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A Protestant Perspective on Mission in Eastern and Central Europe

by Anne-Marie Kool

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I. How the Gospel Came to “The Old Heartlands”: Europe

In Acts 16 we read that Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him to come over to what Andrew F. Walls now refers to as “the Old Heartlands”, to Europe, to help. The following chapters tell us how the gospel reached Europe first. From Church History we learn how Christianity advanced from country to country. We also learn of the enormous socio-political consequences that followed Christianity as it penetrated into the different European countries and spread among its peoples. Former General Secretary of the Danish IVF-linked Christian Student Movement, and former minister in the Danish government Flemming Kofod-Svendsen emphasized, “If the gospel had not reached Europe and penetrated the different countries, we would have had quite a different history.”¹

Some tend to forget, that Eastern and Central Europe is part of this history too. The communist era these countries have gone through could not wipe out this fact.

II. The “Heart” of the “Old Heartlands”, the Birth Ground of the Modern Missionary Movement

¹Flemming Kofod-Svendsen, *Christianity and the Future of Europe* [Website] (Hope for Europe, 1997 [cited September 22 2000]); available from www.hfe.org.

Since the changes of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe a massive ‘invasion’ of evangelical missionaries took place. By far the majority came with no background knowledge in culture or language, in an attitude they “need to bring Jesus” to Eastern Europe.² But, for centuries millions of people have worshiped Jesus Christ in Central and Eastern Europe. Miroslav Volf reminds us that what is rather needed is “to wash the face of Jesus... dirtied not only by Communist propaganda, but also by so many compromises of our churches”.³

Davor Peterlin observes that Western Christians often operate with the false assumption that “the period of Communist rule in the former Eastern European countries has totally annihilated Christian witness”, and they think that what is needed is “not only sporadic church-planting, but the actual creation of Christian culture *ex nihilo*.” Peterlin states that rather the contrary is true, “the countries in question are today at least as Christian as most Western countries, if indeed not more Christian.”⁴

Many seemed to have forgotten that Central Europe even could be considered the birth ground of the modern missionary movement. In the beginning of the 18th century Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf established a Christian community in Herrnhut, Germany, which was to become a center for world missions in the centuries to come.⁵ Furthermore, Karl Heinrich von Bogatzky, a Pietist from Polish/Hungarian background (1690-1774) wrote one of the oldest missionary hymns in 1750. He studied in Halle at the same time as Zinzendorf.⁶

² Miroslav Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996), 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ Davorin Peterlin, "The Wrong Kind of Missionary. A Semi-Autobiographic Outcry," *Mission Studies* 12, no. 2 (1995), 167.

⁵ Anne-Marie Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way. The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)*, ed. Jan A.B. Jongeneel, *Missiological Studies in the Netherlands (Mission)* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum B.V., 1993), 66f.

⁶ Jan A. B. Jongeneel called attention to the authorship of this well-known missionary hymn, “Awake, Thou Spirit, Who didst fire”, “Wach auf, du Geist der ersten Zeugen, Die auf der Maur als treue Wächter stehn, die Tag und Nächte nimmer schweigen und die getrost dem Feind entgegen gehn, ja deren Schall die ganze Welt durchdringt und aller Völker Scharen zu dir bringt”, Jongeneel in: Camps et al. 1988: 235. This hymn is translated by Mrs Gyula Varga. It is published as hymn 396 in

the Reformed songbook of 1948, *Énekeskönyv. Magyar Reformátusok Használatára*, Budapest 1986, and as hymn 235 in *Hallelujah! Evangéliumi énekek gyűjteménye*, Budapest 1944. For English translation see <http://tch.simplenet.com/html/a/w/awakthou.htm>. Cf. *Ibid.*, p.m.

