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William Yoder

Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, Moscow, Russia

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BAPTIST UNION COUNCIL MEETS IN MOSCOW

William Yoder

Dr. William Yoder, with extensive experience in Germany as journalist, as well as in Poland and more recently in Russia, is now contributing a weekly news release in English and German for the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, Moscow, Russia. Yoder is known to REE readers through numerous articles and his longtime role on the Editorial Advisory Board. The following is a composite of four news releases (appearing between October 22, 2007 and June 2008), with some editing.

Despite setbacks, things are moving forward. That was the verdict following sessions of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) Council in Moscow on 20 and 21 March [2008]. It was decided at the meetings to boost the annual contribution of the congregations per member for the work of central offices threefold from 50 to 150 roubles (4,30 euros or \$6,25 US). Simultaneously, work in the RUECB's seven regions is to be increased. RUECB-President Yuri Sipko explained: "The model until now has assumed a large central office, which consumed many resources for itself and did not administer them very efficiently. But the centre must be located in the congregations, and national headquarters need to serve the congregations. We are therefore asking how we can best transfer our primary thrust to the seven regions. We must leave them the chance to initiate things; we must supply them with a larger amount of resources."

A transfer to the regional level is connected to the fact that the work of the new financial department created at the end of 2007 has ceased for the time being. "We have needed to reconsider," the President stated. "The congregations must decide on the tasks of the national office. Headquarters need to complete the tasks given to them by the congregations. It would therefore be inconsistent to create a new office in headquarters with the objective of gathering funds in the congregations." Past department head Leonid Kartavenko will be taking on new responsibilities within the RUECB family.

The question of salvation was also discussed by the Council. On this the President reported: "The existing theological labels of 'Calvinist' and 'Arminian' bother our Baptist brotherhood equally. Being Evangelical Christian-Baptist – that is our identity. But the Christian world has templates and they lead to splits among us. That's

why we simply opened the Bible in brotherly love. We had a wonderful theological discussion which left a good feeling behind. We stressed once more that we are Evangelical Christians-Baptists. Salvation occurs on the basis of God's revelation; we dare not rely on the teachings of mere humans."

Only two of the Union's 57 superintendents were absent from these twice-annual Council sessions, which were held at the RUECB's Moscow seminary. That's a small miracle in view of the country's geographical size. Yuri Sipko is particularly proud of the fact that on 10 March the new educational programme custom-tailored to the needs of the superintendents got off the ground. Those still without a Masters degree in theology can qualify for one within 24 months – mostly through study-by-extension.

New Structures for Theological Training in Russia

Russian Baptists intend to unify and coordinate their theological education programmes. That was the decision made at Council sessions of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist (RUECB) convening in Pokrovskoe near Moscow, 16 to 18 October [2007]. Afterwards, Dr. Peter Mitskevich, President of Moscow Theological Seminary (MTS), explained: "We want to unite all Baptist theological education in Russia under the umbrella of our seminary. We want to network all of our schools and develop a standardised curriculum with standardised degrees. We will stress the exchange of teachers and professors between the different schools. Of course, it will take some time to achieve this goal." Union President Yuri Sipko (Moscow) added: "We are very enthusiastic about this new approach and have high hopes that it will serve our churches well."

Particularly novel is the creation of a new studies programme designed to fit the needs of the RUECB's 50 regional superintendents (also called "bishops" in English). Most of them have served as pastors for years without ever having the opportunity for formal theological training. Their three-year programme, with the students meeting twice per year at the location of the Union's regular Council sessions, will end with a Masters degree. "This programme is a terrific idea," exclaimed Vitaly Vlasenko (Moscow), the RUECB's Director for External Church Relations. "All appear willing to attend. This should help create good relations between the superintendents and MTS.

They will get to know the seminary teachers personally and soon they will even be graduates of this seminary! The process of education will help modify many traditional points-of-view.”

