interesting configurations have developed. For example, the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is lobbying for the introduction of religious training in Russian public schools. At the same time, the Patriarchate praises the separation of church and state in neighboring Ukraine. In Belarus, a new law on religious freedom – first thought of as a counterpoint to the post-Soviet state atheism still in effect in the country – has forced many followers of minority

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