III. The Nature of The Old Heartlands as a ‘New’ Mission Field

Sadly, in the past decades, we have come to realize that Europe is not a Christian continent anymore. While Europe in the 19th century was still the main springboard for missionary endeavor (increasingly with North America), Andrew F. Walls reminds us, that the center of ecclesiastical gravity in the world has shifted from the northern to the southern hemisphere. The missionary movement is now increasingly a movement “from everywhere to everywhere”. Europe has become a mission field, too! Its deeply secularized modern societies need to be evangelized, or as some state, to be “re-evangelized”.⁷

Ulrich Parzany, one of the leaders of the German Lausanne movement, reminds us that Europe is a unique mission field; it is ‘Post-Christian’, which means, “*that we do not start at zero.*”⁸ There has been a long Christian history in European countries. He continues, “We have to be thankful for what the Lord did in building his church of true believers. Especially, we are thankful for the Reformation Movement and the renewal of churches through Pietism and revival movements during the last 300 years up to now.”⁹ He adds, that one of the negative consequences is that “Christian tradition produced immunization of many nominal Christians against the gospel”.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Especially Catholic publications on Mission to Europe.

⁸ Ulrich Parzany, “Cooperation in World Evangelization. A call for Help from Europe”, in: *World Evangelization XVI/60* (1989), 18.

⁹ Ulrich Parzany, “Cooperation in World Evangelization. A call for Help from Europe”, in: *World Evangelization XVI/60* (1989), 18.

¹⁰ Viggo Sogaard, “Re-Evangelizing Europe: Utopia or Reality?”, *World Evangelization XVI/60* (1989), 13.

We are confronted with new missiological issues, like how to deal with the de-churched (lapsed) members of the church, those who ‘make use’ of the church services, but are not actively participating in the life of the church. It is an issue related to that of the renewal and revitalization of the “established” churches. How can their relevance and credibility in our secularized societies be re-established is the question we face.

The General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches quotes the statement made by the President of the European Community, Jacques Delors in 1992: “If we don’t succeed within the next ten years to give Europe a soul, a spirituality, a purpose, we will have lost the game.” Joachim Wietzke wonders what the strengths of the European Churches are to help shape the ‘soul’ of Europe.¹¹

IV. Central and Eastern Europe as a ‘New’ Mission Field

Paul Mojzes describes the situation in Central and Eastern Europe as “a rainbow of nationalities” which “have migrated, settled, and subjugated one another, who pursued or were pursued, then migrated again; who lost, gained and again lost territories”.¹²

Juraj Kusnierik tells the story¹³ that “it is not uncommon to find an 80 year old person that has been a citizen of different states in his or her lifetime without ever moving from his or her village: Kosice in Eastern Slovakia, was up to 1918 part of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, between 1918 and 1938 it belonged to Czechoslovak Republic and between 1938 and 1945 it was part of Hungary,¹⁴ between 1945 and 1992 it was part of Czechoslovakia (called the Czechoslovakian Republic, the

¹¹ Joachim Wietzke, "Christian Witness in Eastern Europe and Central Asia," *Mission Studies* 11, no. 1 (1994), 53.

¹² Paul Mojzes, "Religious Topography of Eastern Europe," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, no. 1/2 (1999), 1.

¹³ Juraj Kusnierik and Milan Eieel, “Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Communism on the Way People Think in Post-Communist Society”, in Marsh Moyle, ed. *SEN Research Paper*, Bratislava, 1997, 9, 10.

¹⁴ According to The First Vienna Award on 2.11.1938.

Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, then the Czecho-Slovak Federate Republic), and since 1.1. 1993 it is part of the Slovak Republic.

In 1994 a consultation was convened in Oradea, Romania, focusing on the issue of Theological Education and Leadership Development in Post-communist Europe. The Consultation produced a significant document: The Oradea Declaration. It describes the differences and similarities with the West European context pointing to the “special Kairos times”, a time of “unprecedented opportunities for the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and to the complexities faced in equipping new leaders. The new possibilities are tempered by “the rapid secularization of our societies” and by the increase of some historic tensions between evangelicals and the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. It states, that these tensions have “the potential of diverting the energies of all Christians from the God-given possibilities of our time, and this would be a tragedy of profound consequences.” The Oradea Declaration continues that the situation is even more complicated by “the flood of well meant, but sometimes misguided, wasteful, and inappropriate efforts from foreign agencies”.¹⁵

It also recognizes the often-overlooked **rich heritage of the historic churches** in the region: “We thank God that Christian faith came to our lands many centuries ago, resulting in the establishment of historic churches. Through these churches many aspects of our national cultures and identities have been shaped and preserved. We pray for the renewal of these churches by the transforming power of the Gospel resulting in holy living and authentic witness to Christ.”¹⁶

a. Shadows of the Past

The changes in Central and Eastern Europe of 1989 required major adjustments politically and economically, but also anthropologically. A new way of thinking and a new approach to life has to be faced: “The new did not simply replace

¹⁵ "The Oradea Declaration" (unpublished declaration of the Consultation on Theological Education and Leadership Development in Post-Communist Europe, Oradea, Romania, October 1994), article 3.

