Observations on Western Missions in Eastern Europe

Bill Yoder

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol12/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
OBSERVATIONS ON WESTERN MISSIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

by Bill Yoder

Bill Yoder (Mennonite) frequently travels to Eastern Europe and has been an observer of the life of the churches in Poland and former East Germany before and after the Great Transformation. His articles appear often in OPREE.

THE GATEWAY ARCH OVER RIGA

In the Riga headquarters of the German Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Soviet Union (DELKSU), a portrait of St. Louis' Gateway Arch graces the wall near the bishop's desk. That is a tiny indication of the Missouri Synod's plans for a large-scale push into Eastern Europe. "Luther Houses," which intend to spread Lutheran thought, have been created in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, and St. Petersburg. Additional ones are on the drawing boards for Budapest, Berlin, and Warsaw. The synod's International Lutheran Laymen's League has helped develop a seminary in Latvia and is beginning a Riga-based radio ministry under the direction of the Rev. Wallace Schulz, a speaker for "The Lutheran Hour." The Missouri Synod intends to use the DELK as its vehicle of entry into the former USSR. As Rev. Schulz puts it: "There's that German Lutheran infrastructure in there. We're using that as a stepping stone hopefully to get from there to the other peoples of the Soviet Union."

The Missouri Synod launched a fund drive in December; funds have already been diverted to Eastern Europe from other programs. Synod administrators are telling their congregations to "think big." Precisely how big is hard to establish; its mission board refused to inform The Lutheran of its projected fund drive goals. Professor Tom Sluberski, director of its "Luther House" in St. Petersburg, states simply: "We want to send a LOT of people there!" A fund drive producing millions appears likely.

The old Soviet empire has disintegrated; the situation there resembles a homesteader's bonanza. A scramble for bargain-priced mission turf is occurring. The Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant church in the U.S., have taken matters into their own hands and diverted $365,000 from a European-run seminary in Switzerland. They are instead sending 115 of their own missionaries to the former Soviet Union, bypassing the protests of European
Baptist churches. For some, an "ethos of hurry" is in force. David Wagler of the Slavic Gospel Association in Wheaton, Illinois explains: "We don't expect the same openness ten years from now. Now is the time to strike while the iron is hot." Mainline churches such as the ELCA prefer to send personnel which are highly-trained and invited by national churches. Consequently, it is parachurch organizations and faith missions who will be sending the most missionaries. No North American Lutheran mission has more than ten persons presently living and working in Eastern Europe.

Newcomers to Eastern Europe are the optimists. They assume that a major religious awakening is now taking place. Veterans such as the Yugoslav Pentecostal Rev. Peter Kuzmic are much less certain: "Except for parts of Rumania, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union, let's not kid ourselves--Eastern Europe is not experiencing a revival."

