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Walter Sawatsy
University of Minnesota

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SOVIET EVANGELICALS TODAY

by Walter Sawatsky

Dr. Walter Sawatsky (Mennonite), native of Altona, Manitoba, Canada, is the Mennonite Central Committee Secretary for Europe and resides in Neuwid, West Germany. He received his B.A. degree from Goshen College, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from University of Minnesota. He is a frequent traveler to the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe and has done extensive research in Eastern European religious developments, the most important product of this so far being his book Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II (Scottsdale, PA and Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981).

In August, 1976, 12-year-old Oleg Korovin sent the following telegram to Prime Minister Kosygin: "I am afraid to go to school because, according to a court ruling, they are going to send me away to boarding school. I wish to live with my Aunt Natasha and have her as my parental guardian." Oleg's parents had died and the authorities did not want his aunt, a Christian, to become the legal guardian. So Oleg stayed away from school. The authorities came and searched for him, even opening up bags of sawdust in the attic. In this case, the court ruling was reversed the next month and Oleg was able to stay with Aunt Natasha.

The Sloboda family was less fortunate. In 1968 Soviet authorities sent the two oldest children away to an orphanage. When the mother persisted in teaching her religious beliefs to the younger children, she was sent to prison for four years. Not long afterwards, the Reform Baptists, an illegal union of evangelicals who had organized a Council of Prisoners' Relatives in the 1960s, circulated a document containing 1,433 signatures. All who signed were mothers (from 42 different towns in seven Soviet republics) who complained about persecution because of their children. They mentioned 64 new arrests which affected the lives of 200 children.

Stories like those of the Slobodas or Oleg Korovin are still rare enough to cause strong reactions. Much more common is the ridicule children from believing parents encounter in school. Exposing children to atheism or to religion is a critical matter for Soviet state authorities and for parents who

are members of a Protestant evangelical church. Both the state and the evangelicals hold firmly to the belief that a commitment to religious faith should be made voluntarily by the individual upon attaining the age of accountability. Children should not be coerced to believe. But both the state and the evangelicals are very much aware of the importance of early training and conditioning. Indeed, Soviet sociological statistics show that, until 8th grade, the parental religious influence is predominant; thereafter more of the believing children convert to atheism. In Soviet society the stakes are heavily weighted in favor of the state, officially atheist, which has a major program of education at its disposal, whereas evangelicals have virtually no literature nor official Sunday Schools.

"Soviet evangelicals" refers to those Protestant groups or sects often called "free churches" (instead of state churches). Historically this meant that they rejected all state interference in religious affairs, including paying the clergy from a tax collected by the state. They were not against the state itself, but had, since the 16th-century Reformation, stressed the separation of church and state. Their sole authority was the Bible, whose message they understood as an uncompromising challenge to experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and to follow him in life as Lord of all things. Evangelicals also emphasized a commitment to be personally active in seeking to convert sinners to Christ.

Soviet evangelicals are like evangelicals in America in these emphases, but they also are unique due to their origins and experiences during 65 years of Soviet power. One way to illustrate that is to list the usual questions that Western Christians tend to ask about Soviet evangelicals.

Does the Soviet Union demand that a local church register legally before it is permitted to "work"?

Yes.

Is the registration automatic?

No.

Are there conditions?

Yes, there is very specific legislation on what a church may or may not do.

Does registration require you to compromise your faith because the laws are too restrictive?

Usually, if the letter of the law is applied, and if you know what the laws are, which has seldom been the case.

Is it possible to register and not compromise?

Yes.

Are all the congregations in the registered union of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB) registered?

No, only about one third.

Are any of the congregations in the illegal and unregistered Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (CCECB or reform Baptists for short) registered?

Yes, about a dozen.

What guarantee is registration?

Guarantees have relatively little meaning.

What is compromise--and when is compromise apostasy?

Perhaps that can best be answered by entering into the story of the Soviet evangelicals.

Their story is full of paradox. It is the story of a Bible movement characterized until the present day by a Bible shortage. It is the story of dramatic growth restrained by persecution, shaped by persecution, or even growing because of persecution. The Soviet evangelicals do not form a united church; rather they constitute many church fragments which have a sense of unity because they are part of the evangelical movement. The search for unity is one of the major but tangled threads of their story. And it is the story of believers who deeply desire peace but cannot decide openly at present whether peace means pacifism or defending their country with weapons of destruction.

