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LESSONS LEARNED IN EURASIA MINISTRY: MOSTLY THE HARD WAY

By Mark R. Elliott


In 1981, I led a tour to the Soviet Union that included worship with Methodists in Tallinn, Estonia. It was an unforgettable experience for many reasons. I recall it so vividly because, sitting on the platform after the beginning of the service, I was asked to preach. As a young history professor with no experience behind a pulpit, I attempted to politely decline the offer, but to no avail. So I had five minutes and my New Testament to prepare my first sermon ever. The text I used that morning was II Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” It struck me as relevant not only for Estonian Methodists who had endured so much, but also for history professors called upon for extemporaneous preaching. It was one of my first lessons learned the hard way: in ministry in Eurasia, flexibility is key.¹

Dutch social psychologist, Gert Hofstede, studied 40 world cultures on a continuum from least to most concerned with completing tasks versus concern for building personal relationships. Americans proved to be strongly task-oriented, whereas Slavic cultures, on average, valued the cultivation of relationships much more highly than completing a given job by a given date.\(^2\) Ministry lesson two might be stated as the need to blend the goal orientation of many Americans with the emphasis upon personal connections of many Eurasians.

In order to blend cultures in ministry for the sake of building God’s Kingdom, those of us in the West heading to the East need to do our cross-cultural homework. In 1935, Methodist missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, published *Christ of the Indian Road*, one of the early clarion calls for what missiologists have come to define as contextualization—introducing the eternal truths of the Gospel into a culture in a way that draws people to Christ and His Kingdom.\(^3\)

Working against contextualization and against a winsome witness is the mentality that the “West knows best.” This superiority complex can creep into dealings with Eurasians even unconsciously—and it can be deadly. Czech pastor, Dan Drapal, author of *Will We Survive Western Missionaries?*, explains, “If your standard of living is higher, you might subconsciously conclude that your spiritual life is better too. You might be condescending and paternalistic without being aware of it.”\(^4\) One American missionary confessed to Romanian World Vision leader, Danut Manastireanu, “Our team had little understanding for cultural differences or the

\(^3\) E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1927).
\(^4\) Dan Drapal, *Will We Survive Western Missionaries? Reflections of a Czech Pastor on Meeting the Western Missionaries* (Prague: Ampelos, 1997).
impact and need for contextualization. We came over with the mentality that what worked in the U.S. would also work in Eastern Europe.”\(^5\)

The corrective for such myopia is double portions of humility and taking the time to learn and appreciate another culture. In order to overcome American ethnocentrism, it would be advisable to heed E. Stanley Jones’ leveling maxim: evangelism is “one beggar trying to help another beggar to find bread.”\(^6\) Many years ago, I met Grigori Komendant, the one-time head of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in the Soviet Union, later head of his denomination in Ukraine, and currently head of the Ukrainian Bible Society. Some from the West, according to Komendant, think of Russia and Ukraine as third-world countries new to Christianity. Instead, he points out, “The church has been here a long time, and we are not interested in Americanization of our church.”\(^7\) In the same vein, longtime Moscow-based religion reporter, Larry Uzzell, advises that “missionaries should avoid behaving as if the Gospel and the American way of life are identical.”\(^8\) Some years ago, the British Evangelical Missionary Alliance published *Working in Central and Eastern Europe: Guidelines for Christians*, which had to confess that “sad to say, some Westerners have shown a superior attitude to Eastern Europeans, many of whom are well educated and resent the paternalistic or imperialistic attitudes they see in some foreign visitors.”\(^9\)

Instead, these British *Guidelines* advised,

> Go as a servant….Be willing to accept and respect the Christians you meet as brothers and sisters in the Lord and to serve their needs with compassion and love….Share what you have to offer with sensitivity. Our ways may not be best in a different culture. Sometimes it is hard to accept and admit that we do not have all the answers. Mission teams which say “We are taking Jesus to Russia” show they don’t understand the situation at all. Nobody is taking Jesus to Russia. He has been there all the time! His Holy

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9 Elliott and Deyneka, “Protestant Missionaries,” 397.
Spirit was moving behind the Iron Curtain before Christians from the West could go there.  