Russian Baptists were allowed to begin theological training by extension in 1968, which led to the formation of Moscow Theological Institute (MTI). In 1993, MTS was founded; the two institutions were combined in 2007. MTS offers a Masters and a Bachelors programme. The latter programme is named in honour of MTI.

President Mitskevich calls the new educational policy “centralised as well as decentralised,” for much instruction will take place away from the Moscow campus. Four regional learning centres located in Chita, Noyabrsk (Northern Siberia), Chelyabinsk and Leninsk-Kuznetskii (near Kemerovo) have already become branches of MTS. New branches are planned in Rostov-on-Don and Prokhladny (near Krasnodar). MTS presently enrolls 250 students with 160 of them studying for certain periods on the Moscow campus. Russian theological education has struggled with the lack of students capable of full-time study. MTS is therefore transitioning into a non-residential institution with students present on campus only part-time.

More than 10 seminaries and Bible schools stretching from Khabarovsk in the Far East to Kaliningrad in the extreme West regard themselves as part of the RUECB. At least three of the better-known ones remain outside the MTS umbrella: Akademgorodok (near Novosibirsk), Samara and Kursk. The same holds true for the liberal-arts-oriented “Saint-Petersburg Christian University”. The Union has not yet formed a national Department of Education. It could be a part of the umbrella uniting all Baptist theological schools.

A visual presentation at Pokrovskoe listed the past problems of Russian theological education: alienation from local congregations, a lack of connection to everyday life and frequent changes in school leadership. Past school autonomy, which meant that an institution answered only to distant, usually North American sponsors, led to disarray and strife. Little headway has been made in reaching Russian intelligentsia for Christ.

The list of positive developments since 1990 included a new strength in combating heretical teachings, the ability of pastors to study the Bible in its original languages and a broadening of the worldview of congregations.

In Pokrovskoe, Peter Mitskevich, a pastor and medical doctor with theological training at Dallas Theological Seminary, was formally installed as President of MTS. He has been serving in this capacity since 1 July. President of MTS until 2005 was Dr. Alexander Kozyenko.

Primary partner for MTS is the North American "Russian Leadership Ministries" (RLM), an independent, evangelical and largely Baptist mission with additional support from Presbyterian and Mennonite circles. Its President is Prof. Ian Chapman (Edinburgh, Virginia); Executive Director is Ted Rodgers (Wheaton, Illinois). Dr. Chapman was President of Northern Baptist Seminary in Lombard near Chicago until his retirement.

In a Class by Itself - The International Mission Board in Russia

There truly are things which function better in Russia than further West. One example are the relations of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) with world bodies such as the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Richmond/Virginia-based Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In Western Europe, relations between the SBC and the unions forming the European Baptist Federation (EBF) are on the back burner, yet in Russia the RUECB cooperates well with both. (EBF is the European arm of BWA). The stresses which the SBC's mission society, the International Mission Board (IMB), experiences in Russia are largely governmental and state-church in origin, not evangelical. Things are different though in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the Unions have withdrawn from the BWA and EBF.

RUECB-President Yuri Sipko is keen to emphasise his own Union's constructive cooperation with the IMB. They also register broad agreement on issues such as Biblical inspiration and the leadership role of women. Alexander Popov, the Baptist Superintendent in the Izhevsk region just west of the Urals, is deeply convinced of the value of IMB support. He noted in a recent conversation that the missions drive in his region, Udmurtia, was no North American creation. "It was our idea that we cooperate. We developed the projects mutually. In our area, the Southern Baptists worked strictly through us and our Union. They wanted us to plant the congregations ourselves."

The Southern Baptist Convention's 16.3 million members make it the USA's second-largest denomination. The Roman Catholic Church has three times as many

members, but Catholics cannot come near the Baptists' 44,000 congregations. The SBC has fielded a mission society (the IMB) ever since its founding in 1845; it was known until 1997 as the "Foreign Mission Board". The mission has been active in post-communist Russia since at least 1990.