¹⁶ "Ibid.", article 16.

the old. A significant residue of the communist past remains as a great shadow. **A shadow of the past.**¹⁷

1. Lack of Responsibility

¹⁷ Kusnierik and Eieel, "Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Communism on the Way People Think in Post-Communist Society", 1. See also Peter Kuzmi_, "The Communist Impact on the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20 (1996)..

Marsh Moyle, editor of some excellent research papers on the impact of communism on church and society, tells the story of asking several friends what they considered to be the most significant effects of communism on the life of church and society. Although it was a diverse group of people, they agreed on one thing: the most significant shadow cast by the communist past over our present days is *lack of responsibility*. “Who is responsible for my well-being? Who is responsible for the education of my children? Who is responsible for the environment I live in? Answer: The state and its institutions. Because I can do nothing! I am an insignificant small wheel in a big machine. And politics, education, economics, etc. are not my business anyway.”¹⁸

Christians were considered to be second-class citizens, with limited opportunities. That affected their attitudes and ways of thinking. Many had an “inferiority complex”. “To be recognized as a believer was something similar to living with a physical handicap.”¹⁹ Many were afraid of being involved in *outreach* and rather spent most of the time with other Christians, preferably from the same denomination.

Where many did not learn to carry responsibility, the interesting other side of the coin was that many pastors often adopted an attitude of over-responsibility for their parishioners, in the sense of being responsible for their personal decisions, their relationships, the quality of their family lives, etc. They took on a kind of a Christian ‘guru’ role, without whom no major life decisions could be taken.²⁰

2. *Lack of unity*

¹⁸ Marsh Moyle, "Shadows of the Past: The Lingering Effects of the Communist Mindset in the Church and Society," *Transformation* 16, no. 1 (1999), 18.

¹⁹ Kusnierik and Eieel, “Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Communism on the Way People Think in Post-Communist Society,” 22.

²⁰ Moyle, "Shadows of the Past: The Lingering Effects of the Communist Mindset in the Church and Society,".

Another shadow of the past is the *lack of unity* among the churches. An effective policy of the Communist governments was to purposefully create mistrust and divisions between denominations and within the Christian congregations by spreading rumors and creating fear. You never knew who was „built in” to inform the government on your activities.

As a result Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe suffers from many divisions. It still has a long way to go towards restoration of the relations in a process of reconciliation. Important steps were taken by Miroslav Volf when he introduced the categories of “Exclusion and Embrace” to overcome the problem of otherness in providing the churches with the theological tools for this process to begin.²¹

This situation of divisions is reinforced by the countless independent mission initiatives imported from the West following the changes.

3. Dichotomy between private and public

A third Shadow of the past is the *dichotomy between the private and the public*. During the communist period sometimes quite rigorous pressure was exercised to keep faith and religion in the private sphere. A ghetto mentality was the result. Churches were not allowed to be ‘relevant’, to speak to the context, and were pictured as outmoded, only for the ‘old ladies with a scarf’.

This dichotomy was reinforced by 19th century Pietism with its narrow view of spirituality as a personal, existential and emotional relationship with God, which had a strong influence in Eastern Europe. A consequence is that the majority of Christians still live in two separate worlds.²²

I sometimes wonder whether this ‘restricted’ theology is not also strengthened by the influx of missionaries from this part of the world, with their theological baggage of a strict separate view of the role of the church in society.

²¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

²² Kusnierik and Eieel, “Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Communism on the Way People Think in Post-Communist Society,” 23.

It is this same theology which is critiqued by the younger generation. A strong emphasis towards integration of the Christian faith into all areas of life can be detected, based on a larger view of God and His Kingdom. Such a view strengthens the credibility of Christianity.²³

Kusnierik observes that deep theological reflection on issues of church and society is still missing, “we have no time to stop and think”, but “we should pause and give it priority”: “The transformation of the mind is more profound and takes more time than the transformation of society.”²⁴

b. A Major Challenge: Proselytism

In this paper I will focus on one of the major challenges we face in the Church in Eastern Europe. It is part of my everyday experience, that of proselytism and mission.