So for those ministering in Eurasia, homework is a requirement in order to better understand and appreciate Slavic culture. On the Orthodox Church, I recommend starting with Donald Fairbairn’s *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, followed by *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians and From Da to Yes: Understanding the East Europeans* by former foreign service officer, Yale Richmond. Also tap the deep reserves of moral ponderings and reflections on human nature found in Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn. And if thousand-page novels are too daunting, start with thought-provoking short stories such as: Tolstoy’s “Three Hermits” and “How Much Land Does a Man Need?,” Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s “Matryona’s House,” and “The Grand Inquisitor,” chapter 5 of book 5 of Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Experience an English-language Divine Liturgy on YouTube. Better yet, as Russian religion reporter, Larry Uzzell, advises, attend an Orthodox worship service in person: “Visiting such a parish,” he insists, “should be as much a part of any serious Christian’s preparation for a trip” to the former Soviet Union “as buying a guidebook.” But, in attending a Divine Liturgy, Uzzell also advises, do not attempt to receive the elements “as if the Orthodox Church had the same rules as many Western denominations which make their sacraments available to any baptized Christian regardless of his or her beliefs.”

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Another source for very practical cross-cultural advice is Mary Raber, who under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee, has taught church history in seminaries in Ukraine for over two decades. She advises:

- “Don’t give in to the temptation to confuse capitalism with the gospel.” As a Russian believer shared with Raber, “People must learn that salvation is from Jesus Christ, not the West.”
- In addition, Raber advises, “Don’t answer questions people aren’t asking. A Ukrainian friend of mine asked me to translate a letter she had received from an American Christian pen-pal. The American woman went on at great length about the proven reliability of the King James Version. It’s an extreme example, to be sure, but we need to remember that our issues may not be theirs, and their issues may not be ours” (Raber). I had a similar experience while serving on the faculty of Wheaton College. A person wrote offering to purchase Russian Bibles for my future trips east, but only the King James Version. And, of course, there is no such Russian Bible.
- Always stressing cultural sensitivity, Raber writes, “Do dress modestly and simply. Go easy on jewelry and makeup. Speak quietly, even if you are sure that no one around you understands English; think about the tastefulness and appropriateness of what you say and do. My personal rule is never to say anything in English that I would not want to be understood by everyone within earshot.”

Raber also advises, “Don’t try to make jokes from the pulpit. For that matter, don’t feel you have to smile and laugh incessantly.” Most Eurasians are more reserved in public than Americans, and it behooves us to fit in rather than stand out. On public transportation, for

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15 Raber, “Do’s and Don’ts,” 5.
16 Ibid.
example, I advise groups I am leading to speak English quietly, if at all, and to refrain from laughing and joking.

While we are on the subject of joking, in most cases, we should abstain from humor in the pulpit because jokes crossing cultures usually lose their meaning, give offense, or both. Even worse are ethnic jokes at the expense of Eurasians. Over 20 years ago, I wrote an editorial, “A Moratorium on Russian Jokes,” that argued, “If non-Russians tell Russian jokes, they can be a subtle, even if unconscious, expression of racism. And whether racist or not, they unquestionably wound feelings.” The best Russian joke I’ve ever heard goes like this. Missionary one: “Have you heard the one about the Russian mechanic?” Missionary Two: “I’d rather not.”

Another lesson learned the hard way is this: We should never volunteer what we think is wrong with this Eurasian country or that, or this Eurasian church or that, especially if our knowledge is limited to one or two short stays in the country. I will never forget inviting a good friend, a Russian Orthodox priest, to speak at a conference I was organizing in the U.S. Imagine how embarrassed I was at dinner when a college president, who had been to Russia once for 12 days, proceeded to lecture Father Georgi on what was wrong with Russia and what his country needed to do to fix its problems.

The corrective for many a cultural faux pas is spending time and building long-term relationships, as opposed to what I call the curse of “hit-and-run” evangelism. George Mason University anthropologist, Janine Wedel, is the author of Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe. Her criticism of quick-fix, grant-funded consultants can apply as well to short-term missions: “What people on the East European side really resent

18 See also Kathy Rogers and Tina-Joy Kinard, “A Guide for Giving and Receiving Aid in Post-Communist Europe,” East-West Church and Ministry Report 7 (Spring 1999), 1-4; (Summer 1999), 6.
are…fly in, fly out advisors who come for a short time and spend all of their time just learning a little bit about the country that they’re supposedly helping. The Poles, who quickly became cynical of any good coming from Western advisors, invented a term for fly in, fly out, high-paid consultants…the Marriott Brigade.” The five-star Marriott Hotel “was where you…had to stay if you were a real consultant.” 20 The remedy is taking more time and being “people-oriented rather than task-oriented.” 21 A Bulgarian church leader related, “The positive help was when people came first to build up relations.” 22 Professor Judith Berling, who has done a careful study of cross cultural seminary partnerships, writes that any Western organization should:

make a hard assessment of its depth of commitment and available resources before starting down the road of cross-cultural relationships. A willingness to commit the financial and human resources necessary for the program is essential. Moreover, a cross-cultural relationship cannot be a one-year experiment. Cross-cultural relationships take time and resources. 23

Some especially large Western congregations boast of short-term mission teams serving on multiple continents in order to underscore their global commitment. In contrast, I personally believe large, as well as small churches, are better served—and serve better—by focusing on a few overseas relationships, developing them in depth over time. Rome was not built in a day, and neither are overseas mission partnerships that have a chance of making a significant, long-term spiritual difference.