Ever since its creation in 1947, the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation has fostered relations with the churches of Eastern Europe. Western missions have had personnel living in Poland and Yugoslavia for thirty years. Yet, most newcomers assume that the doors were closed prior to Gorbachev. Decentralization and proliferation are occurring. As many as 200 Western mission organizations may now be active in the former USSR. The news service "Pulse" concludes: "Younger church leaders are taking money from Western agencies to pursue their pet projects, or projects that Westerners have convinced them that are urgent. Johnny-come-latelies in Eastern Europe are cutting in on long-established relationships Soviet church leaders have had with other agencies." Professor Walter Sawatsky of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries agrees: "Established partnership understandings are threatening to become undone as the new missions have breezed in and offered more money and quicker action." There is little reason to assume that the pitfalls of Western mission in the Third World will not be repeated in Eastern Europe. These include the export of church divisions to foreign countries, sectarianism, administrative waste, and foreign domination. Coordination even among Lutheran missions remains minimal; waste appears likely. The Missouri Synod has invested at least $60,000 and many hours of labor to prepare a seminary building for the DELKSU in Yurmala near Riga. They had not been sufficiently informed of similar German and American efforts to establish a seminary in Russia proper, probably in Omsk, Siberia. The Missouri Synod has relied heavily on the advice of the kindly, eighty-year-old DELKSU-bishop, Harald Kalnins, who has urged that the church's base remain in Latvia. But the need for Russian Lutheran headquarters to be moved from the Baltics is apparent. The DELKSU is no longer welcome in the independent nation of Latvia, not because it is German, but rather because it is assumed to be Russian. The creation of parallel institutions remains a major fear. Between the World Wars, the Missouri Synod established a separate church in Slovakia. Fears abound that this may occur again. Bishop Kenneth Zindle of the ELCA's Slovak Zion Synod believes the Missouri Synod may
attempt to stake out its own exclusive mission territory there. Groups such as the Minnesota-based Evangelical Lutheran Synod concede that the spread of Lutheran confessionalism is a major goal. Rev. Duane Tomhave, an administrator for the Wisconsin Synod’s Board of World Missions, explains: "We look for our own ventures until such time that we find ourselves in agreement with another church body. We are going to uncover Russians whom we can train to be the national leaders in their own church. That is church planting in a sense, but not with Western missionaries." Non-ELCA Lutherans interpret present church trends as movements in their own favor. In November, Missouri Synod officials met with Patriarch Alexii II, Moscow head of the Russian Orthodox church. They believe Russian Orthodoxy is moving towards a more anti-ecumenical, non-participatory, and male-dominated position. This synod also stresses its theological closeness to East European Lutherans. Professor Sluberski maintains: "We found that we have very few problems with the kind of Lutherans we found there. Many of them are more conservative than we are."

Seemingly, the spirit of the times no longer favors the centralized approach of the Lutheran World Federation. The LWF has attempted to work multilaterally, accepting money from Western churches and deciding together with East European churches on how best to spend it. Its general-secretary, Rev. Gunnar Stalsett, has attempted to work with existing East European church hierarchies. He describes East European churches as "institutions with their own integrity. They should not be bought by money or unduly influenced." Some in the LWF assume though that the Missouri Synod will in time expect theological returns on its investment; aid will only continue being extended to those groups who accept a separatist theology. Rev. Stalsett adds, "I am concerned that this easy money which flows in now for the establishment of certain kinds of institutions will have an in-built controlling element. That bill will need to be paid later by the local churches." Saying "no" to needed money has been the only way for some African churches to liberate themselves from foreign control. The abrupt appearance of unfamiliar faces from St. Louis has resulted in nervousness. Veteran Lutheran agencies suspect the newcomers to be opportunists and intruders, attempting to reap the harvests planted by others. Hungarian Lutherans have expressed a preference for aid from the ELCA and LWF, but the money and personnel being offered for new projects is coming largely from elsewhere. Others, such as the Slovak and DELKSU churches, have adopted a wait-and-see attitude regarding aid conditions stemming from Missouri. The ELCA is in fact reluctant to expand its own East European program. Bilateral projects between North America and Eastern Europe tend to undercut existing LWF programs. Bilaterally, the ELCA is already involved in the establishment of partner synod relationships, scholarships, and an exchange of personnel. Bishop Herbert Chilstrom has visited nearly all East European countries. Rev. David Nelson of the ELCA Division for
Global Mission claims that his department has "no money" for additional, bilateral US-East European projects. Indeed, only $10,000 were budgeted for this during 1991. "My idea is not to begin a major bilateral thrust in Eastern Europe," he adds. "I would rather double the amount of money we make available to the LWF." ELCA program donations to the LWF totaled $980,000 in 1991. In any case, the ELCA has no desire to force other Lutheran efforts out of the East European arena. Protestantism traditionally has expanded through division, and there is little reason to expect harmonious cooperation in foreign countries if there is little at home. Bishop Zindle assures: "We do not begrudge churches there accepting help from any sources at all." Rev. Nelson's feelings are especially mixed: "Missouri Synod activity has been welcomed there. We are suspicious, wondering about their true intentions. But I can perfectly understand East European willingness to accept non-LWF funding, when one needs to do everything at once. The Missouri Synod has the right to be in relationship with other Lutherans."