If paradox is a key element of the story, then anticipations for the future are even more paradoxical because the signs are both promising and foreboding. Yet it appears that there is some promise even in the foreboding signs.

A Bible Movement Without Bibles

Today the major groups of evangelicals are the Evangelical Christians (emerging through influence of Plymouth Brethren from England), Baptists (initially German, later American influence), Pentecostals (through reverse immigration from America) and Mennonites. The Mennonites, who originated in Western Europe as part of the Radical Reformation, came to south Russia at the beginning of the 19th century. Here they practiced their faith in freedom, lived in isolated colonies, became successful farmers and were restrained, by an official Privilege which they received from the Tsar, from proselytizing among the Orthodox population.

Russian evangelical origins are rooted in the 19th century. The first

Russian-speaking Baptist or evangelical was baptized in 1867. This marks the official beginning for both the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB) and Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (CCECB) evangelicals. It became possible because in 1813, through tsarist patronage, a Russian Bible society was founded which translated and distributed the New Testament (and after 1875 the Bible) into modern Russian. Thanks to the impact of the Pietist awakening on the Russian elite, a major printing and educational program began which resulted in many Russian peasants learning to read, and to read the Bible. Many of these peasants became disenchanted with the local Orthodox priests. Sometimes the priests or bishops put pressure on critical peasants; sometimes the peasants on their own formed a Bible circle that developed into an evangelical congregation.

In any case, the first Bible society was closed in 1824 due to Orthodox fears about Protestant influence. After 1831 a more restricted Bible society for the non-Russian population was permitted. This society sent out colporteurs who were evangelical missionaries. Many of them contrived to sell Russian Bibles by entering a village, reading some passages or leaving a copy, and then moving on before the police arrived. In spite of foreign influence, much of the actual development was indigenous as a few aggressive Russian peasants and members of the emerging business class established contact with each other and tried to organize. Even the charge that the influence was foreign and that to be Russian meant to be Orthodox did not fully fit. There was a long tradition of religious dissent in Russian Christianity and it was precisely among those groups, particularly the Molokans, that evangelicalism became most widespread.

Until the Russian Revolution of 1917 the evangelicals were a severely persecuted group; one of their leaders was imprisoned 17 times. The Bolshevik declaration of separation of the church from the state was a statement of liberation for the evangelicals. The first decade of Soviet power became their golden age and also the period when they launched a major effort to publish Bibles and other religious literature. But it did not last.

Today, although Soviet evangelical leaders indicate their concern about possible encroachments of modernist theology, they do not usually speak in theological categories. Instead they stress seven major principles which they have taken from general Baptist principles. These include the historic

Reformation emphasis on sola scriptura, and an understanding of the church as consisting of those who have been born again. They practice baptism and the Lord's Supper, treating the latter as a service of remembrance. Baptists and Evangelical Christians emphasize that only the baptism of responsible adults is genuine and that this must be performed by completely immersing the individual in water. Many Mennonites, on the other hand, with essentially similar beliefs, baptize by effusion. This difference in method has resulted in excluding Church Mennonites from the Baptist union whereas Mennonite Brethren, who also immerse, are accepted. Even within Baptist ranks there are disputes about whether to baptize in a running stream or in a baptistry in the church sanctuary (now much preferred by the Soviet authorities instead of the public witness at a river or lake).

Some special "free church" emphases are the independence of the local church, as was the case in the New Testament. All church members are equal because each believer is a priest who needs no mediation between himself or herself and the Trinity. The presbyter (or pastor/preacher) and deacon are simply elected to office. Soviet evangelicals also follow the classic liberal understanding of freedom of conscience. Their stress on separation of church from state includes the understanding that the church engages in a purely spiritual task.

Most Soviet evangelicals practice a faith that emerged in suffering and was strengthened by it. Many have a pronounced sense of living at the end of time. Prayers are often full of appeals for the Lord to come quickly and ease their lot. An impressively large number react to this sense of the shortness of time by busily moving about and evangelizing. They are able to endure because of their certainty that God never loses control of events. So suffering becomes a part of worship, binding together persons in prison with those in the widely scattered congregations. Suffering also validates their witness.