My task is to highlight the Protestant perspective; Dr. Peter Kuzmic was to have focused on the Evangelical point of view. The division is for me somewhat artificial. In this respect allow me a brief biographical note as illustration. I grew up in a Reformed church in the Netherlands with a Calvinistic background. But for years I was serving with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students first in the Netherlands and later - unofficially - in Hungary and felt theologically quite at home in this “brand” of the evangelical movement. In fact it was at an IFES conference in 1985 that I met Dr. Kuzmic for the first time. So I feel in a sense both Protestant and Evangelical. A more helpful division marker to me is therefore to speak about the Established or historic churches versus the Free churches.

Could it be that this – in a sense artificial – Protestant/Evangelical dichotomy is also part and parcel of the imported theological luggage of the majority of missionaries in Central and Eastern Europe, contributing to the already existing divisions?

²³ Juraj Kusnierik and Marsh Moyle, “Trends - Ten Years On. A SEN Study Paper Describing Major Trends in Central European Church and Society 10 Years after the Fall of Communism.” *SEN Research Paper*. Bratislava, 1999.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, **33**.

A decade has passed since the massive influx of missionaries began. It is time to pause and ask whether their help has been adequate. How could the historic churches and the “expatriate contingent” work together more effectively, for instance in an area of need, which also relates to my personal experience and work: that of relevant, biblical and contextual theological education and leadership development. There is a great need for well-equipped leaders in the churches of Eastern Europe, able to deal with the burning issues of the context we face, like the churches’ response to nationalism and ethnicity, revitalization of the churches for local and global mission, how to communicate the Gospel in a relevant way to the secularized de-churched (nominal) and un-churched people of the former communist countries and how to move towards reconciliation in church and society.

The German Missiologist Joachim Wietzke observed in 1994 that the proselytism debate was back on the ecumenical agenda for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. He states “campaigns such as ‘AD2000’ continue to poison the ecumenical climate.” The time seems to have come, according to Wietzke, that a “position of polite detachment” in relation to “these Protestant fundamentalist movements” is not enough: “what is called for on their part [i.e. on the part of the Western churches] is a public condemnation of any form of proselytism.”²⁵ Wietzke is right in arguing that a change also should take place in the attitude of the established churches. It should be pointed out to the Orthodox Christians – and I would add, to other established churches, including the Protestants, - that “branding the missionary activities of these Christian minorities as proselytism reveals a traditional view of homogeneous denominational states for which there is no place in a plural Europe any longer.”²⁶

Not much has changed since 1994. Recently John Witte spoke about “a new war for souls has ... broken out in these regions – a fight to reclaim the traditional

²⁵ Wietzke, "Christian Witness in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,"., 68.

²⁶ Ibid., 63.

cultural and moral souls of these new societies and a fight to retain adherents and adherence to the indigenous faiths."²⁷

²⁷ John Witte, "Introduction: Pluralism, Proselytism, and Nationalism in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, no. 1-2 (1999), 3.

The large number of articles published on this matter shows that proselytism is an important issue on the missiological agenda of Central and Eastern Europe. The scope of this presentation does not allow for an elaborate treatment of the issue.

Tamás Földesi brings the problem of proselytism back to a difference in opinion on what the target group of missionary activity is. The first group would be the atheists and agnostics, the second that of adherents of non-Christian religions. According to Földesi problems arise in relation to the third target group, whether “one should extend mission to adherents of other Christian churches”.²⁸ The theoretical foundation for this latter ‘mission’ is, that “over and above being Christian churches, they believe that it is their own teachings that are most in accord with Christ’s thought.” In other words, “although all Christian churches are true simply by being Christian, one particular Christian church can be even truer.”²⁹

Földesi continues by stating that an even more sensitive issue is whether mission should target “the very members of any particular church”, in other words, one of the main target groups of mission must be “those who belong only formally to their respective churches.”³⁰

It is this proselytism *within* the Protestant churches, which causes most confusion in our Hungarian context. I agree with Miroslav Volf that differences in theology play a secondary role. “For the most part, the problem of proselytism is an issue of personal power, cultural taste, generational difference, and financial independence.”³¹ So, on both ‘sides’ you can find Christians of evangelical beliefs.

c. Some Roots of the Problem

a) Failure to understand the role of religion in building a national identity

²⁸ Tamas Földesi, "Mission and Proselytizing: The Hungarian Case," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, no. 1/2 (1999), 135.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

³¹ Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: 'Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe,'" 27.

