Continuity in Charismata: Swedish Mission and the Growth of Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Russia

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The spread of Neo-Pentecostal churches and denominations in Russia after the fall of Communism has been highly visible and controversial. It is part of a general resurgence of religion and Christianity, including the Orthodox Church. Critical accounts have rejected the growing influence of Neo-Pentecostal churches as a form of Americanized religious imperialism. The missionary activity that lies behind some of the churches in the former Soviet Union has even been branded as an “unwanted mission”.¹ In this article a different perspective is presented by pointing to the continuity between Classical Pentecostalism in Russia and the missionary efforts of Word of Life Church, Uppsala, Sweden. The conclusion of the article is that a prerequisite for the success of the Scandinavian based missions in Russia has been the presence of national and transnational networks of Classical Pentecostalism.²

The term Pentecostal is derived from Pentecost, a Greek term describing the Jewish Feast of Weeks. For Christians, this event commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ, as described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. Pentecostalism is defined most conveniently as an expansive but loosely tied global Christian missionary and revivalist movement with origins in the international holiness movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, emphasizing themes like baptism in the Spirit, healing and glossolalia. The roots of Pentecostalism can be found in the theology of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in the 18th century. A renewal of Pentecostalism took place in the 1960s and 1970s, often called “the Charismatic revival”, influencing historical churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican and Lutheran churches but also leading to innumerable new so-called Charismatic or Neo-Pentecostal churches.

Today the umbrella term Pentecostalism covers both the earlier and the later forms of movements, numbering about 500 million adherents with a stronghold in Latin America, USA, sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia. The earlier forms of Pentecostalism are commonly labeled Classical Pentecostalism, consisting of denominations, organizations and local churches with their roots in the revival of the early 1900s. Pentecostalism, beginning in USA (Topeka, Kansas 1901, Los Angeles 1906), reached both Sweden and Russia in the first decade of the 20th century, developing into national revival movements. These soon organized into more or less well defined denominations with different legal relations to state authorities.³

The most important of these Classical Pentecostal denominations in the countries

mentioned were the Pentecostal Movement in Sweden and Christians of Evangelical Faith (Khristiane evang’el’skoy very, KhEV) in Russia.\(^4\) The two denominations grew out of earlier Baptist churches and retained the Baptist congregationalist ecclesiology. Strong leadership characterized them, with Lewi Pethrus (1884-1974) in Sweden and Ivan Voronaev (1885-1930s) in Russia. Voronaev was, like many other Pentecostal pastors in the Soviet Union at that time, killed in the Stalin camps in the 1930s. This said, it is clear that Pentecostalism as a phenomenon has a century of history in Russia, has survived the persecutions of Communism and has a position in religious life in Russia comparable to other Protestant denominations.

**Neo-Pentecostals/Neo-Pentecostal churches** are terms associated with the Charismatic revival from the 1960s and onwards.\(^5\) One important part of the current worldwide Neo-Pentecostal movement has been the revival of theology prevalent in the international holiness movement of the late 19\(^{th}\) century. Based on a literal exegesis of especially the Gospels and the Pauline Letters, this Bible teaching has emphasized faith as a spiritual mechanism, healing and wholeness as an integral part of salvation and the possibilities of the individual believer and the local church to experience different forms of growth and blessing. “Prosperity gospel” has been the derogatory term used for this widespread and popular form of teaching, while the adherents rather have talked about the faith teaching.\(^6\) There is both common ground and differences between Classical Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostals.

A full discussion of this topic is not possible here, but some relevant similarities and differences can be mentioned. The common ground is found in the theology and practical application of the charismata, especially Spirit baptism, glossolalia, healing, prophetic utterances, extemporaneous prayer, etc. The Classical Pentecostals adapted the worship forms common in the international holiness movement of the 19\(^{th}\) century to the new experiences of Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts: hymns, choirs, extemporaneous prayers, testimonies, and sermons with subjects emphasizing edification. Among Neo-Pentecostals the worship tends to combine contemporary popular music with simple Biblical rhymes in the pursuit of an atmosphere that is conducive to the charismata. Added to that, there is often a stronger emphasis on Biblical exposition and, especially in the renewal movements in historic churches, a greater openness to older liturgical forms. Tensions between Classical Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals have concerned attitudes to contemporary culture. Another area of contention has been the faith teaching.\(^6\)

Twenty years after the fall of Communism there is a need for a reappraisal of the development of Neo-Pentecostal churches in the former Soviet Union. The immediate post-1989 religious situation profoundly challenged the long tradition of politically enforced ideological unity in the Soviet Union. As the Soviet regime was about to collapse in 1990 it rejected its earlier commitment to militant atheism. A year later the leaders of the newly founded Russian Federation confirmed the change by refusing to commit themselves to any particular faith or ideology. Similar things happened in other new independent post-Soviet states at the same time. A new openness for religion replaced the old atheism, with few restrictions on religious organizations. Neo-

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Pentecostal churches thrived and multiplied in this situation, many times supported by missionary activities from Europe and USA. This led to criticism from older churches and denominations, including both the Orthodox churches and Classical Pentecostals. Although these churches also experienced growth and new opportunities, the competition from the new Neo-Pentecostal churches was felt. Criticism was expressed in theological, church political and purely political terms. One of the most public international expressions of this was the Russian Orthodox Church’s criticism against “proselytism” in the World Council of Churches during the 1990s.7

