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THREE UPDATES ON PROTESTANTISM IN RUSSIA

By William Yoder

William Yoder, PhD is an advisory editor of Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe. He is an American scholar and journalist who currently lives in Russia and writes periodic reports and analyses of religion in areas he visits. This is one such release written in Khabarovsk on May 24, 2018, and can be found on the webpage: rea-moskva.org.

GOOD FOR SURPRISES AFTER ALL PETER MITSKEVICH NEW PRESIDENT OF THE RUSSIAN UNION OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS-BAPTISTS

M o s c o w — On March 22, 2018, at the national Moscow convention of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB), Peter Valterovich Mitskevich was elected president. He succeeds Alexey Smirnov, who served as president for two terms beginning in 2010. Peter Mitskevich (born 1959) is probably the best-educated Russian Baptist president in its overall history. After serving as a medical doctor and part-time pastor for a decade, he entered Dallas Theological Seminary in 1992, graduating five years later with a master's degree in theology. Mitskevich has spent the vast majority of his life in the Moscow region and has served as senior pastor of Northern Moscow's Golgotha congregation since 2004. He also has extensive experience in the highest echelons of Russian Baptist leadership, serving as a vice president or senior vice president for the last 16 years. Reverend Mitskevich is not underemployed: at least

for now, he remains rector of his denomination's flagship "Moscow Theological Seminary," a position he has held since 2007, and he serves as pastor of the Golgotha congregation.

There are few names "more Baptist" than the Mitskevich one. Both his still-living father, Valter (Walter), and his grandfather, Artur (1901-1988), held high positions in the much larger Soviet-era Baptist Union. Artur was jailed for his faith in 1935, deported to Siberia two years later and jailed again in 1942. Released three years later, Grandpa Artur was a senior pastor in Ukraine after 1946. He served as Deputy General-Secretary of the entire Union in Moscow from 1966 to 1974.

Peter Mitskevich has proven skills as a church diplomat. He speaks excellent English and relates easily to strangers. Due to his studies and years in seminary leadership, he has long-term, extensive contacts in the western world. If anyone can keep financial channels open and Baptist contacts with the western world afloat in a time of international crisis, then that should be Mitskevich. He has a daughter, the spouse of an American doctor, who lives in Tennessee in the United States. As a diplomat, the non-Calvinist Mitskevich is expected to do what he can to keep the Union's traditionalist and new (post-1990) Calvinist wings under the roof of a single union. A cautious leader, he has until now not been regarded as strongly innovative or creative. Observers have not been reckoned with surprises.

However, the new Senior Vice-President is somewhat of a surprise: Viktor Vladimirovich Ignatenkov, is the long-time Senior Pastor of a RUECB congregation in Smolensk. Smolensk is located near the border of Belarus, 420 km west of Moscow. Both the Union's president and senior vice president are members of each other's extended families: Mitskevich' son is married to Ignatenkov's daughter. (The author does not mean to imply nepotism however.)

Both the outgoing senior vice president, Sergey Sipko, and the one preceding him, Evgeny Bakhmutsky, remain in Moscow as the head pastors of new church plants. Outgoing president Alexey Smirnov remains pastor within the largely unregistered Baptist community in Dedovsk just west of Moscow. Reports state that Baptist headquarters are counting on new faces and are cutting back staff in an effort to limit expenditures. A new Director of External Relations to replace the outgoing one, Sergey Belov, has yet to be named. He had been preceded by Vitaly Vlasenko, who served in this capacity from 2006 until 2017. Vlasenko is now the ambassador-at-large for the Russian Evangelical Alliance.

A Flurry of New Activities - Commentary

Sadly, the Ukrainian Baptist Union was not officially represented at the Moscow congress. A letter sent to Russian leadership from Kiev had asked their Russian counterparts to apologize for a statement issued at the St. Petersburg conference four years previously. Formulated only weeks after Maidan and the dramatic fall of the Yanukovich government in Kiev, the statement from May 30, 2014, had questioned the theological justification of street-sponsored revolts. It had stated that Biblical teaching “does not permit the violent overthrow of legitimate authority, nor nationalism, nor the resolution of socio-political differences through means other than political negotiation.”