Since its beginnings forty-five years ago, the LWF has taken a long-term view of mission in Eastern Europe. The Mennonite Sawatsky has stated: "We were in Eastern Europe before they [the new arrivals] came. We'll still be there after they're gone." The LWF sees affairs similarly.

**LUTHERAN SPAGHETTI**

According to the *Washington Post*, Russian Lutherans are earning their keep by "sponsor[ing] releases of phonograph records such as the Beatles' 'White Album' or 'Jesus Christ Superstar.'" The group in question, the St. Petersburg-based United Evangelical-Lutheran Church, is indeed heavily funded by the Russian record firm "Melodia." But this church, led by the Latvian Joseph Baronas, is most likely a short-lived maverick kingdom. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) quickly distanced itself from Baronas. North American Lutherans are holding to a neutral position.

There are at least six other Lutheran denominations in the former Soviet Union. Five of them are clearly ethnic: the churches of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as well as the still-forming Finnish and Ukrainian churches. The Riga-based German Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union (DELKSU) and the aforementioned United Evangelical-Lutheran Church are competing for the right to inherit the mantle of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia. This church was forcefully dissolved by Stalin in 1937. The St. Petersburg group includes at least twenty-six congregations, some as far away as Siberia. The DELKSU encompasses roughly 400 congregations with as many as 500,000 members stretching from the Baltic Sea to Irkutsk in Central Asia.
Besides the ELCA and the Missouri Synod, North American Lutheran groups active in Eastern Europe include the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (LELCA), the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). The Slovak Zion Synod, active in Slovakia, is a part of the ELCA. Of these, only the ELCA and the LELCA are members of the LWF. The two groups most heavily-involved in Eastern Europe are the 13,000-member Latvian LELCA and the 21,000-member ELS. The LELCA, though it belongs to the LWF, is heavily engaged in bilateral projects with the church in Latvia. Its contributions during 1991 totaled nearly $250,000. Professor Tom Sluberski, director of the "Luther House" in St. Petersburg, stresses the Missouri Synod's willingness to cooperate with other Lutheran missions. "We are working with the Martin-Luther-Bund in Erlangen, Germany," he states. "They are very friendly to us. They have a lot of money." (The MLB has long been committed to the spread of Lutheran thought throughout Eastern Europe.) This synod is also cooperating with separatist Lutheran churches in Germany and Finland. A coalition of Lutheran forces rivaling the LWF may yet come into existence in Eastern Europe.

THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD HAS GRAND PLANS

A tiny church is supporting one of the largest North American Lutheran efforts in Eastern Europe. "Thoughts of Faith," a one-time radio ministry allied with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) and based in Stoughton, Wisconsin, has begun a grade school in Czechoslovakia. It is hoping to found another one in Chernobyl, near Kiev. It has placed Bibles in all Ukrainian schools and will soon have supplied them with 800 computers. A model farm is in the offing.

In January 1992, it brought 125 Ukrainian orphans to Chicago to spend the winter with families. In March, a Soviet transport plane is to land at O'Hare Field. It is to return with relief supplies. Thoughts of Faith wants to cooperate with all Lutheran bodies on relief projects such as this one. This mission's project budget for 1992 is for more than two million dollars.

"Thoughts of Faith" hopes above all to revive the Lutheran church in the Ukraine. This church had existed between the World Wars, attaining a peak membership of 10,000. According to Rev. John Shep, the Ukrainian director of this mission, the Ukrainian Lutheran church had been well-received precisely "because it was liturgical, historical, catholic and confessional." The ELS intends to keep it that way. Shep adds: "We do not want to cause new divisions in the church, but we do want to encourage them along the path of confessional Lutheranism. That's very important to us."

"Thoughts of Faith" has raised temperatures in Latvia. Two men are now studying at the ELS-seminary in Mankato, Minnesota. The initial person's departure had irked
DELKSU-leaders in Riga, for the invitation to America was extended without consulting the student's denomination. The Wisconsin Synod, which cooperates with "Thoughts of Faith", has four persons in Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany engaged in exploratory work.