Russians had a saying centuries ago: "The Tsar is far away and God is on high." But not only Moscow is far away for most Russian evangelicals – Richmond, Virginia is even further. The fireworks in North America appear to have had little effect on the work on location in Russia. IMB-workers are – or have been - involved in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Bryansk, Ivanovo, Nizhny Novgorod, Ufa, Izhevsk, Volgograd, Ekaterinburg and the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, among others. In Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka peninsula North American missionaries are involved directly in the planting of a new congregation. The RUECB-seminary in the Novosibirsk suburb of Akademgorodok receives vital IMB support. These missionaries organise conferences, evangelistic campaigns, concerts, Bible distribution, English classes and humanitarian projects. A Christian campground near Bryansk has been supported.

As with most other Western missions, the IMB attempts to concentrate on mission to the unreached as well as to other distinctive groupings. In this instance they include the Udmurts, a non-Slavic people related to the Finns residing in the region of Izhevsk, as well as the Muslims of Moscow and Russia in general. Other target groups include Russians of Korean origin, the deaf, Jews, students and artists. Ed Tarleton, the head of its Moscow office, dreams of reaching two dozen of Russia's roughly 180 people groups.

Matters Worth Copying

The International Mission Board is a leading expert at mobilising Christians on the home front – a skill which Europeans could be well-advised to learn. Donation drives and an annual "Volunteer Summit for Central and Eastern Europe" are held in the USA; this year's Summit was held in late April in Sherwood, Arkansas. The Internet plays a heavy-duty role in the drive for mobilisation.¹ Particularly active in generating

¹ see for example, "hope4cee.org/Russia", "hope4russia.org" and "hope4artists.com". The webpage "hope4udmurt.org" describes how a church event featuring the Udmurts can be organised – including the proper cuisine.

missionary activity for Russia is the White River Baptist Association located in the Arkansas village of Flippin (population 1,357).

The IMB is also a king in the prayer movement for evangelisation, and Russia held first place in the IMB's support campaigns during 2007. On 27 May, the world's Southern Baptists dedicated their annual Day of Prayer and Fasting for World Evangelisation to the 770,000 Udmurts of central Russia. The annual Week of Prayer for International Missions, which took place from 2 to 9 December, focused on the missionaries serving in the region of the former Soviet Union.

Within or Without?

Across the globe, the IMB usually retains its own mission and programme. Though it may cooperate closely with the programme of a national union, the two missions remain separate and independent entities within that country. This has sometimes led to the claim – as in Nigeria – that the IMB “runs a parallel organization apart from the national conventions”. Internet reports from the team in Khabarovsk express the expectation that locals will join IMB-run projects – not vice versa. In early 2001, the IMB and RUECB-congregations in the Irkutsk region broke ties. Reports indicate that local pastors wanted support for existing projects. Yet the Southern Baptists preferred to start new church-planting initiatives with little or no financial support for locals. But the attempts at cooperation took a very different turn in Izhevsk.

Even in the very best of circumstances, differences in culture and economic clout remain a major hurdle for the work of missionaries in foreign countries. The IMB does have long-term missionaries: Mel and Nancy Skinner, now stationed in St. Petersburg, have been serving in Russia for 16 years. Ed and Teri Tarleton have been on location for two years less. Yet the vast majority of work is done by missionaries in Russia for the shorter term – persons much less-equipped to take on the twin “foes” of culture and economics. The IMB has developed and labelled a wide range of service options for short-term missionaries speaking little or no Russian. For example, a “Virtual Strategy Coordinator” is a US-based lay volunteer given the task of developing a plan to evangelise a given Russian city or region. Other options include the teaching of English and “prayerwalking” – a practice by which one prayerfully canvasses a

given area on foot in hopes of chancing upon opportunities to converse with passers-by.

But, not surprisingly, the lack of experience and cultural empathy will on occasion show through. The Houston-based Virtual Strategy Coordinator for Nizhny Novgorod wrote recently: "Most of the city's 1.3 million people have no access to the Gospel and little interest in religion or anything else from the West." Last year, the head of IMB-efforts in European Russia reported: "The door is definitely closing. The groundwork is being laid to get [the Christians] ready for the next wave of persecution and the future necessity of house churches." That news is of course of little encouragement to those Russians committed to staying in their homeland and not hanging out the white flag prematurely.