Let’s assume we are doing our cross-cultural homework, we do head east with a servant heart, and we are committed for the long term. To be God’s fruitful ambassadors, we still need to

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20 Janine Wedel, Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001).
take heed of hard-earned lessons in appropriate giving. Three books give a wealth of excellent advice on how to give, not only with compassion, but with discernment. Covenant College professors, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, have written *When Helping Hurts; How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* and Atlanta-based urban ministry activist, Robert D. Lupton, has published *Toxic Charity; How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* and *Charity Detox: What Charity Would Look Like If We Cared about Results*. All three books warn that wrong-headed kindness can kill, whereas giving is redemptive when it fosters self-sustaining churches, preserves dignity, and is accountable.

In the past 15 years, no subject has consumed me more than pondering how best to foster self-sustaining churches, seminaries, publishing houses, and compassionate ministries. In 1999, I took a seminary faculty position in which I moved from teaching modern European and Russian history to teaching missions. In preparing for this new assignment, my reading led me to conclude that, historically, North American and European Christian missions had frequently fostered churches abroad that were too often shackled by their financial dependence upon mother churches. I discovered that literally for centuries, Western missions had been cultivating churches overseas that could not stand independently because they were too dependent upon Western financial support.

For years, I had been observing this same phenomenon in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union without realizing that the inadvertent fostering of dependent churches had such a long history. Fifteen years ago, I gave a presentation to missionaries in Moscow on this subject

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that was received politely, but with no discernable change of heart. After all, the missionaries I was addressing were themselves dependent upon Western donations; how could they be expected to instantaneously become converts to the notion that the churches and ministries they were building should or could become free of Western funding?

Finally, two years ago, I decided that it was not enough to speak and write about this curse of dependency; I needed to do something concrete about it. That led me to raise funds for seven greenhouses for churches and compassionate ministries in Ukraine and Russia, the purpose being to help Slavic believers take some first steps toward financial independence. Where did this particular idea come from? In 2011, I was in Central Asia meeting with a missionary who had been given the unenviable assignment of informing indigenous church planters that their salaries provided by a Western mission were about to come to an end. The missionary’s plan was to provide pastors with small greenhouses that would permit them to become bi-vocational ministers. I liked this idea, and with helpful advice from four University of Kentucky agriculture professors and a one-month training course on a Christian farm near Tula, Russia, for each participant, I launched a greenhouse project. It has produced encouraging yields of produce for ministry use and for sale, and the growing conviction among site directors that self-sustaining ministry is a realistic undertaking.27

I see three practices that can make self-sustaining churches and ministries in Eurasia a reality. First, Eurasian believers need to hear regular preaching and teaching on the subject of tithing. Sergei Chervonenko, a Protestant seminary dean in Moscow, has recently completed a

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Doctor of Ministry thesis at Asbury Theological Seminary on this very subject of ways Eurasian churches can become self-supporting.28

Second, I believe, in most cases, bi-vocational ministry makes the most sense in the Eurasian context. In the Soviet era, full-time pastors were a rarity in Protestant congregations, and until local churches are strong enough to support a full-time minister on their own, bi-vocational church service can help congregations overcome heavy dependence upon overseas funding.

Third, microenterprise projects can help sustain local churches and charitable ministries. In the face of declining enrollments, many Protestant seminaries in Eurasia have undertaken all manner of auxiliary enterprises to stay afloat.29 Might local congregations and charitable ministries consider the same? And while greenhouses may not be the answer in urban settings, Western ministries would do well to brainstorm with Christians in Eurasia about other small business possibilities in cities.

Overcoming dependence is actually a realistic possibility. Take the case of church-based alcohol rehab programs. I cannot imagine an American congregation with 100 or fewer members sponsoring a church-based alcohol rehab center. But hundreds of such small churches by Western standards are sponsoring such programs all over the former Soviet Union. What is more, the vast majority of Protestant rehab programs were initiated without any prompting from Western supporters, and in almost every case, they are self-supporting—far more so than any other Christian endeavor in Eurasia. They manage such self-sufficiency through a creative array of agricultural and microenterprise projects including gardening, beekeeping, poultry and pig-

raising, auto repair, and furniture repair. And this creativity and initiative has a great deal to do with church growth. More than one long-term missionary has concluded that the major source of church growth in Eurasia today is church-based alcohol and drug rehab programs. Churches are starting rehab centers, and rehab centers are starting churches.\(^{30}\) So the idea that church growth is dependent upon Western funding need not be the case.