Consequently, at this year’s convention, past RUECB-President Yuri Sipko, well-known for his dissident sympathies, brought forth a motion that the Union’s statement from 2014 be rescinded. The motion got tabled and is to be discussed further at the next meeting of the Union’s Council this fall. Instead, a statement signed by President Smirnov was issued on March 21, 2018, congratulating Vladimir Putin on his re-election as Russia’s president: “God has again

made you President of Russia, a unique country with a great and glorious history. Thanks to your actions and the actions of your expert team, Russia has again become a strong country with a concrete and clear position within the whole world. . . . Russia is gaining greater and true unity. I am sure you will continue to be committed to traditional spiritual and moral values. In accordance with the Word of God, the Bible, the churches of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists will support you in their prayers. As before, our brothers and sisters will make every effort to build not only the Kingdom of Heaven, but also their earthly Fatherland: Russia.”

The deputy Ukrainian president, Igor Bandura, stated on Facebook the same day that this is “one more example of unpolitical Christianity as expressed by the RUECB. How sad.” Four years ago, the Ukrainian Union had protested an RUECB statement lauding Putin for his support of traditional moral values. The Ukrainians had accused the divorced Russian President of being a hypocrite on the matter—which reminds one now of Donald Trump. According to Yuri Sipko on Facebook on March 30, his son Sergey, the outgoing senior vice president, had not supported the letter issued on March 21.

Mitskevich’ coming has unleashed a flurry of good initiatives however. Astounding was the fact that RUECB leadership paid a visit to Kiev on April 24 and 25. This was the first meeting of the two union leaderships on Russian or Ukrainian soil in four years. At the Moscow conference, its delegates had decreed that RUECB leadership pay Kiev a visit. In view of the preliminaries, that fact the two Unions even met can be described as a breakthrough. Precisely for this reason, some observers are optimistic. According to the Ukrainian release afterwards, the Russians called—as usual—for a reopening of ties and broad cooperation. The Ukrainian side for its part called for “an objective and truthful covering of events in all instances.” The statement’s

attack on “zombification,” “hybridism,” and “post-truth” is clearly aimed at those harboring sympathy for the Russian government. Russia’s Union—with the exception of its letters to Putin—remains less political in orientation, stressing the need of Russian-Ukrainian cooperation on mission and humanitarian efforts. Most Ukrainian Baptists continue to regard themselves as the victims of aggression—though human beings further east see the Maidan revolt as the initial aggression.

The RUECB’s press release on the Kiev gathering reports on the nostalgia present regarding happier times in the Soviet era when the two Unions were still united. Artur Mitskevich, for example, had long served as a pastor in Ukraine and spent his retirement years in Kiev, where he is also buried. The release added: “We were all united in our concern regarding the responsibility of the church to contribute to peace between the warring parties through prayer, good deeds and God’s Word. . . . We appeal to all nations to reconcile themselves with God and each other.” It is gratifying that the Ukrainian Union’s release also appealed for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

On the heels of the Kiev meetings, an RUECB delegation headed by President Mitskevich, visited the young Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Crimea on May 14. The Baptist congregations on the peninsula are roughly divided 50-50 on whether they should report to the Kiev or Moscow Union. It is significant that the local union visited answers to Kiev. Other congregations have been incorporated into the RUECB.

Sadly, on March 27, military forces stripped a chapel of the unregistered Baptists in Stakhanov within the pro-Russian Lugansk People’s Republic, taking even the plumbing with them. Such misfortune undoubtedly usually occurs because Ukrainian Baptists are perceived by

the Eastern authorities as unabashedly pro-Western. Clearly, Protestant-state relations will improve in Eastern Donbass only if Ukrainian Baptists can transition to a bi-partisan orientation.

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NO LONGER IN LIMBO
THE EURO-ASIAN FEDERATION OF UNIONS OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS-
BAPTISTS IS BACK IN BUSINESS

M o s c o w — After four years in limbo, the Euro-Asian Federation of Unions of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (EAF) appears to have roared back into existence. Between April 9-16, 2018, it hosted a Jerusalem gathering of nearly 80 delegates from countries stretching all the way from the United States to Tadzhikistan. The Russian delegation consisted of 12 members including newly-elected President Peter Mitskevich, Senior Vice-President Viktor Ignatenkov and outgoing President Alexey Smirnov.

