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PATIENT DIPLOMACY PAYS OFF FOR U. S. CHURCHMEN

Special Correspondence from Moscow

J. Martin Bailey
(Editor of A.D.)

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Five American church leaders saved the recent Moscow peace conference, according to many delegates, including several from Russia and eastern Europe. Salvation, in this case, meant that patience and behind-the-scenes diplomacy avoided an ugly East-West split among the religious workers from 90 countries and led to the adoption by acclamation of four wide-ranging documents.

The stage was set when the host for the conference, Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and All Russia, made an address which even the skeptical U.S. Embassy described as having "taken the high road." Other even-handed addresses were delivered by Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Byelorussia and two Soviet government officials. Anti-American speeches, snarled with rhetoric, then began to flow, however, from several Third World delegates who must have assumed that their one-sided exaggerations were an appropriate way to thank their hosts. One dramatic speech by a survivor of Hiroshima echoed more stridently in Moscow than the same words would have sounded in Washington or at the UN.

It required all some American observers could do to keep their cool. Finally, as he took his turn as chairperson, Presiding Bishop David Preus of the American Lutheran Church explained that he had come to Moscow expecting that the delegates could "rise above national, political, ideological and religious differences to call all peoples of the earth to stop the development of nuclear arms and begin the process of disarming."

Preus then introduced Arie Brouwer, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, for a major address. Brouwer's carefully drafted speech was heard with rapt attention: he is widely trusted in eastern Europe as the chairperson of a National Council of Churches committee on U.S.-U.S.S.R. church relations. He explained that when American Christians challenge the policies of their own government in the arms race, they do so as good citizens. "This emphasis should not be interpreted to mean, however, that we consider the U.S. to be unilaterally responsible for the problems of the world." All governments should be challenged and criticized, Brouwer said, but he counseled that "the propaganda war is also a war without winners."

Meanwhile, an initial draft of a document addressed "to all governments of the world" began to circulate. Americans were concerned that a reference to Brezhnev's decision not to deploy new medium-range missiles west of the Urals be "balanced" by a reference to the Kennedy-Hatfield proposal to freeze the production of nuclear weapons. William P. Thompson, stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church, and Avery D. Post, president of the United Church of Christ, were ready to act. Before leaving New York, Thompson had learned that President Reagan was planning a major disarmament speech on the eve of the Moscow conference. He had arranged to have the text available for all U.S. delegates in Moscow the morning the conference opened. Mr. Reagan's proposals were a more appropriate basis for a balanced document. Post and Thompson went to an eastern European colleague, Bishop Karoly Toth of Hungary, to enlist his help. They knew Toth through the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and in an informal East-West dialogue group, Karlory Vary, that Post and Toth cochair.
Toth's sensitivity to the issue was immediate. He quickly called Metropolitan Filaret and Bishop Paulos Mar Gregorios of India from the platform. Within a few minutes, the cluster of world church leaders, who happen also to be longtime friends, had worked out acceptable language. Gregorios, who headed the drafting committee, assured the others that he would persuade his committee and the delegates to approve the compromise. In the end, there was also support from leaders of the Evangelical Church of the Union in the German Democratic Republic—a church that last year established full communion (Kirchengemeinschaft) with the United Church of Christ. That network of ecumenical association and trust, to which the Americans could appeal, was all that was needed.

Brouwer and a United Presbyterian professor from Chicago's McCormick Seminary, Bruce Rigdon, were on the drafting committee and steered the document through what turned out to be relatively calm waters. Rigdon, who is a specialist in Orthodox liturgy and history and who served on the conference preparatory committee, is highly respected by Russian Orthodox leaders.

The most critical of four conference documents was one that delegates addressed to their respective governments. The negotiated paragraph expressed appreciation for the helpful trend in efforts to lessen tensions and cites especially the Soviet decision to stop deployment of the new medium-range missiles in the European part of the U.S.S.R. "We also welcome the expressed readiness of the U.S. to conduct formal negotiations on the reduction of strategic nuclear arms beginning as early as next month" (June). The delegates appealed to the Soviet Union, to the United States, and to other nuclear powers to hasten the pace of implementing programs of disarmament. "We cannot rest until all nuclear weapons are banished and destroyed," they said.

In the midst of this drama, the same actors were playing significant roles on another stage. Before leaving the U.S. they had been encouraged by many Americans, including 27 U.S. senators, to visit the Pentecostal families who have been living as exiles in the American embassy since June 1978, and to make witness for religious freedom. Rigdon counseled that any visit should be made after the conference closed, so as not to cloud the overriding issue for which they had all come. The four church executives used their plan for a postconference visit as leverage to gain an audience with Vladimir Fitsev, vice-chairperson of the Council of Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. This visit was helpfully arranged by the general secretary of the Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Alexi Bychkov. The meeting was regarded as constructive by all parties.

The four denominational executives meet their Russian Orthodox counterparts frequently in the context of the World Council of Churches and other bodies. In recent years the U.S. and Soviet church leaders have established a tradition of always having a meal together. In one of the six formal toasts, Thompson told his Russian hosts that he believed their growing friendship and understanding, developed over a period of years, would be a useful model for their respective governments. He ended by quoting a Native American proverb, "The longest journey begins with one step."