As for the related issue of the pros and cons of Western funding for Eurasian church workers’ salaries, the debate rages on. But as a historian, I contend that in the long run, outside funding for pastors’ salaries appears to weaken rather than strengthen new church plants. On the other hand, a case can be made for Western support for start-up costs for such expensive undertakings as seminaries and Christian publishing. Over the years, missiologists have published a great deal on the pros and cons of funding national workers, including four articles on the Eurasian context in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*.\(^{31}\)

What are some other instances in which helping hurts in Eurasia? For one, free Bible and Christian literature distribution makes it nearly impossible to develop independent, indigenous Christian publishing. One reason a distribution infrastructure for Christian books has been slow to develop in Eurasia is that some Christian organizations are still distributing books at no charge. Gideons has donated 45 million New Testaments and Josh McDowell Ministry has given away 15 million books, the largest number of donated Christian books other than the Bible distributed by any one mission in the former Soviet Union. Self-sustaining Christian publishing will never develop as long as Christian literature is handed out free of charge or is heavily


subsidized. Book sales hold promise for helping indigenous Christian church and parachurch groups become self-sustaining, but only if Western groups abandon well-intentioned but ultimately destructive free distribution. The British *Guidelines for Christian workers in Eurasia*, quoted earlier, makes the same point:

The time comes...when it is no longer wise to deliver large quantities of Bibles and Christian literature for free distribution. It is more helpful in the long term to encourage local Christians to set up Christian publishing houses, Christian bookshops, and an indigenous Bible society. One of the best ways to help is to share skills with others. Someone said that if a man is hungry you could give him a fish, but it is better to give him a fishing rod and show him how to use it.

I greatly admire British missionary, Marsh Moyle, who over many years helped launch independent Christian publishing houses in a number of East European countries. This long-term approach, in contrast to Western free literature distribution, he says, “means a commitment to long-term relationships, to mutual accountability, and to the surrender of prestige and sovereignty.”

The same dynamic is at work in Christian ministry to survivors of sexual trafficking. Recovery programs providing counseling and safe shelter are essential, but unless women are taught skills that can provide them with an alternative livelihood, short-term help is no long-term solution. Some years ago, I did considerable research on Christian responses to trafficking in women from Eastern Europe, which was published in a Russian-English theological journal. Oleg Turlac, my Russian student assistant from Moldova who helped with this project, was struck by one title that figured in the study: *The Natashas* by Victor Malarek. It turns out the

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generic Slavic designation for a trafficked woman is Natasha, which is also the given name of Oleg’s wife. Today Oleg and Natasha Turlac lead a holistic ministry that includes the provision of sewing machines and training for at-risk women in Moldova and Central Asia.37

Appropriate giving is also a need in ministry to Eurasian orphans and orphan grads. Missionaries Kathy Rogers and Tina-Joy Kinard, for example, share practical, common sense advice:

Orphanage workers have been known to steal goods intended for the children or the institution. This problem can be curtailed simply by assuring that each worker receives a package. Their home needs may be as great as the needs of the orphans. Give the box to the workers personally, stating clearly which things are specifically designated for the orphans.38

Candy and toys are at best band aids that do not heal the deeper wounds that orphans carry. In fact, band aid giving can actually be counter-productive. Candy can rot teeth and donated toys merely postpone the traumatic day of reckoning that comes for most orphans too soon at age 16 when they must fend for themselves. George Steiner, president of “Orphan’s Tree,” an outreach to Russian youth who have aged out of orphanages, points out,

Orphans have their own psychology: “I’m an orphan; I deserve to be taken care of; I deserve gifts; I deserve things that are given to me.” And when they get out, guess what? That does not happen. I think there are some approaches we can take to change this dependency.39

To that end, “Orphan’s Tree” teaches orphan grads life skill classes including how to navigate social welfare bureaucracy, how to cook, how to use public transportation, how to prepare and keep a budget, how to garden, how to preserve produce.

Trent Timberlake of Mission Russia Outreach set up a computer lab in an orphanage to teach computer skills. This helps both boys and girls because it gives them a marketable

skill by the time they leave school. At the same time [Timberlake writes] I struggle with the question of appropriateness of giving. I do not want our teams to be seen just as Santa Claus….We in the West are so wealthy and have such a capacity to provide so much. The challenge is to give appropriately so that relationships are most important, not the riches we bring.  