A major claim that Soviet evangelicals made is that they consider themselves "entrusted with the task of restoring original Christianity in its creative power." One leader in the AUCECB defended their membership in the World Council of Churches as an opportunity "to witness about the Christianity of apostolic days which has been forgotten in the West." Whether that effort at restoration of apostolic Christianity stresses more the personal worship of

Mary or the social activity of Martha remains to be seen.

A visit to a Soviet evangelical worship service is a moving experience. The worship consists of three main elements: preaching, singing and fellowship. Usually evangelicals meet for worship three evenings a week and at least twice on Sunday, normally for a period of two hours. The service begins with congregational singing which slowly gathers force, always maintaining a distinctive Slavic melancholy. The three or more sermons that follow are interspersed with choral and congregational singing. In recent years many congregations have also introduced instrumental ensembles. Few of the sermons last longer than fifteen minutes, and those which the audience likes are delivered with emotional fervor. Worship services also begin and end with public prayer sessions where several members of the congregation speak audibly and spontaneously while others provide a chorus of whispered prayers. These prayers are full of personal praise to God and there is much weeping. Often this is the moment for a person to be born again. Such a person will offer a simple confession of his or her sinfulness, ask God's mercy, and then break down weeping. After a minute or two the new convert resumes the prayer with a thankful note. At such a time many others will chime in with short verbal prayers of affirmation and encouragement.

This acceptance into fellowship is expressed in a very broad sense. The average evangelical knows no social life besides the church. In addition to the worship service there are smaller functions such as choir and instrumental music practice (depending on how much of this type of activity local officials will allow), plus regular or casual activities with children and youth at birthdays, weddings and funerals. The fellowship with other believers becomes the evangelical's support in a largely unfriendly world. This also explains the importance of the greetings at the end of each service. Many evangelicals use their vacation time to visit family and congregations in other parts of the Soviet Union.

A key figure in evangelical church life is the local leader or presbyter, as he is called. Most presbyters must earn their living in a factory or collective farm, having only their free time for church work. This means that after the day's exhaustions of work and standing in line for food and other necessities, he is still expected to be a forward-looking leader. The AUCECB leadership spelled out very high expectations of the local pastor.

As shepherd of the flock, he must know each person. That means visitations and conversation to learn about illnesses, suffering, etc.. What this looks like in specific cases is shown in the following example.

Presbyter Ivan was the salaried leader of a large urban church. Sunday he spent all day in church because it took too long to travel home by bus in between the services. True, he preached only once, letting his assistant lead the other service, but he still had to be present because he was legally responsible. In addition, there were three services in the week to plan and he had started a series of teaching sermons from the Gospel of Matthew. That meant extra preparation since this was the substitute for a Bible study, only there were no commentaries available on the Gospel of Matthew. Weekly he met with 25 other preachers to discuss the spiritual concerns of the congregation. Twenty young people were awaiting baptism. He had started weekly classes of instruction with them. How he wished for a copy of the book on doctrine which he had seen in Moscow.

Twice that week he had been to see the local official from the state Council of Religious Affairs. Once it was to try to speed up the decision for approving the baptismal candidates. The other time he applied for permission to undertake slight repairs on the building. Each time the meeting had been more strained because the official was receiving complaints that the noisy singing was offensive to the neighbors. So far he had been fined three times that year because their youth group, without telling him or asking permission, had presented music programs in nearby churches. Now the official was threatening other measures. How he wished for a breather to step back and review those quick little decisions he had been forced to make, small compromises he had agreed to, in order to give the church more breathing space in other areas. He had not consciously compromised or cooperated with the state. Nevertheless, some of his actions troubled his conscience. Even the new, successful counselling sessions with individual members were a burden. Members unburdened their hearts to him, and if their secrets became known to the authorities, then he alone could have told on them. He knew he was suffering from emotional fatigue but he did not know where to turn.

A presbyter from the Reform Baptist church has a more difficult lot. Ivan Froese, for example, had been pressured by the authorities since 1969 to have his congregation in Dzhezkazgan registered. City council officials and

security people constantly called him in for questioning, wanting to know all about the details of church life. Yet his church brotherhood had decided that the authorities had no right to know about the internal church affairs. So he refused to talk, even if they held him for up to eight hours. Finally, they offered him the freedom to emigrate and even showed him a television program in which Froese and his family were pictured as backward and dull, as receiving all the privileges of the Soviet state but responding with hatred and agitation against the socialist order.