The newly-elected president of the Federation is seminary head Leonid Mikhovich from Minsk/Belarus; his deputy is Gia Kandelaki from the Evangelical Baptist Association of Georgia. Confirmed in his position as general-secretary was Yuri Apatov, an ethnic-Jewish Russian who had moved from Moscow to Israel in late 2015. It was this transition, along with the eruption of enmity between Ukraine and Russia following Maidan in February 2014, which had brought the work of the Federation to a virtual stand-still. A Ukrainian delegation was naturally also present, but significant is the fact that for the first time neither a Russian nor Ukrainian resident is among the Federation's top leaders. Ukraine and Russia field the largest Baptist unions by far. The EAF no longer qualifies as Moscow-based; its base can now be best described as Jerusalem or Minsk. Many of the delegates, including Russians, Belarusians and

Ukrainians, do not need visas to enter Israel. According to the press release, participants reveled not only in the sunshine, but also in the significance in being in the Holy Lands.

At least since Gorbachev, evangelical Zionism has made major inroads among the Baptists of Ukraine and Russia, perhaps most strongly though in Pentecostal groupings. A detractor, the US-American Stephen Sizer, claimed in an article on January 5, 2018 that the vast majority of Zionists are actually Christian: “Fifty million evangelicals joining in common cause with five million Jewish people in America on behalf of Israel is a match made in heaven.” He points out that the dissident “Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism” from August 2006 had been signed by the heads of Coptic, Orthodox, Episcopal, and Lutheran denominations in the Middle East. Of Israel’s population of 8.8 million, only 74.5 percent (6.55 million) are Jewish. The native Palestinian Christians of Israel—including their Baptist sector—reject Zionism.

The press release confirms that the Illinois-based Slavic Gospel Association had largely funded the event. Interestingly, the SGA had aided the official founding of the Evangelical Baptist Association of Georgia in October 2012. One of its officials, Gia Kandelaki, now has a leading position with the EAF. The founding of the Georgia’s Evangelical Baptist Association was one result of the medical doctor Levan Akhalmosulishvili’s split with the more-liberal European Baptist Federation-related Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia in 1997. At its founding in 2012, the Baptist Association had only 600-800 adult members. This Georgian divide between conservatives and liberals is mirrored in the not always intentional divide between the EAF and Europe’s mainstream, Amsterdam-based European Baptist Federation (EBF).

The EAF has long regarded itself as the non-legal successor to the erstwhile All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists which suffered its demise along with the USSR in

1991. It sees its calling in prolonging the fraternal relations which had existed between the Baptists churches of the various republics during the Soviet period. That makes it a type of Russian-speaking conservative alternative to the English-speaking EBF.

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THE THREAT OF A HOLE IN THE MOSAIC
THE WORLD’S LARGEST TERRITORIAL LUTHERAN CHURCH MUST MAKE DO
WITH VERY FEW PEOPLE

By William Yoder, Ph.D., Gvardeysk, June 14, 2018

V l a d i v o s t o k — Even in the Russian Far East, it can be the state that keeps a Protestant congregation from throwing in the towel. A Lutheran house church had already received a green light from church leadership to close its doors. Yet when the city informed them that deregistration would cost 60,000 roubles (1,800 euros at the time), the congregation changed its mind. How fortunate that bureaucracies can also prevent mistakes from happening: four strong women in this congregation appear very much capable of keeping it afloat. Yet they lack the time to prepare sermons and organize public events for the general public. The “power women” of Russia are overworked: the church head in this instance spends 60 hours a week working at a local drugstore. In addition, they are additionally confronted with the labor-intensive matter of a *dacha* in summertime. This small congregation is currently home to about 10 people.