Paul Mojzes points to the fact missionaries often do not understand the background of the negative reactions to their often good-willed activities. Most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are still in the nation building stage, focusing on national unification. Religion plays an important role in affirming this collective identity, often in the form of the dominant historic religion, which was marginalized for so long. Because the missionaries belong to heterodox (interdenominational) religious communities, either from abroad, or from the country itself, they are considered to be “obstacles in the process toward maximal homogenization”, and for that reason, their activities give rise to great resistance from both national political and traditional religious leaders.³²

“The proselytizers and other proponents of genuine choice in religious convictions have been quickly lumped into a single, negatively perceived group that is being rejected as ‘alien’. The proselytizers often have not fully comprehended why and how threatening they are because they tend to be focused on more universal values such as ‘truth’, ‘salvation’, ‘supranational values’ and multiculturalism, all of which are internationalist agenda, in contrast to the nationalist agenda of majority religions.”³³

Mojzes concludes that few have discovered that a way out of this dichotomy is “that respect for every person’s religious liberty will contribute to a more vital modern community.”³⁴

b) Different Perspectives of What a Christian is

³² Mojzes, "Religious Topography of Eastern Europe,"., 35.

³³ Ibid., 36.

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

At the root of the problem of proselytism is the fact that the definition by the evangelical groups of who non-Christians are, includes most members the established churches.³⁵ Often these evangelical missionaries conclude from the negative reactions of the Protestant historic churches that they are ‘liberal’, which strengthens them in their conviction that they need to be evangelized.³⁶ Miroslav Volf states that what is considered to be legitimate mission by what he calls the evangelical Protestants (in my definition, the free churches) is considered to be “illegitimate and culturally damaging proselytism” by the Catholics and Orthodox, which he defines as the ‘established churches’.³⁷

So the perspective on what it means to be a Christian differs significantly. Established churches are more like “mothers who embrace all children born to them – that is, all those who were baptized”, the evangelical groups “are like stern fathers, and accept only those who behave – who actively believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and act in accordance to their belief... therefore all those who do not “behave – believe and act – are legitimate objects of evangelization”.³⁸

c) Strong focus on planting new churches

The problem of proselytism is aggravated by the strong focus by the evangelical missionaries on planting new churches even in countries where the established Protestant churches are relatively strong. (Hungary has more than 1500 Protestant churches all over the country.) Many argue that the incentive for the priority to planting new churches in these countries is given with the statistical fact that hardly any ‘viable’ churches are available, which can reproduce them. So instead of working on the revitalization of the existing churches they chose to give priority to starting new ones.

³⁵ Cf. Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: 'Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe,'"., 26.

³⁶ Cf. Ibid., 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 26.

³⁸ Ibid., 27.

Underlining an “attitude and ignorance of the missions situation in Hungary” a mission leader involved in church planting in Hungary recently articulated his vision with the importance “to acknowledge that we need more churches in Hungary. I estimate that the church buildings in Hungary could not hold more than 30% of the population and the current pastoral structure could not hold more than 20% of the population and that most of the churches in Hungary would not know what to do with new Christians but God wants 100% of Hungarians to have New Life in Christ so we better plant churches.” He called on the Reformed Church in Hungary to “repent of their pride and be humble enough to think that they do not own the world and control God”. He added “I love the Reformed Church in Hungary, but God is able to work without it also.”

Juraj Kusnierik questions whether this approach to church planting is really effective. “Saturating” a country with churches might be a good motivational goal in itself, but if that means, “reproducing small, closed, theologically superficial and culturally irrelevant communities, the spiritual impact might actually be quite marginal...”

Moreover, in countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovakia there are already Lutheran and/or Reformed churches “available” in every geographical area of the country.³⁹ I agree with his observation, that these churches have many problems and many of them are just nominal. But Kusnierik asks the pertinent question: “why do we think “our” alternative will work better?” He argues that church planting should not be made a single objective in and of itself, because then we mistake the essence of what the Church is.