Appropriate giving also entails thinking of supplies and repairs. One short-term mission team member insisted on giving Walkman players to orphans, with no thought of how orphans could find, much less pay for, replacement batteries. The same problem arises with donations of copy machines, computers, and all manner of electronic devices. Will recipients have the funds and access to technical assistance to maintain such gifts? A particularly staggering example of shortsighted giving was the gift from abroad of one million dollars for a church whose membership now struggles to heat and maintain their albatross.

A very practical concern in appropriate giving involves the promises we make. The most natural impulse in the world is for a compassionate and prosperous Western visitor to see a crying need and to offer assistance. But all kinds of questions should be addressed before any promises are made. Do long-term missionaries and indigenous church leaders see a particular gift as a priority? Do recipients have the wherewithal to use the gift to good effect? Will a particular gift excite jealousies among those not so favored? Will the gift help sustain a ministry or perpetuate dependency? And above all considerations, what are the chances a promise can be kept? Eurasia is littered deep in the debris of broken promises. Kathy Rogers and Tina-Joy Kinard lament, “Westerners spoke too lightly or gave their word too easily. Sometimes specific requests were promised but never kept. ‘Christian list-makers’ visited once, asked pertinent

40 Ibid.
questions, wrote their lists, went home, and were never heard from again.”

On this score, British Guidelines offers sage advice:

Do not assume that you can do things in the same way and with the same time-scales as you could at home. Many people have seriously underestimated how difficult it would be to accomplish their goals. The simplest task can become a nightmare when you face inefficient bureaucracy, a shortage of basic materials, and poor communication. You will need a lot of determination and commitment to overcome the problems. To sum up, carefully think through what you have to offer. Discuss with experienced workers and your contacts in the country concerned, whether this is the best and most appropriate way to meet the need. When you are sure that you have the resources, tell your contacts what you have to offer. Go ahead only if your offer of help is accepted, is appropriate, and will positively meet a need. It is better to start a small project which might grow in the future than to attempt something that is too big. Faith is great, but we have to be realistic. If promises are not kept and projects grind to a halt because the money runs out, it will have a negative effect and be a bad testimony.

A valuable rule of thumb is to under-promise and, if possible, over-deliver. No one in Eurasia will be upset if someone from the West over-fulfills a promise. On the other hand, not keeping a promise is far worse than never making one in the first place. So Westerners should be ultra-conservative with verbal commitments and ultra-liberal with delivery. Sad to say, in some instances outright fraud has been the case:

Many people in Romania have been let down by Western visitors who kept pastors busy taking them to see hospitals and orphanages. The visitors took video tapes and photographs and promised help. They went home and were never heard from again. Later on, local government officials asked the pastors what had happened to the help that was promised. The pastors were embarrassed and upset because, in the eyes of the authorities, Christians were seen to be liars.

One example of such malfeasance came to my attention very recently in 2016. One of my greenhouse project sites on the outskirts of Kyiv is a church-based alcohol rehab center. Visiting there in July 2016, I learned that for some time, the director had been hesitant to accept an offer of a greenhouse because previously, a Western group had done exactly what had happened in

42 Ibid.
43 Evangelical Missionary Alliance, Working in Central and Eastern Europe, 5.
44 Ibid., 5.
Romania: would-be donors had taken lots of picture, had made many promises of help, but never donated anything. Even worse, they had used photos of this rehab center for their own fundraising purposes.45

Another concern in giving with discernment is what to do when pressured to pay a bribe. Such predicaments more typically confront long-term missionaries and indigenous believers and church leaders, but if short-term workers make repeated visits and undertake longer-term construction or microenterprise projects, pressure to give bribes will increase. In 1997, four articles in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* gave very different answers to this dilemma—all the way from “absolutely never” to “yes” under certain circumstances.46 In tackling this thorny subject, Western Christians serving in Eurasia should think through how they will respond ahead of time in case they find themselves in such a predicament. An East European missionary serving in a predominately Muslim region of the former Soviet Union put it this way: “An understanding of post-Soviet bureaucracy and market functions and dysfunction is essential. How one will respond to pressures to bribe is best resolved before one inevitably finds oneself in such circumstances in Central Asia.”47

Dr. Ronald Koteskey, a retired psychology professor, has a counseling ministry in missionary care, including an invaluable website, missionarycare.com, with over 100 brochures and over a dozen books downloadable for free. His most recent e-book, *Missionaries and

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47 “Nurridin Vlashinov” and “Andrew Colbourne,” “Advice for Ministry in Central Asia,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 21 (Summer 2013), 6-8.
Bribery\textsuperscript{48} fills a long-standing gap in the literature, and it was prompted by the earlier debate on the issue of bribery in the \textit{East-West Church and Ministry Report}.