In the Russian Far East, Lutheran church life is fighting for its very existence. Due to high heating costs, the Lutheran house quarters in the former Gulag city of Magadan need to be

sold. In Komsomolsk-na-Amure, up to nine people attend a biweekly church service. Khabarovsk with its 577,000 inhabitants features eight Baptist congregations, but the city's sole Lutheran congregation rarely has no more than seven locals in attendance. These two congregations have been forced to make do without a pastor since early 2002. The last pastor in these two congregations, Rev. Markus Lesinski from Hanover, claimed recently: "It's a true miracle that these two congregations still exist." Should endangered congregations be offered euthanasia—or should they receive all possible support in hopes of their recovery?

The Lutheran diocese (Propstei) in the Russian Far East has only two ordained pastors: Manfred Brockmann (born 1937) from Hamburg is superintendent (area dean) in Vladivostok and has been on location since 1992. A local Lutheran, Alexander Lapochenko, has been serving 250 km away in Arsenyev since 2008, while also helping out in Ussuriysk. The only Lutheran building in the Russian Far East which also looks like a church is Vladivostok's St. Paul's Church, dedicated in 1907. That makes it the oldest church structure in this relatively young port city.

One should note that Russia's Lutheran community has been suffering massive shrinkage during the past quarter of a century. The bustling Ekaterina Veits, church head in Komsomolsk-na-Amure, reports that her congregation still had over 200 participants at the turn of the millennium. Membership stats in Khabarovsk had also once been well over 100. The mother church in Vladivostok (it has 100 members) currently has an attendance of up to 40 on Sundays. Nina Dmitriyeva, a long-time lay minister in the Vladivostok congregation, bemoaned the fact that so few are attending church today. "One can still see it on the old photos", she reports. "We once had very primitive facilities, but the benches were full. Today, we possess very acceptable facilities, but most chairs remain empty." As she sees it, the causes are not limited to emigration

and a high death rate. “Some people had the wrong idea about church,” she reports. “They wanted to receive rather than to give. As soon as humanitarian shipments from the West stopped arriving, they stopped coming.”

The Endangered Mosaic

In terms of territory, the Omsk/Siberia-based Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Urals, Siberia and Far East is the world's largest Lutheran church. It has roughly 4,000 members in 150 congregations. The nine congregations from Chita in the West to Magadan in the East belong to the Vladivostok-based diocese Far East. Around half of these nine congregations are now in danger of being closed. (The Amur region begins a bit before the station Yerofey Pavlovich on the Trans-Siberian Railroad—that which the Russians call the “Far East” “Siberia” ends at that point.)

Christendom can be described as a mosaic. Every denomination and every region represent a unique stone within a wonderful mosaic. If the Lutheran denominations in Russia's Far East would cease to exist, then this glorious mosaic would suddenly be sprouting a hole. But all is not yet lost. Affairs remain well-organized in Vladivostok—the parish continues to feature a number of loyal “givers.” The church doors remain open daily. Concert organizer Viktor Baranov is usually present and rarely needs to complain about insufficient visitors. The congregation holds as many as 33 concerts annually; the very fitting and circumscribed surroundings have carved a niche for the church in the city's cultural scene. A word of greeting or prayer at the beginning and end of the events constantly remind the listener of the spiritual context. Parish member, Baranov, a resident of the city since 1969, frequently points to the mission mandate of these concerts and regards them as a means of introducing outsiders to the

work of the parish. According to the Superintendent, the parish has through its music created a group of 3-4.000 “friends” of the church. Alcoholics Anonymous, a Bible study group and others are gathering within these church’s walls.

Mechanical engineer Konstantin Pavlenko, the congregation's English-speaking lay leader, still engages in dreaming. Despite the presence of sceptics, he continues to imagine a small guesthouse being built on the church premises. Along with the music, it would be a source of income for the parish. But a guesthouse would also clearly fit Konstantin's hospitable personality. His family has been living in Vladivostok region for six generations, but both he and spouse Anna are first-generation Lutherans.

Svetlana Vashanova, a social worker from Karaganda in Kazakhstan, also clearly cares about people. She gives dance instruction in the church and when children appear on a Sunday, she also holds Sunday School. She will be organizing a summer children’s camp this year. She had become acquainted with an evangelical parish through a visit in Germany in 1999. Upon her return, she was delighted to discover that Vladivostok had similar offerings.