“We need to address issues of quality at least as much as issues of quantity... A cynic might say that God does not want more churches that are introverted and do not honor his name or climb beyond a vision of a village God. First we must raise our vision of God and His kingdom and then talk about increasing the number of locations at which He is worshiped.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Kusnierik and Moyle, “Trends - Ten Years On. A Sen Study Paper Describing Major Trends in Central European Church and Society 10 Years after the Fall of Communism,” 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

So Kusnierik's criticism focuses on the tendency of the church planting movement to focus more on quantitative growth than qualitative growth. His concern is not to have more introverted churches, but he wonders why it is not better to transform the existing churches into communities that are culturally relevant and might have a greater spiritual impact on society.

d) Fundraising Methods

Another factor that aggravates the problem of proselytizing is the way the mission movement into Eastern Europe is funded. The pressure to meet the expectations of the donors at home for 'success' stories make it difficult for missionaries to work in ministries that are less visible. Planting one's own flag, establishing a 'satellite' organization of a Christian 'multi-national', seems to work better in the demanding art of fund raising. But, we may ask, should the fundraisers set the agenda for mission?

V. Any Use of Foreign Missionaries?

The issue of proselytism and the closely related question of the impact of foreign missionaries made Davor Peterlin ask the question: "Any use of foreign missionaries?"⁴¹ The foreign missionary has one disadvantage in that they often have difficulty in communicating fluently in another language; therefore they are often not able to "click in' with the recipient culture, even after a long period of suffering... The ways and means of the host country remain unfathomable, and their inhabitants a mystery or a deviation from what is perceived as a 'norm'."⁴²

Ronald E. Davies, who traveled in Eastern Europe for more than two decades, quotes an East European pastor who was recently asked by a Western Christian, 'How can the church in the West help you?' The pastor replied: "First pray; second pray; third pray and please stay away!"⁴³ Davies considers the influx of many groups

⁴¹ Peterlin 1995: 171.

⁴² Peterlin 1995: 171.

⁴³ Ronald E. Davies, *After Gorbachev? How Can Western Christians Help?*, Eastbourne 1991, 123.

(including sects) seeking to establish their own sphere of influence “often with lavish gifts and promises” as „the worst kind of cultural and spiritual imperialism”.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

Juraj Kusnierik observes that expatriates have assisted Central European churches to focus more on the future, a perspective often lacking. “Big visions are often missing.”⁴⁵ Another benefit has been that people have received a stimulus by the exposure to models from other countries, and to the expatriate missionaries themselves. Proper planning and management are weak areas in which people have learned much.

Anita Deyneka, speaking from her experience in Russia, is concerned with how to make the expatriate involvement more useful to the Churches in Eastern Europe: “How strategic is Christian assistance from afar? And how can such assistance be made more strategic? ... How can the many tributaries cooperate and converge - not only with each other as Westerners - but perhaps most importantly with our brothers and sisters in the East - so that an ocean of blessing will overflow?”⁴⁶

VI. Yes, But... Changes Are Needed!

Kusnierik considers the foreign missionary as an important ‘agent of change’. “A foreign missionary is in a good position to question some of the old habits, break notorious taboos, and show new and creative ways in encouraging a healthy diversity in an otherwise quite uniform environment.” **But** an important prerequisite is that foreign missionaries should come to Central and Eastern Europe ready to learn: learn about the history and culture of the region, but also to help the Christians facing the hard questions of life from a Christian perspective.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁶ Anita Deyneka, “Building Bridges for God’s Kingdom: Questions to Help Western Missions Think More Strategically”, in: Linzey, Sharon, M. Holt Ruffin and Mark R. Elliott (eds.), *East West Christian Organizations. A Directory of Western Christian Organizations Working in East Central Europe and the Newly Independent States Formerly Part of the Soviet Union*, Evanston, 22.

⁴⁷ Kusnierik and Moyle, “Trends - Ten Years On. A Sen Study Paper Describing Major Trends in Central European Church and Society 10 Years after the Fall of Communism”, 27.