The questions regarding appropriate giving raised so far are as follows: 1) Have I done my cross-cultural homework? 2) Am I heading east with a servant heart? 3) Am I a hit-and-run donor, or am I committed for the long haul? 4) Am I people-oriented or task-oriented? 5) Will my giving contribute to a sustainable church or ministry, or will it foster dependency? 6) What are the chances I can keep any promises I make? Another question to ask is this: Are procedures and checks in place to insure accountability? Two missionaries in Siberia have advised, “Give money only when it is possible to track its use for the purpose specified.”\textsuperscript{49} A prominent Bulgarian church leader recognizes the need for such a safeguard:

\begin{quote}
We must be accountable to God, to each other, to committees. But some understand it in a wrong way. They say that they are accountable only to God. They need not put anything on paper. They say that what the left hand is doing, the right hand must not know. This opened the door for many, many bad things.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

In handling the Sunday offering, in both the East and West, more than one person should be involved, and if two are counting the collection, they should not be related. In the Eurasian context, Kathy Rogers and Tina-Joy Kinard have noted, “many temptations exist in relief work” for donors and recipients. “Compromises can be made without really thinking them through. A system of accountability which protects each other is important.”\textsuperscript{51} Thus, an effective Western ministry project in Eurasia “will entail on-site monitoring of progress and rigorous post-project evaluation,” not only for purposes of accountability, but also as a means of determining how

\textsuperscript{49} Robbins and Hammer, “Giving Guidelines,” 16.
\textsuperscript{50} Gibson, “Evangelical Alliance,” 3.
effective a given donation has been.\textsuperscript{52} Ideally, the actual physical transfer of funds and humanitarian donations will involve both accountability and cross-cultural sensitivity: More than one person should receive donations, but it is better not to make a large public display of Western help which can be humiliating.

Speaking of humiliation, in sponsoring a Vietnamese refugee family, my wife and I learned a lesson that applies in Eurasian ministry as well. In 1975, as we welcomed the Nguyen family to their new home, our church’s generosity was many-faceted: housing, transportation, free medical care from a church physician, and help with job placement, just for starters. For some time, we did not realize how troubling it became for our new friends to always be on the receiving end of donations. We finally came to realize the shortsightedness of our giving through our infant daughter, whom we had adopted from Vietnam just months before the Nguyens’ arrival. On occasion, we needed a babysitter, and the Nguyens offered to watch our daughter for us. Our biggest mistake was trying to pay for this help. In time, we came to realize how important it was for our new friends to be able to give back. They really wanted to help us, and it was a way of helping preserve their self-respect.

The application of this lesson to Eurasia is obvious enough. Seminary consultant Judith Berling writes:

\begin{quote}
North American money has too often created asymmetry in relationships. A sense of indebtedness or being the client of a wealthy patron has inhibited …cross-cultural partners from expressing their needs, concerns, and mistakes….It takes patience and hard work to create genuine mutuality in the power dynamics of the relationship. Partners abroad are often too polite to assert their own agenda or challenge the unconscious assertion of privilege, which can so easily come with the resources and good intentions of North American institutions.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Elliott, “Lessons for Ministry,” 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Berling, “Hard-Earned Counsel,” 8.
Right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a Lutheran bishop in East Germany, observing the flood of sometimes ill-advised aid from the West, bemoaned what he saw as a modern-day perversion of the Golden Rule: “He who has the gold makes the rules.” Helping that hurts, of course, is what must be avoided. Any assistance the West renders must “preserve the dignity of the people” one is “attempting to help.”

Professor Mary Raber urges, “Do be willing to learn from those you seek to serve.” That is what Rogers and Kinard call “cultural reciprocity:” “If the receiver needs to give in order to be free to receive…then, by all means, receive his gift with grace and humility.”

Father Georgi Edelstein learned that direct donations of Western clothing to his poor, but proud village children near Kostroma, Russia, was sometimes rejected out of embarrassment. But when he organized racing competitions by age groups, with ample first, second, third, and even fourth prizes of clothing, self-respect survived intact. British missionary Marsh Moyle thinks the same principle of preventing a recipient from being “made to feel like a second-class person” is at work in the Old Testament practice of gleaning: The landowner was not to harvest a field twice, but was to leave the remaining grain in place. “He was not to pick up the [remaining] grain and hold a free distribution program.” Instead, those in need “had to contribute productive labor into the process. Their…labor in the sun preserved their dignity.”