How "high" is high overhead? One simple indication for the disturbing ratio between cost and effect are the immense travel costs instigated by missionaries working for limited periods in Russia. But this is an issue for nearly all missions still active in Russia. If there were no short-term foreign missionaries, there would often be none whatsoever. Prayer walking can be an important endeavor – but is it worth the cost of a roundtrip flight from Texas to central Russia? Is it more effective than praying in Texas? Some questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no".

The Biggest Happening in Town

It is possible for the Baptist majority gathered within the BWA to question aspects of IMB mission work. One should nevertheless keep the relative sizes in mind. With a worldwide total of 5,400 missionaries, the IMB qualifies as the globe's largest Protestant mission society. Its missions budget for 2007 totalled \$165 million. The aforementioned CBF supports 163 foreign-based missionaries and has an annual missions budget of \$6 million. The "American Baptist Churches" (ABC), which also resulted from the split of 1845, supported 150 foreign missionaries in 2002.

IMB fields 20 missionary teams throughout Russia. The number of IMB-missionaries residing longer-term in Russia is just under 100. Although ABC-members are active on mission projects and in the Moscow seminary, neither they nor the CBF presently have any foreign missionaries residing in Russia. By May, three teams of short-term missionaries will have visited Russia in 2008 – a frequency no other Baptist

mission can match. (The “Slavic Gospel Association”, which is also very active among Russian Baptists, is an interdenominational mission.) When it comes to vision and levels of foreign Baptist mission activity in Russia, the IMB remains in a class by itself.

The trauma of the SBC’s departure from the BWA is far from over among the small Baptist denominations of Western Europe. The SBC appears to be forming a relationship with Germany’s ethnic-German immigrants from Russia – the Aussiedler. A major player for these contacts is the “Bibelseminar Bonn” Bible institute, which is frequented primarily by the children of Aussiedler. A preachers’ conference in Lemgo featuring top Southern Baptist leaders was to be held in collaboration with this institute from 21 to 24 May, 2008. This conference could ring the alarm bells of those European Baptists fearing the creation of an alternative World Alliance or at least increased distance between Aussiedler and native-German Baptists.

If SBC-leadership could accept a reasonable amount of diversity and new forms of unity were found, then the suspicion of competition would become superfluous. The denominational infighting and church splits so prevalent in North America are a “luxury” which the impoverished evangelicals of Europe cannot afford. Baptists badly need each other. The laborers in the vineyard are few indeed.

Greater Unity: an Interdenominational and Two Baptist Sessions Convene

Rather than putting major resources into public relations, the Baptists of Russia should concentrate their efforts on “mutually strengthening the relations between their congregations”. They should also “plant many new congregations and improve the size and quality of their existing ones.” Those are the views of one high Russian government official quoted by Pastor Vitaly Vlasenko, head of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) Department for External Church Relations, at a pastors’ conference in Bryansk on 12 April, 2008. The official had added in conclusion: If your brotherhood “would work together like the strings of a well-tuned piano and carefully organise and synchronise all of its activities, then you could become within five to ten years the kind of genuine force from which the government would be happy to hear.” The department head also noted in his lecture that it is often brothers and sisters in Western countries who understand least well why autonomous congregations “desire to join our Union.”

A meeting of the “Advisory Council of the Leaders of the Protestant Churches of Russia” in Moscow three days later noted that the state Ministry for Education and Science had initiated a meeting with Protestants on 11 April. The state’s intent had been to hear out Protestants regarding their views on the planned Orthodox school classes entitled “Spiritual and Moral Culture”. The Council intends to propose an alternative, less-partisan form of school instruction on moral and religious topics. This government invitation could be interpreted as a sign of Protestants already being taken more seriously.