The issue is: what changes are needed in order to make the foreign missionary contingent more helpful? What changes are needed for reducing the tensions related to proselytism and mission and how could we focus our co-operative efforts better on the real issues, the priorities on the mission agenda of Eastern Europe such as equipping and training leaders who have learned to deal with the issues of church and society in a contextualized way, so that the church of Central and Eastern Europe may be better prepared to deal with the crucial issues related to the “Shadows of the Past” of the Post-communist countries, including the difficult challenges of secularization. “Any use of foreign missionaries?” “Yes, but some changes need to be made.”

I would like to suggest that we add a few key verbs to our missiological dictionary, or maybe we simply have to refresh our memory.

a. Enabling

As an attempt to encourage partnership among the 200 evangelical mission organizations working in the region, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization convened a summit conference in Budapest in 1991 on “Evangelization in Post-Marxist Contexts”.⁴⁸ A six-point strategy for mission groups working in Eastern Europe and the former USSR was outlined, with the purpose of discouraging ‘free-lance entrepreneurial approaches’:

1. Enabling churches and mission organizations in eastern countries to undertake their own work of evangelizing their own people;
2. Modeling and encouraging cooperation in the work of evangelization;
3. Going where Christ is not named or known;
4. Undertaking involvement over the longer term that aims to produce fruit that will remain;
5. Working only from an adequate understanding of the people and their contexts;
6. Working with complete ethical and financial integrity.

⁴⁸ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization: Budapest Summit Statement to those Working in Eastern Europe and USSR, September 1-7, 1991, Quoted by James A. Scherer, "Revolution in the East and Its Missionary Implications for Christians in the West," *Dialog* 31, no. 2 (1992), 114.

James Scherer emphasized rightly that the focus of the statement was on “enabling local churches to do their own mission work, rather than doing the work for them”.⁴⁹ As far as I know the statement was only published in German.⁵⁰ It is encouraging that some mission agencies do adhere to these principles. Others seem to favor other values. If these principles were to be practiced more I am convinced it would reduce the tensions among various groups, and promote partnership and cooperation also between Protestant historic churches and evangelical groups.

b. Partnering

A radical refocusing is needed away from independent church planting efforts towards partnering with local churches in working towards their revitalization.

One of the principles of partnership of the Anglican Communion is that “The local church in each place is primarily responsible for mission in that place, although as part of the universal Church it also has gifts to offer and advice and resources to receive.”⁵¹ Partnering is a synonym for enabling.

An important prerequisite for partnering is accepting the notion that we all know only partially, there is no Church that possesses the full truth. Rather the perspective of other Churches enriches our understanding of Christ.⁵² Or in Paul’s words praying for the Ephesians, that they “may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...”⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁰ Tom Houston, "Zur Arbeit in Osteuropa Und in Der Udssr - Teil 1," *Evangelikale Missiologie*, no. 1 (1992).

⁵¹ These four principles were agreed upon at a meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council held in Dublin in 1973. The first three are: “(1) There is one mission in all the world, (2) It is shared by the world-wide Christian community. (3) It involves a process of giving and receiving in which all have gifts to offer and needs to be met.”

⁵² Cf. Földesi, "Mission and Proselytizing: The Hungarian Case,"., 139. He speaks about the “divisibility of truth”.

⁵³ Ephesians 3, 17-18.

Duncan Hanson states that the PC USA is purposefully not engaged in planting new congregations of its own tradition in former Soviet Union, although there is a call to support local efforts of the Orthodox, Lutheran and Baptist churches “in planting culturally and linguistic relevant churches among the indigenous peoples who are their neighbors.”⁵⁴ Emphasis is placed on partnering with the local churches, in order “not to divide the church where it already exists but rather to support the church in that place”.⁵⁵

In a similar tone Anita Deyneka emphasizes that Western ministries should recognize “the primacy of indigenous churches and should carefully consider the counsel of national Christians from whom much can be learned.”

Speaking on the situation in the CIS, Kent Hill states that “More than ever, it is clear, success in ministry will depend on cooperation, collaboration, and a thorough grounding in [CIS] history and culture”.⁵⁶ Western missions - so Hill pleads - need to strive for good relations with the Orthodox and existing Protestant Churches. “I would make the strongest possible appeal for cordial ties, wherever possible with the Orthodox Church and existing Protestant Churches - to come alongside and help.”⁵⁷

Peterlin argues that foreign missionary-sending agencies should link with a recognized indigenous Christian group, be it a denomination or a local church.