Froese, aged 27, with nine children, earned his living at a factory. At the same time he was the leader of a 200-member congregation. Usually he would rise at 5:00 A.M. and, together with some of the older children, would go to the fields to stuff several bags with grass which they picked by hand. This was the fodder for their cow. In the evening there were often guests in the house, coming to see him for spiritual counsel or to discuss affairs of the church. Many of his fellow pastors had spent three to five years in prison. Others were in hiding, able to see their families for only fleeting moments every few weeks. That was why, as one such individual explained, the wife of a presbyter stood with him at the front of the church for the ordination service, why she had to kneel with him and answer whether she, too, was ready to pay the costs of the ministry.

Growth and Persecution

The history of Soviet evangelicals always was one of persecution. Michael Kalinin, when President of the Soviet Union in 1924, told the Communist Party that "it would be ridiculous . . . if the Party did not take into account that the history of the sectarians is a history of uninterrupted persecution." Years later an atheist writer in the Communist youth paper Komsomolskaia Pravda (1965) pointed out that "the closing of a parish does not make atheists of the believers. On the contrary, it attracts people all the more to religion and in addition it embitters their hearts." That same year the chief official of the state Council of Affairs of Religious Cults reported to his national staff (the report was later leaked) the following:

The grossest and most widespread administrative measures that have been taken against believers are the closure of prayer houses, refusal to register religious communi-

ties . . . breaking up prayer meetings of believers forcibly with police and auxiliary police, arbitrary searches of believers' homes and prayer houses, confiscation of religious literature, illegal arrests of believers.

Evangelical growth was sometimes slowed by persecution, but at times state pressure added to the attractiveness of being a Christian. Often the impact of persecution was to expose evangelical weaknesses which they then sought to exploit.

Starting with the first baptism in 1867, by 1905 there were 86,538 Baptists and 20,804 Evangelical Christians. By the end of the Civil War (1921) this had increased to 100,000 Baptists and 250,000 Evangelical Christians. Then came the golden decade of freedom to expand. By 1929 there were approximately 500,000 baptized evangelicals which represented, together with family members and supporters, approximately four million people. From 1917 to 1924 both Baptists and Evangelical Christians increased their membership five-fold. Some local congregations grew very rapidly. In Leningrad the Evangelical Christians expanded from 165 in 1917 to 392 in 1926 to 900 in 1930.

Many had followed the motto: "Every Baptist a missionary." Indeed, in some places believers took out a map, identified towns where there were no evangelical churches, moved there and started one. Regional unions of evangelicals sponsored itinerant evangelists. In the Ukraine the Baptist Union supported 56 evangelists. In the 1920s there were 1,000 Baptist congregations and 2,000 Evangelical Christian congregations in the Ukraine. Both groups of evangelicals also expended large sums of money on literature, printing 25,000 copies of a complete Bible in 1926, songbooks and 10,000 copies of a concordance (1928). In 1927 in Kiev 10,000 copies of an incomplete Bible and 25,000 New Testaments were printed, the last printing of Bibles until 1956.

When the Baptists and Evangelical Christians reported to the Baptist World Alliance congress in 1928, their spokesman claimed 4,000 congregations. He went on to say. "We have around 900 presbyters and 3,100 congregations and groups without prepared leaders." In addition to the shortage of qualified leadership, he noted that out of 4,000 preaching places, they only owned 400 prayer houses, rented 800

buildings, but the remaining 3,800 locations were in private homes.

These shortages of leaders and buildings makes the dramatic collapse in the next few years more readily understandable. Already one year after new legislation on religion prompted the closure of many churches, that is, by 1930, the Russian Baptist Union reported only 50,124 members. By the autumn of 1929, over 100 Baptist preachers had already been arrested and all regional offices were shut down. In fact, the Russian Baptist Union closed permanently in 1935 and the Evangelical Christians barely managed to keep one church in Moscow open. The legislation of 1929 may not have been directed specifically at the evangelicals, but paragraph 17 gave a long list of activities that were now forbidden--precisely the activities which helped the evangelicals grow so rapidly. From 1929 onward, preachers had to restrict their activities to their region of residence. No longer was it permitted to give material aid to members, to hold special meetings for children, youth and women, to run libraries or go on excursions.