The desire for closer Baptist cooperation was also evident at this year’s sessions of the “Euro-Asiatic Federation of Unions of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” meeting in Kiev on 9 to 11 April, 2008. Pastor Vlasenko, who had been present in Kiev, reported in his Bryansk lecture: “It is apparent to me that we Russians will soon be able to better support the church in the Central Asian countries and elsewhere.” The Protestants of Central Asia are all subject to increasing government pressure. The Euro-Asiatic Federation unites 12 of the 15 unions which had formed the “All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” during the Soviet era. (Only the Baltic unions did not join this successor organisation.)

This initial “Day of Brotherhood” in Bryansk fulfilled a promise made by Union leadership in January to leave Moscow offices and visit pastors on-location throughout the vast regions of Russia. The response of the 120 pastors in this region southwest of Moscow was overwhelming and gratifying – the heightened congregational fees for the work of national headquarters (they have been increased 300% to 150 roubles - \$6 US - annually per church member) have already been collected there. Pastor Vlasenko reports that such sessions, which promise to be an exhausting exercise for Moscow staff, are to be held monthly in hopes of covering all of Russia’s 50+ Baptist regions within a five-year period. He projects: “In the end, local pastors will know us not only from our letters, but also by our faces.”

The Advisory Council session on 15 April also covered issues other than Russian school classes. The assembled leaders expressed great satisfaction in this year’s National Prayer Breakfast, which was held in Moscow on 18 March. It is to be expanded in both size and length next year. Discussion groups are to be introduced and the Breakfast could be extended to cover nearly an entire day. The “Global Leadership

Summits” sponsored by the North American Willow Creek movement are to be headed in Russia by Vitaly Vlasenko for the foreseeable future.

Phase Two in the Offing - Public Council Meets in Moscow

The re-election of Valentin Vasilizhenko (Moscow) as Secretary of the “Public Council” (Obshestvenii Soviet) for the next two years at its Moscow session on 27 May rings in a new, second phase of its work. This umbrella organisation consisting of 10 church unions - most of whom departed from the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists following the USSR's demise - was founded in June 2006. Following the meeting, the re-elected Secretary, a pastor in the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB), reported: “We ascertained that the first two tasks given our association have already been fulfilled: Contacts were created and a dialogue is in process. We are now facing the third task: the creation of joint projects.” These will consist primarily of mission and educational projects. Pastor Vasilizhenko added: “It’s important that pastors even in remote regions get the opportunity to improve their level of knowledge. Pastors with families and a secular job will not be able to travel to a seminary - the seminary will need to come to them.” Youth leaders are to be included in the effort to up educational standards. He noted that new means for attaining objectives in a changed, capitalistic society need to be learned - the works of Rick Warren are being studied in this capacity.

Foreign mission was also an important topic at this gathering of 60 church leaders from as far away as Siberia, the Caucasus region and neighboring countries. In certain cases, the majority of members belonging to one of these church unions already reside in the West. One is therefore considering the option of sending them missionaries from Russia. The still- unregistered *“Initiativniki*, who became known worldwide as the “underground church” and now go by the name of “International Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” (IUCECB), report a global membership of 78,015. Yet only roughly 20,000 of them still reside on Russian soil.

Vasilizhenko indicates that a phase of soul-searching ensued after the passing of long-time IUCECB-President Gennadi Kryuchkov in July 2007 and the accidental deaths of two other leaders. Now, a new President has been elected: Nikolai Antonyuk from Timoshovsk in the region of Krasnodar, Caucasus. His deputy is Gennadi

Yefremov from St. Petersburg. Secretary Vasilizhenko maintains: "A new leadership has been selected and we believe we will be able to find contact with one another and continue our dialogue." This church union has observer status within the Public Council.

Whether the RUECB should remain host and "first among equals" within the Public Council is presently a matter of debate. The RUECB, Russia's largest unified Protestant church, represents 80.000 adult members in 1.750 congregations and groups. "We are very open to discussion on this matter," states Vitaly Vlasenko, the RUECB's Director for External Church Relations. "We desire full mutual respect and brotherhood. With many of them, we were together in one union for a long time."