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WAITING ON THE WHITE SMOKE

THE RUSSIAN EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE'S 15TH ANNUAL CONVENTION IN MOSCOW¹

By William Yoder

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Moscow — It took a while for the white smoke to climb up the chimney. That's the Roman Catholic metaphor the 66-year-old Alexander Fedichkin, the Russian Evangelical Alliance's president, used to describe the protracted internal negotiations leading up to his appointment for an additional three-year term. Consequently, the REA's fifteenth annual conference, held on February 22, 2018, in Moscow's Lutheran Peter-and-Paul-Cathedral, began late.

Fedichkin, a long-time Baptist Union pastor in Moscow, has served as president since 2013. General-Secretary Sergey Vdovin, a pastor within the "Association of Churches of Evangelical Christians" in Moscow, has held this position since 2011. The initial head of the REA, the Baptist seminary lecturer, Vladimir Ryaguzov (born 1950), suffered a debilitating stroke in 2013 and is now residing with his spouse and children in Seattle/Washington. Ulrich Materne from Wittenberg in Eastern Germany, the German Alliance's representative to Eastern Europe and a friend of the Russian Alliance, retired in 2016.

Prominent at this year's conference, which had roughly 30 participants, was the stipulation that only the official delegates of denominations and church organizations vote. This was done to keep the members of any single, local congregation from determining the outcome.

¹ This article is reprinted by permission from the author from an official release of the Russian Evangelical Alliance. It may also be found on the webpage: "rea-moskva.org".

Fortunately, nearly all leading denominations were represented. REA leadership has been relatively effective in retaining its umbrella function, in keeping the organization from falling into the hands of any single denomination or movement.

Fedichkin's re-appointment demonstrates continuity; dramatic surprises are not to be expected. At the same time, Vitaly Vlasenko's coming on board as “Ambassador-at-Large” last April has led to an upsurge of foreign activity. Vlasenko, the Russian Baptist Union’s Director of External Relations until March 2017, is now playing a leading role in the Eastern European work of the Swiss-based European Evangelical Alliance. The EEA is sponsoring a conference for youth leaders in Tallinn/Estonia from October 8 to 13.

Vlasenko is also very concerned about networking between Russia’s Protestant businesspeople and farmers. He states: “It is not enough for farmers to contend themselves with feeding their own families—we must think further. Our churches will not become financially self-sufficient until we have many more firms capable of supporting the work of the church.” New, well-paying jobs are obviously the best medicine against continued westward emigration. The search is therefore on for foreign loans and co-investors, both in the West and in China.

Alliance leadership remains committed to being a truly Russian entity. The 70 members of Sergey Vdovin’s “Balsam” congregation have made remarkable progress down the road towards self-governance and self-support. Vdovin stresses frequently that the Russian church must now rely on its own means.

Further Alliance activities include discussion clubs led by Alexander Fedichkin. In collaboration with the European, Israeli and Turkish Evangelical Alliances, the REA is offering annual tours to Biblical locations in these countries. Vdovin has been involved in this programme for more than a decade. The General-Secretary also stressed the importance of

regular prayer groups; he notes that groups meeting for prayer have chalked-up concrete results. This year, a Russian delegation will again be visiting the German Alliance's annual convention in Bad Blankenburg, from August 1 to 5.

In general terms, Russian Protestantism remains fractured. Since 2015, not all larger denominations are participating in Moscow's "Advisory Council for the Heads of the Protestant Churches of Russia". The REA will now be attending the Advisory Council's sessions. The Alliance does not regard the Advisory Council as competition: The Council attempts to work from the top down, the Alliance, from the bottom up. The REA wants to be a lay movement of church people concerned about inter-denominational cooperation. The REA continues to regard itself as a movement in which at least all Protestants can freely participate.

At the conference, President Fedichkin spoke of the believers' fear—fear regarding the ramifications of the restrictive Yarovaya Laws of 2016. Many church buildings and educational programs are under government scrutiny. Yet Alliance leadership is unanimous in its conviction that one should remain calm and continue doing the genuine work of the church. At the meeting, Ivan Borichevsky from the Moscow office of Eduard Grabovenko's Pentecostal "Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith" even described the present as "a great and blessed time for doing the work of the church". Since the church is doing its best to stay within Russian law, it is no rational reason for fear.

Berlin, 6 March 2018