After the Second World War a recovery became possible. Most experts believe this was because of the vital assistance of both Orthodox and evangelical churches and their leaders to the war effort. Churches were again registered, but only about one third of them were registered before that procedure was stopped in 1948. Nevertheless, there was growth in members again. The AUCECB claimed up to 4,000 congregations by 1948, with a membership of 350,000. By 1954 they claimed 512,000 members in 5,400 congregations.

These statistics were inflated, as became evident in the split that began in 1961. At that time state policy once again led to massive closure of churches--over half of those registered. The evangelical union, the AUCECB, simply announced that it was issuing a revised church statute in order to bring it into line with state law. It also sent an accompanying Letter of Instruction to the superintendents of regions or Senior Presbyters. This letter referred to harmful missionary tendencies and severely restricted baptism of young people and religious activity involving children. But behind this action, which was forced on the church, were secretly revised laws that greatly restricted religious

activity. The enforcement of these laws resulted in the church closures, but this time many of the rank and file in the congregations resisted. The governmental response was more restrained than in the 1930s--mainly prison sentences of three to five years--but the number of prisoners increased and a few excesses became public knowledge.

In the Kalunda community of western Siberia, for instance, Nikolai Khmara had been converted from a life of drunkenness to that of model father and husband, and was an active church worker. He was convicted for refusing to accept the revised church constitution, sentenced, and within two weeks of the trial, the family received word that he had died due to illness. When the sealed casket was delivered, church members, who insisted on opening it, found a brutally mutilated body. There were chain marks on his arms, scorch marks on hands and feet, fingernails and toenails torn off, and gaping wounds in the abdomen. Then someone pulled the cotton stuffing out of his mouth and found that Khmara's tongue was missing. Other prisoners later told the family that Khmara had spoken about Christ to the end.

Sometimes the imprisonments frightened the believers into stopping their assemblies, at least temporarily, but in this case they circulated the evidence (including photos) widely. An investigating commission was finally sent and the prison warden eventually received a reprimand.

As more reports circulated, observers noted how factual they were, and yet there was no hatred against the persecutor. Rather there were appeals to prayer, to be faithful, and even hopeful praying for the persecutor. Georgi Vins expressed it well in a poem which he wrote while in prison:

My Persecutors, I do not curse you,
But I am saddened by your fate.

The immortal examples of history
Speak of the futility of persecution--
The fires of love and abundant faith
Burn enthusiastically through the whole land!

My Persecutors, I do not curse you,
And at this hour under the burden of the cross
I pray for you and bless you
With the simple humanity of Christ.¹

¹Three Generations of Suffering (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), p.

It was in this context that the evangelicals developed missionary methods adapted to the situation. Parents took their priestly role in the home more seriously by teaching the children Bible stories, memory verses, and religious songs. Outright witnessing at work was forbidden, but when workmates asked why the believers were different, the believer would invite them to church. Evangelistic rallies were not permitted but there was a long tradition of conducting a full week of worship services at the New Year. These became carefully planned evangelistic services where many were converted. The quality of expectation is illustrated by one story of a man addicted to smoking who became converted and therefore gave up his habit. He gave his beautiful leather tobacco pouch to a friend who then was converted the following evening. He gave it to a third but when a day later the third friend, newly converted, wanted to pass it on to a fourth, the latter resisted, fearing that his smoking days might thereby be numbered!

Even a de facto traveling evangelist became possible. Such a person was forbidden to preach unless registered to do so in that locale. But when such a visitor was invited to give a greeting at the service, he managed to expand the greetings to a greeting from Jesus and the Epistles of Paul! Substitution Sunday Schools were achieved by carefully planned birthday parties. The choir practice, with a protracted meditation in the middle, became a de facto youth meeting. Even weddings and funerals received new content. A Christian wedding meant that unbelieving friends and relatives would be present and would hear a Gospel invitation, and would see how the celebration was enjoyable without anyone getting drunk. And at funerals, churches still make sure that their best preachers and an adequate choir are on hand--here, too, the focus is often more on the living, who are not yet ready for eternity, than on the dear departed. At funerals it also is permitted to hold a procession to the cemetery and to conduct an open-air religious meeting.