The hymn, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” includes two lines that affirm: “We share our mutual woes; Our mutual burdens bear.” The stress is on mutual. Those who have engaged in

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55 Raber, “Do’s and Don’ts,” 5.
57 Fr. Georgi Edelstein, “Thoughts on the Current Situation in the Moscow Patriarchate: Hypocrisy, Servility, or Complete Indifference to the Fate of Religion?,” East-West Church and Ministry Report 10 (Fall 2002), 9, 11-12.
ministry in Eurasia can testify to the blessing it has been, a point that should be repeatedly stressed with Eurasian partners. Ministry worthy of the name is mutual.

One type of Western aid, however, may not be a mutual blessing. Instead, it can be ill-advised helping that hurts, namely, lengthy educational programs in the West for Christians from the East. Such help almost always leads to a brain drain of potential church leaders. Connie Robbins and Rodney Hammer write from Siberia, “Many groups see the opportunity to help a national by providing an educational opportunity in the West. This practice is sometimes warranted but should be coordinated very carefully through indigenous church leaders and missionaries. Training in a distant context is often a mistake.”59

Consider the case of Romania. In the early 1990s, approximately 100 Romanians in their late teens and early twenties “received scholarships to pursue undergraduate degrees” in a number of American Christian colleges. “When these mostly immature Christians went to study in the richest country in the world, they were exposed to great temptations. It is not surprising that most of them found various reasons to stay in the West. Only a fraction of those who studied in the U.S. ever returned to Romania, and even fewer of them are really making an impact for Christ in their homeland.”60 Long-time religion beat journalist, Larry Uzzell, would temper the desire to help with discernment, declaring a free trip to America for “brand-new converts” a “dubious practice:”

With rare exceptions, American missionaries should not offer extended stays in the United States to schoolchildren, undergraduates, or others who have not already demonstrated a serious long-term commitment to Christian service in [Eurasia]. Even when it is clear that a student does have such a commitment, Americans should seriously assess whether they are offering an academic experience which is genuinely needed and definitely not available in [Eurasia].61

60 Manastireanu, “Western Assistance,” 8.
Danut Manastireanu, a leading Romanian Evangelical theologian and former head of “World Vision” work in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, points out the disturbing fact that “approximately 40 Romanian Evangelicals have received doctoral degrees in theology in the West since 1989, but only about 12 of them are still teaching theology in Romania today.” 62 Seventy-five percent of Colombian theological students who have studied abroad never have gone home, the same for 85 percent of seminarians from the Caribbean and 90 percent of seminarians from India. 63

Is there any reason to believe that Eurasian seminarians studying in the West will be more successful in resisting the temptation to remain abroad? As far back as 1995, I wrote:

The lure of the West already is spelling more and more post-Soviet seminarians opting for golden opportunities abroad. Borrowing from an American folk-song, “Will they ever return” or will they “ride forever ‘neath the streets of Boston?” Past performance suggests another brain drain is in the offing. 64

If a few older, especially committed and especially mature believers receive funding for higher theological degrees in the West, it should be in programs with the shortest residential requirements and with funding set aside for critical, periodic returns home. 65 Even then:

If every theological student in the West did return home, unhealthy side effects still might cause the church in the East to question the advisability of study abroad. As Ralph Alexander points out, when seminarians study in another country, “training is removed from the normal ministry context.” In addition, seminarians’ introduction to Western living standards and Western cultural values makes going home a difficult adjustment. The negative influences of narcissistic materialism and individualism are self-evident. But even defensible Western mores, such as the high premium placed on efficiency, productivity, and punctuality, pose problems for graduates attempting to re-enter societies that frequently value the building of relationships more highly than the completion of tasks by a set date. 66

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65 Ibid.,” 71.
On a more positive note, in 2011, an extraordinary new code of missionary conduct saw the light of day following five years of deliberation among parties that rarely have worked in concert: the Roman Catholic Church, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the World Council of Churches (representing mainline Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches). This document, entitled “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,” affirms that “proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian.” However, “it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.” If space permitted, each of the code’s five subheadings would merit careful and prayerful consideration: 1) “Fair Representation of Other Confessions and Faiths,” 2) “Disavowal of Violence and Coercion,” 3) “Advocacy for Government Impartiality,” 4) “Calls for Tolerance, Respect, and Dialogue,” and 5) “Distinguishing Appropriate Acts of Compassion from Inappropriate Allurements.”