The already-mentioned Nina Dmitriyeva, who was born in Vorkuta in 1949, belongs to the small circle of Lutheran Russian-Germans still active within the church in the Far East. When her entire clan was exiting Frunze (now Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan) for the West in 1999, Nina and her family departed in the exact opposite direction. One reason was that her husband, a policeman and ethnic Russian, no longer had a future in the new Kyrgyz state. She claims not to regret that decision.

The organist Stepan Menshoykin plays without pay at church services – not a common occurrence in Russia.

The Stones Will Need to Cry Out

Vladimir Vinogradov, the Omsk-based superintendent for the 120 congregations in the church's Siberian region, describes the lack of co-workers as the church's most crying need. It would therefore make sense for his church to intensify the search for local candidates. Such persons speak Russian without an accent and possess the right kind of passport. Yet much to the chagrin of the superintendents in Omsk and Vladivostok, the vast majority of those coming into question long ago decided to spend their time in the West. The Vladivostok Superintendent is very irritated by the fact that German mission societies sometimes aid theologians in emigrating to the West.

When the best-suited Lutherans drop out, then, according to Jesus, the stones will be commissioned to carry on with the Gospel (see Luke 19:40). These are foreigners of evangelical faith—and these “stones” are far more numerous than the Lutherans of Russia. The Christians of China should be included among the stones. Assuming a million adult Protestants in Russia makes the churches of China at least one hundred-fold larger and wealthier than the Russian ones. Chinese Pentecostal and Baptist congregations already exist in border cities like Khabarovsk and Blagoveshchensk, and Moscow hosts a Pentecostal congregation with nearly 1,000 participants. In 2018, a congregation from the Three-Self-Movement in the Chinese border town of Suifenhe celebrated Pentecost at St. Paul's. This church is located no more than 150 km west of Vladivostok. Superintendent Brockmann has maintained contact with church circles in Harbin/Manchuria for years. South Korean citizens remain active within Methodist and Presbyterian circles in the Russian Far East. The arrival of East Asian peoples would naturally revolutionize the color of the Lutheran mosaic piece but a German Lutheranism in the Russian Far East no longer exists anyway.

Willing helpers unable to move to Russia will need to be satisfied with long-term planned, continual visits. Such visits from Germany and North America are nearly always welcome. They supply the hosts with necessary resources and reassure the hosts that they are not forgotten. Former Far Eastern pastor Markus Lesinski arrives every October in Khabarovsk to help organize a local culture week. The members in Khabarovsk appreciate that very much. Lesinski remains a foreign-based pastor working under the auspices of the “Evangelical Church of Germany” in New Delhi.

The buoyant Olga Kokhan from Komsomolsk still possesses thick albums documenting her visits to Lutheran parishes in Kansas during 2003. She would very much like to resuscitate those friendships. That desire is not unrealistic, for Pastor Gary Teske from Topeka/Kansas and the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are still in the business of maintaining partnerships with these small Russian congregations. Work teams from Australia and New Zealand have also made an appearance in Vladivostok. One would think these initial contacts could be developed further.

Yet these efforts remain in the end stopgap measures and makeshift remedies. Visitors are no replacement for workers living on location. A couple years ago, a Presbyterian couple from the United States stated, “We are the greatest missionaries around! For we are the ones who live here on location.” The location was Klaipeda in Lithuania. Lay parish head Konstantin Pavlenko noted: “No one from the outside can save us—we can only do so ourselves.” He added: “Human contacts always remain the greatest value—money trails behind.”

The Advantages of the Far East

What does life in the Far East have to offer? “Nowhere else is greener,” claimed Nina Dmitriyeva. “We have nature pure with tigers, bears, waterfalls, mountains and seas, fishing and boating.” Yet those scouting for mushrooms need healthy muscles: they can reach as high as the knee. Konstantin cannot live without the smell of the sea. Those attracted to yachts and ships can tour as far as South Korea and Japan. Vladivostok’s hills and ocean remind one of San Francisco—yet without the earthquakes and astronomic rent. But the Far East even then is relatively expensive for Russians. Similar to Minsk in Belarus, Khabarovsk strikes the visitor as well-groomed and stately. The Russian Far East is by no means on the fringe when one is reminded that China describes itself as the “Middle (of the globe) Kingdom.” China indeed was that up into the fifteenth century and is now well on its way to becoming that once again.