The context of state pressure against religion shaped the attitudes among different evangelicals on methods of outreach. A particularly graphic illustration of this took place in 1965 when leaders of the AUCECB and the CCECB met to try to reconcile their differences. AUCECB

General Secretary Karev explained that the Bible refers to doors of mission possibility being opened and closed. During the first decade of Soviet power, he went on, the door was wide open for Christian work. Then, in 1929, the door closed: "We all went to prison. Then Stalin died, and the door again began to open, but only until 1959, when the 21st Party Congress decided to make a swift end to religion. Then that door became very small, and so, in view of this situation, in 1960 we spelled out the 'closed doors' by means of the Letter of Instruction and Statute." Gennadi Kriuchkov, president of the Reform Baptists, responded by asserting that God did not close doors--one should not subject oneself to circumstance. But Karev insisted that it was a series of closed doors that lead the Apostle Paul to turn to Europe on his missionary tour.

During the winter of 1980 another of the dramatic revivals swept through Soviet Central Asia. A trigger for the phenomenon was the visit of two unassuming and unimpressive preachers from the Ukraine. Congregations spent the day before in fasting and prayer. When the two brothers came, the expectations were so great that people pressed forward to confess their sins before the service properly got started. In one congregation there were as many new converts as there were members. In the Republic of Kirgizia there were 900 converts from seven churches in the space of two weeks, plus a total of 400 rubles in fines to various presbyters for allowing the extra meetings to happen. One evening the meeting started at seven instead of eight o'clock. The visiting preacher stalled and stalled, and kept looking at his watch until it was ten minutes to eight. Then he launched into his sermon and people were moved mightily. Upon inquiry, the local host discovered that the visiting evangelists had made a pact with their home congregations to unite with them in earnest prayer beginning ten minutes before the normal starting time. Without that prayer support he had seen little point in proceeding with the meeting.

The Tangled Thread of Unity

For Soviet evangelicals unity is both a serious Biblical injunction and a major embarrassment. Baptists and Evangelical Christians attempted

to unite into one national union, beginning at least in 1900. But then zealous Baptists excommunicated members who were lax about specific codes of behavior and soon discovered that the Evangelical Christians had accepted them. Often these mutual switches of membership were due to personal rivalries and animosities. There also were too many strong-minded leaders for only one church union.

When church life resumed in 1944, it was on condition that the evangelicals form one union. By then the old reasons had become irrelevant in the face of so much suffering. Unity became possible. The following year Pentecostals were faced with the option of joining the evangelical union or extermination by the state. They joined, but under conditions that forced them to give up their distinctiveness of speaking in tongues (glossalalia). In 1963 Mennonite Brethren also joined the union, having given up their pacifism and the practice of foot washing at communion.

Unity in adversity was possible, but maintaining an unequal union where Evangelical Christians dominated remained the ongoing difficulty. A major break finally came in 1961 when some Baptists protested the AUCECB statute revisions which were arbitrarily imposed. The split became irrevocable when the Reformers announced the excommunication of 27 leaders in the AUCECB. The Reformers first worked through a small organizing committee (Orgkomitet) until in 1965 they organized the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (CCECB), with Gennadi Kriuchkov as President and Georgi Vins as Secretary.

This council met secretly, prepared proposals for the new state constitution, set up a program of evangelization and gave financial support to traveling evangelists. A key emphasis was aggressive Sunday School work with children. Many of the leaders, including Vins, were sent to prison on the charge of teaching religion to minors. In spite of the restrictions, the CCECB produced a journal and in 1970 organized a secret printing house called "Khristianin." The machinery for printing was largely hand-made. The printing press was collapsible so that it could be moved on very short notice. A virtual army of helpers scoured the country buying small quantities of paper, supplies, and later helped to distribute the printed materials.

"Khristianin" Press was exposed at least four times with leading workers usually getting three-four year prison sentences. Nevertheless the work continues and the dedication of the workers is extremely selfless. One worker at the secret printing press contracted cancer. Rather than expose the others to danger by going to a local doctor, she removed all identification from her clothing, traveled to a far city, and there became a nameless ward of the state until she died a few months later.

Even more impressive than the CCECB was an independent body known as the Council of Prisoners' Relatives. Organized by wives and relatives of prisoners in 1964, it has always been run by women, with Lidia Vins, mother of Georgi Vins, serving as president for much of the time. This council collected detailed information on prisoners and their families, and circulated this material in laboriously duplicated publications, now known as samizdat (meaning self-publishing). To the present day this council has continued to produce a Bulletin five times a year, usually containing more than forty pages of letters, reports, and public appeals to the authorities. Today Baptist prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union are known by name in the West, and the families usually receive financial aid.