“[However] there are still too many of those who do not adhere to this policy. Instead they send their lone ranger missionaries or teams, which then fight with other lone rangers over territory and vigorously protect their turf. We can observe this evangelical Christian conquest of the Wild West in Eastern Europe.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Duncan Hanson, "Denominational Perspective on Ministry in Eastern Europe," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 20, no. 3 (2000), 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁶ Kent Hill 1993: 27.

⁵⁷ Hill 1993: 18.

⁵⁸ Peterlin *ibidem*.

Our concern should be to partner with the established churches, with the historic churches for the purpose of enabling them to witness to Jesus Christ in a relevant way to the secularized people in their societies. Such partnerships should focus on what Wilbert Shenk calls the “fundamental reorientation of the church in modern culture to mission to its culture”.⁵⁹ He emphasizes Luke's twofold model by which the church works out its missionary existence in the world. First of all, the *organic mode* or the witness of the disciple community scattered under the impact of persecution and secondly the *complementary mode*: certain individuals set apart for itinerant ministry.

Yes, it does take time to build relationships of trust, to build true partnerships in which being is more important than doing.⁶⁰ It may not seem ‘effective’, but no short cuts will work for this difficult secularized mission field, what some even have called the “Graveyard of missions”.⁶¹

c. Improving

An area, which seems to need serious improving is that of the training of missionaries to the secularized, post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The re-evangelization of Europe and the revitalization of its churches poses for us new missiological issues: The issue of reaching out to de-churched people, ‘nominal Christians’⁶², the issue of how to cooperate with the mainline churches in true partnership, as well as the issue of church renewal versus church planting, to mention just a few, all require profound study.

⁵⁹ Wilbert R. Shenk, “The Training of Missiologists for Western Culture”, in: Woodberry, J. Dudley, Charles E. van Engen and Edgar J. Elliston (eds), *Missiological Education for the 21st Century. The Book, the Circle and the Sandals*. Maryknoll 1996, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Cf. Leon Spencer, “The Church in Today’s Africa: One Expatriate’s Views on Partnership”, lecture held at OMSC, October 31, 2000.

⁶¹ David Sanford, "'Graveyard of Missions' Requires New Approaches: Too Many Missionaries Are Failing in Western and Central Europe," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 30, no. April (1994)..

⁶² Cf. Lausanne Occasional Papers on these topics.

The old paradigms of training missionaries for such a unique and complex mission field in a modern culture deeply affected by secularism does not suffice. According to Wilbert Shenk, “Mission to modern culture will have to reckon with the history of Christendom in the West for the ancient cathedral spires continue to cast long shadows. The training of missiologists and missionaries for this culture must be in full view of that history, but based on a renewed understanding of the apostolic character of the church as embedded in the Great Commission.”⁶³ This renewed understanding consists of living a missionary existence in the world as a disciple of the body of Jesus Christ.

⁶³ Shenk 1996.

The outcome of Wilbert Shenk's survey of mission training programs with the object of training missionaries for modern or Western culture is shocking. Training programs for missionary service to modern or postmodern culture analogous to programs preparing for cross-cultural ministry are not available.⁶⁴

During my visit to a number of mission institutions in North America in 1995 I asked a similar question: How do you prepare your students for missionary service into Central Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union? The answer was the same everywhere: we have no experience available to provide particular teaching and training for these regions.

The Old Heartlands of Europe and the Church in Eastern Europe faces tremendous challenges in the New Millennium, too large to face on our own.

We need enablers, we need partners, we need better trained missionaries, servants, credible witnesses who help bring the whole Gospel, which - in the words of Peter Kuzmic - "covers proclamation of truth and exhibition of love, manifestation of power and integrity of life. In the task of world evangelization, it will also require less competition and more cooperation, less self-sufficiency and more self-denial, less ambition and more willingness to serve, less of a drive to dominate and more of the desire to develop".⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Wilbert R. Shenk, "The training of missiologists for Western culture", in: Woodberry, J. Dudley, Charles E. van Engen and Edgar J. Elliston (eds.), *Missiological education for the 21st century. The book, the circle, and the sandals*. Maryknoll 1996.

⁶⁵ Peter Kuzmic, "How to Teach the Truth of the Gospel", in: J.D. Douglas (ed.) *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes*, Minneapolis 1990, 201.

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