Russia’s Far East is a natural for orientalists preferring residence on Russian soil. Blagoveshchensk (translated: “Good News City”), the city on the Amur with an unobstructed view of a Chinese one just across the river, attracted a Protestant couple which regards China as its mission field. As residents of the border region, they are allowed to enter China without a visa. The man hails from the Volga region, while the woman is from Ukraine. The major cities in the border region feature a many-colored mix of nations. Chinese and South Korean tourists belong to the landscape of Vladivostok and those with a trained eye can on occasion identify a North Korean. South Koreans visit the city in order to experience “Europe” at minimal cost. Svetlana Vashanova is among the local Lutherans who regret that not even more Japanese citizens visit the Russian Far East. They are cherished for their friendliness and politeness.

Those enterprising persons eager to create something from scratch are at their proper location in the Far East. Those suffering from the travel bug and longing for action will get their

fill there. In Siberia, just to the west of Omsk, such drive among Russian-German Mennonite farmers has led to a mini-re-immigration from Germany. In business terms, Germany's juicy sectors and choice objects were spoken for generations ago.

Those with an adventuresome spirit and not on the lookout for salvation in secure comfort zones should give the Russian Far East a look. These attributes fit Superintendent Brockmann well. Forging across borders, setting out for foreign lands, a restless heart finding peace on the move, are all expressions which describe his disposition. He venerates the church father Augustine and the liturgy of the Taizé community in France.

Yet on the other hand, life in the West can be more precarious than one assumes. A young Christian from the USA wrote this to me recently: "Words can't express the admiration and respect I have for someone . . . who spreads the Gospel of Christ in foreign precarious countries like Russia and China." Yet, according to my impression, life is not as bad in Eastern Europe and Asia, nor as good in the West, as conventional wisdom assumes. The shrinkage of America's middle class and the moral dilemmas emanating from current US foreign policy have also made life in the USA "precarious." Life can be precarious everywhere, the issue is essentially how believers master the challenges confronting them.

The Russian Far East can of course also become one's dearly-treasured homeland. In Vladivostok, lay preacher, Nina, mentioned the mud puddles which tend to spring up right below one's feet when exiting a city bus: "If they would suddenly disappear, then this city would no longer be my home." A difference in mentality may be afoot: "Russians can be happy and content even in situations in which conditions are not optimal."

In Komsomolsk, lay church leader, Katya Weits, noted how she discovered the congregation 20 years ago through attending a German language course. She had taken the

church-sponsored course in hopes of exiting to the West as quickly as possible. She then spent a number of weeks visiting Germany and decided to return home. “I didn’t want to be a second-class citizen long-term,” she said. “Two of my girlfriends who had emigrated have returned. The same thing would have happened to me.”

Of course, the Far East is no longer as it was when the German trade firm “Kunst and Albers” reached Vladivostok by sea in 1864 and set up shop. Today, those with sufficient pocket change need to spend only 10 hours on a plane to get from Khabarovsk to Berlin. (The train from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok takes three hours longer.) Lutherans from the Far East repeatedly visit seminars in St. Petersburg or Omsk as well as the prominent “Kirchentag” church convention in Germany. Superintendent Brockmann visits Germany a number of times annually. Nina Dmitriyeva has a daughter in California; a Pentecostal from Vladivostok will be marrying an Alaskan this summer. A Baptist flight service from Alaska has a base in Khabarovsk. A number of Far East residents work in the Far North both to the east and west of the Urals and spend every second month back home. The people in the Far East know Western Europe and North American much better than vice-versa. Those with insufficient roubles can still easily resort to Skype and social media. Current technology is completely capable of networking the Lutherans in the broad expanses of Russia much more intensively. It would, as a stopgap, help keep a church surviving on its pilot light from complete extinction.