At first the AUCECB resisted the pressure from the Reformers to withdraw the offending church statute. But when it became apparent that nearly half the membership supported the Reformers, it proved possible to call a national congress (in 1963) where the statue was replaced with a better one. Many of the improvements were based on suggestions made by the Reformers. The latter rejected the 1963 congress, however, because their own leaders could not be present. Further reforms were achieved at subsequent congresses of the AUCECB in 1966 and 1969. Each time the CCECB representatives were left out (failed to receive full voting status, or the authorities were keeping key people in prison). Each time it was pressure from the delegates representing local memberships that forced the leaders to introduce changes which made the AUCECB much more congregational in polity. In general the church statute became more Biblically based. By the mid-1970s, new leaders and the reforms had resolved the old issues which precipitated the split, but subsequent

events and encounters with each other made reunification an ever more distant possibility.

Unity talks in 1965, 1966 and again in 1969, simply made clear that the Reformers demanded abject apologies from the AUCECB, not a mutual statement of confession as offered by the AUCECB. Further, their attitudes to the world, to methods of work and witness, and even their understanding of unity and spiritual purity were different.

Today the leader of the CCECB is still living in hiding from the authorities (since 1970). The CCECB has encountered numerous internal splits, largely due to suspicion of each other since a great deal of the work depends on secrecy. Many of their followers have registered as local autonomous congregations, accepting neither CCECB nor AUCECB leadership. The AUCECB has recovered much of its authority and prestige in the membership. Nevertheless, maintaining the existing unity remains a delicate task. The Pentecostals, for example, were seriously considering leaving the union in 1979.

At the national congress in 1979, with numerous foreign guests present, delegates refused repeatedly to vote for Peter Shatrov, the Pentecostal member on the council and governing Presidium. Was this a vote against the Pentecostals? Was this an expression of distrust against an individual for seeming to work too closely with the authorities? Or was it simply a dislike of his personality? These questions could not even be discussed openly, but the vote against him had become a symbol of delegate power against a leadership which urged keeping the status quo.

Evangelicals Want Peace

Soviet evangelicals earnestly seek peace. They preach a message of peace with God. They are also actively involved in the peace struggle. Western churches are still unsure how to respond because of some of the paradoxical qualities of the Soviet peace emphasis.

In the 1920s all the evangelical unions officially became pacifist. For some of them it was the influence of neighboring Mennonite congregations which had historically rejected all military service. For many it was a simple argument that their reading of the Bible showed

that Jesus had always avoided use of force, had urged his disciples to follow him, and to follow him meant the way of the cross and suffering. Still others may have felt that it was wrong to participate in the new Soviet army since this would mean fighting on behalf of godless communism. After 1919 the evangelicals were able to apply for alternative service.

But the Bolsheviks were at that time very unsure of their strength and could not afford the luxury of so many pacifists; 40,000 had applied for conscientious objector status. The issue was combined with a loyalty declaration which the new Soviet regime demanded of the evangelicals. Between 1923 and 1926 Baptists, Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals came under strong state pressure to disavow their pacifism. At national church conferences in 1926 and 1927 statements rejecting pacifism as being counter to their confessions of faith and even counter to Biblical teaching were put to a vote and carried with slim majorities. The state pressure had included imprisoning some of the leaders. In the case of the Baptists, the secret police came to the meeting, arrested twelve men publicly, and still the final vote carried only because over half the delegates abstained. A few groups even withdrew to form separate unions temporarily. The Mennonites would also have been forced to disavow their pacifism, but after 1925 they were no longer able to hold a congress. The Baptists and Evangelical Christians both argued that rejecting pacifism (it again became a matter of personal conscience) was the price that had to be paid in order to be able to continue to function as a church. Within three years they realized that that had been a fruitless compromise.

In World War II the evangelical believers did their share to help the war effort, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Michael Orlov, of the one Evangelical Christian congregation still in existence, organized fund raising for an ambulance plane. When the new evangelical union (AUCECB) got started in 1944 and published the journal Bratskiy Vestnik (Brotherly Messenger), its pages were full of declarations that a good Christian served the fatherland with weapon in hand.