Focusing on just the last standard, a very serious question emerges: What constitutes compassion with integrity and what constitutes manipulative charity unworthy of the gospel? Colonel Vasili Pashkov was a wealthy nineteenth century Protestant convert in St. Petersburg who selflessly funded a host of commendable outreaches to the poor. But it could be argued that his paying his “field workers who gave up their work to listen to his preaching” amounted to an inappropriate allurement. Equally questionable was the practice of the Methodist Church in the former Soviet Union that included free meals for the poor, but only for those who sat through the

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66 Ibid., 69.
worship service first. In the same vein, Rogers and Kinard report a problematic case of “long lines waiting for relief outside a Protestant church” in Eastern Europe, but “only church members were entitled to receive the aid.” Fortunately, these same authors share another case of a much more winsome witness:

During [Bosnian] war years in Serbia, one Protestant church, considered a sect to be avoided, broke down barriers by sharing relief not just with members of its own denomination (the usual practice), but with the community at large. The church’s generosity profoundly affected its image. Now the pastor is well-respected and considered a leader within the village.

The actual language of the 2011 Code of Conduct on the subject of “appropriate compassion” versus “inappropriate allurements” commends demonstrations of Christ-like compassion, but not material enticements that could lead to conversions of convenience:

Christians are called to…serve others and in so doing to recognize Christ in the least of their sisters and brothers. Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach. Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements, including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service,…fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.

As praiseworthy as this principle is, the Code of Conduct does not give adequate guidance in differentiating between biblically-mandated compassion on the one hand and unjustifiable allurements on the other. The fact is that Russian Orthodox define any Protestant educational, medical, or charitable assistance as a means of proselytizing and sheep stealing. As an example, in the 1990s, a United Methodist pastor from Florida shared with me his church’s plan for an evangelistic campaign in Russia. Following a short-term preaching mission, those Russians who made professions of faith and who joined a Methodist church plant were to be

given a trip to their sister church in Florida so that they could experience a worship service in America firsthand. To the best of my ability, I tried to explain to this well-meaning but misguided pastor that his approach to cross-cultural ministry was bound to produce “rice Christians” drawn to “faith” by the enticing prospect of a free trip to an American vacationland.

Conversely, just as a paid trip to Florida is an inappropriate allurement for new Russian converts, equally inappropriate is Orthodox insistence that no Protestant act of charity is legitimate on what Orthodox define as their exclusive canonical territory, even in cases of charity extended to those who have no affiliation with Orthodoxy. In the mid-1990s, an Orthodox priest visited an orphanage near Volgograd, advising the director not to accept assistance from Nazarene missionaries. The director, who was not a believer, reacted angrily, asking the priest why he had not come to help, rather than criticize Protestants who did help.

No fair-minded Christian would want to endorse the example of the Florida pastor or the Volgograd priest. Nevertheless, the line between commendable and exploitative acts of mercy and service can be quite fine and quite gray. Thus, the appendix of the “Christian Witness” Code of Conduct is right to note that “each issue” addressed in this unique, multi-confessional document “is important in its own right and deserves more attention.” In fact, it would be beneficial to have the text of this Code of Conduct serve as the basis of discussion for the formulation of best practices for every Western ministry working in Eurasia.72

My mentor in Eurasia ministry was Peter Deyneka, Jr., who taught by his example. Following his untimely death in 2000, I edited a Russian and English booklet of tributes to Peter, including a compilation of his sage advice, including the following:

- Partner and network whenever possible because more can be accomplished together than in isolation;

72 Ibid.
• Be open to counsel from others, especially a spouse, who can provide wisdom, perspective, and needed corrective to any assumption that “my way must be the right way;”
• Be so preoccupied in the Lord’s work that there will be no time to dwell on, or be handicapped by, real or perceived ill treatment;
• Never exaggerate one’s accomplishments. Give no concern for who receives credit for God’s work well done. Do not seek recognition, but if it comes, point always to Christ.73

Pointing always to Christ one can hardly go wrong with that purpose uppermost. United Methodist Jack Stevenson from Hermitage, Pennsylvania, spoke at a Eurasia orphan ministry conference in Atlanta back in 2000:

When we go to the orphanage and they clap and thank us for bringing them gifts, we say the gifts are from Christians in the West. But they really come from God because God loves them. I always try to emphasize that the gifts are really from God.74

Fortunately, when mistakes are made, as they inevitably will occur even in the most earnest efforts to do the right thing, friends in the East will look past these cross-cultural blunders if they see that hearts are truly set on sharing God’s love abroad.

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74 “Appropriate Giving,” 20.