In early 1949 the publication stopped as part of a new wave of state pressure against religion. When the Brotherly Messenger resumed

publication in 1952, it devoted extensive coverage to the new peace movement in which the Baptists claimed active membership. The publication stated, for example, that "the Soviet land became the chief of all freedom-loving peoples in its unceasing struggle for peace, for social and political justice." In this connection, the AUCECB president, Jacob Zhidkov, made a radio speech in October, 1952 to Baptists around the world in which he said:

We know that there are Baptists, especially in the USA and England, who support the militarists and approve their aggressive actions. We Baptists in the Soviet Union consider that these Baptists discredit Christianity and are unworthy of the Baptist name. The Baptists must be completely committed to the great ideals of Christianity: the ideals of human brotherhood and peace among nations.

Actually it was very seldom that fellow Baptists elsewhere in the world were attacked like this, but the uncritical claims that the Soviet government was doing "everything possible to conserve and consolidate peace in the world" continued much longer. Only in the 1980s have they spoken in general condemnation of all production of nuclear weaponry.

When speaking with Soviet evangelicals today, it becomes clear that whatever mixed motivations there may have been earlier, they earnestly desire peace and deeply fear a nuclear catastrophe. Some may be suspicious about their leadership bending over too far on behalf of Soviet foreign policy. Others see little difference between their own justification of Soviet policies of deterrence and the stance of fellow evangelicals in America. An increasing number recognize that they as church must be involved in working for peace.

The continuing worry is a pacifism that is threatening to emerge in their own ranks again. One way to combat this is to reissue some of the old articles of 1926 which roundly rejected pacifism and to declare that this has always been the true evangelical position. A genuine, open debate on the peace question might well lead to stronger affirmations of pacifism than the state would tolerate, even though slight softening of the latter's position on this point is becoming apparent. At the level of international church relations this is particularly problematic and

increasingly so as more Christian bodies are moving at least to an affirmation of nuclear pacifism.

The Future: More Paradox Guaranteed

Soviet evangelicals have survived for more than a century in a hostile environment. In fact, they appear to be flourishing even though the anti-religiosity of the Soviet state is also flourishing. The most recent Soviet sociological studies acknowledge that it will take another generation for the movement to collapse. Their studies show that in the 1970s more men joined again (not just a movement for women); that younger and more educated persons joined; and that major growth occurred in the urban areas.

There is a promising future for Soviet evangelicals, but the nature of that future depends, first, on what the state will do. Will the state take action that will again destroy the church institutions and leadership? Or will the state exert steady negative pressure that tends to keep evangelicals on their toes and actually strengthens the movement? Finally, will the state become more accommodating, perhaps even cooperative with evangelicals, who, after all, have a growing reputation as reliable, hard-working citizens?

For the evangelical leadership the major challenge is to steer a course that avoids a state-church mentality which is committed to fostering the national character and to maintaining political stability, but that also avoids the isolationism of narrow sectarianism. The AUCECB will likely face greater temptation from the former, whereas the CCECB is already showing signs of drifting into isolationism. Neither dare forget that the attractiveness of the evangelicals was that they confessed a faith worth going to prison for. How to demonstrate that becomes a problem because deliberate seeking of prison and martyrdom is a form of egoism and pride.

Soviet evangelicals will be forced to struggle towards unity and reconciliation. Repeatedly in small and large issues they will be forced to determine whether they are still keeping separate from the state and its world. There will be specific opportunities to decide how much they are prepared to pay for being a free church. They will confront the

issue of tactics: does one choose the way of valor and confrontation, fully aware of the obvious and also deceptive dangers of that choice? Or does one choose the way of meekness, and of discretion, but with the understanding that that way also demands courage and persistence?

While in the first decades of Soviet rule much of the evangelicals' energy was expended in survival, by 1974 their leaders began to think more hopefully and deliberately about qualitative growth. Given their unique context, it is certain that they have not yet reached the limits of creativity both in techniques to foster growth, and in finding fruitful involvement in Soviet society.

Interested fellow believers in the West will want to deepen their ties to Soviet evangelicals. They need to remember that at times the best way to help is to allow Soviet believers to choose their own way. It may well be that the greatest challenge to them and to us is to be a force for peace within and between our very different societies. Christians confessing the same Lord cannot have a higher interest that would require them to annihilate each other. Building a basis of trust within Soviet and Western society will require openness, patience, and courage to speak truth to power both in word and deed. That is a task that can only be tackled jointly.