Fifteen years later, in 2010, the mushrooming Neo-Pentecostal churches have stabilized in the formation of a number of legally recognized denominations. These denominations have established contacts with both the state authorities, ecumenical bodies and historical churches. In understanding this development, many different factors have to be assessed. In the following pages one of these factors will be discussed, and that is the crucial role played by Classical Pentecostals in the process of stabilization and nationalization of the Neo-Pentecostal churches. The presentation stresses the continuity between Classical Pentecostals in Russia and Sweden and the formation of the new denominations. This is done through short biographies of four leading personalities in these denominations and networks on national, regional and local level in Russia and in the mission efforts of the Word of Life Church, Uppsala, Sweden. The aim of the article is then explorative, meaning that it tries to survey and expose new facts that demand attention and that give rise to new questions and hypothesis. To answer these questions more thoroughgoing research is needed. The material basis for this article is newsletters, memoirs, and interviews with pastors and missionaries working in the former Soviet Union during the last twenty years. Attention has also been paid to current websites of the mentioned religious organizations.

Swedish Neo-Pentecostal Mission in the former Soviet Union

Several associations of Neo-Pentecostal churches in the former Soviet Union developed out of the missionary efforts of the Word of Life Church in Uppsala, Sweden, and its vast network of churches, organizations and individuals in Scandinavia. Word of Life Church in Uppsala was founded in 1983 by the Lutheran student priest Ulf Ekman (1950-) and his father-in-law, the Methodist missionary and pastor Sten Nilsson (1914-2009). They, and the original nucleus of the church, was involved in the Charismatic revival among Lutherans and Methodists in Sweden at this time. The theology was a blend of Lutheranism, Methodism, Faith teaching and Neo-Pentecostal worship forms. The mission of Word of Life in the former Soviet Union began in 1989 and the theology of Ulf Ekman became thus a shaping force in determining theology, practice and social ethics of the Russian and Ukrainian churches that were founded and supported. Between 1989 and 1996 about 1000 new local churches were planted and/or supported by Word of Life and its network through conferences, missionaries, short time volunteers, and bible schools in different parts of the former Soviet Union. Major aspects of the background and history of Word of Life Uppsala can be found in the secondary literature listed at the end of the article and will not be related here. In short, Word of Life Uppsala was a controversial but also popular element in the religious landscape of Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s. The local church in Uppsala grew from 25 people 1983 to around 3300 in 2009, with about 10 000 students in their bible school during the same time period. Through its strong emphasis on missions, Word of Life’s present international

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network comprises about 1500 churches in the former Soviet Union, East and Central Europe, Central Asia and Scandinavia. Some of these churches have a formal organizational tie to Word of Life Uppsala, while others have more informal relationships.  

The formation of the Word of Life-oriented churches in the former Soviet Union into several different national and transnational organizations took place in the later part of the 1990s. The turning point in the development toward more denominational-like structures was the growing political pressure against foreign and non-traditional religious missionary efforts in Russia. In 1997 the Russian Federation issued a new law, “O svobode sovesti i o religioznykh ob’edineniyakh” (Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations), which continued to guarantee all citizens’ freedom of conscience and creed while at the same time taking measures to promote the country’s four “traditional” confessions, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism and especially the Orthodox Church, at the expense of other religious groups. One aim of the law was to curtail and diminish foreign missionaries in Russia and the churches that they had planted and supported. One of the tenets of the new law was a prohibition against denominations and churches founded after 1983, which would effectively outlaw all the Neo-Pentecostal churches planted or supported by Word of Life and its Scandinavian network.  

This was anticipated by many of the new Neo-Pentecostal churches in Russia in 1995-96 in different attempts to create an umbrella organization with a pre-1983 origin. The attempts finally succeeded in 1997 through an organization inherited by the Classical Pentecostal pastor Sergey Ryakhovsky, Rossiisky obyedinenny soyz khristian very yeavangelskoi pyatidesytnikov (ROSKhVYeP), the Russian United Union of Pentecostal Christians of the Evangelical Faith. ROSKhVYeP is presently said to have about 200,000 members in 1500 local churches. A number of Word of Life-oriented churches in Russia became member of this umbrella organization and some of them created their own union, Assotsiatsiya KhVYe ‘Tserkvi very’, Association of Evangelical Christians - Churches of Faith, under its wings and comprises today the largest section of ROSKhVYeP with about 240 churches. During the first decade of 2000s, the leader of this association has been the pastor of Word of Life Church in Moscow since 1998, Mats-Ola Ishoel. Ishoel became vice chairman of ROSKhVYeP in 2008. There were also several other associations of Word of Life-churches formed that became members of ROSKhVYeP. The leaders of two of those associations (Andrej Dirienko and Pavel Savelev) will be discussed below. These other associations of Word of Life-oriented churches preferred to maintain a more independent relation to Word of Life Church in Moscow. They tend to have a similar theology and spirituality and/or their pastors and leaders have studied at Word of Life bible schools in Uppsala, Sweden or in the former Soviet Union.  

When the new law in 1997 was promulgated the new organizational structure was already in place and has functioned to this date. Through the Association of Evangelical Christians - Churches of Faith another umbrella organization for Word of Life-oriented churches, but with transnational membership, was founded in 1996, Euro-Asian Association of Christians of Evangelical faith – Churches of Faith. This association consists of Neo-Pentecostal churches of similar type in all of the former Soviet-Union (Russia, Armenia, Azerbajdzjan, Estonia, Ukraine, Belorussia, etc). In 2009-2010 the organization was reconstructed and its name changed to Word of Life International. One of the associations of Word of Life-oriented churches in former Soviet republics that joined this
umbrella organization was *Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church*. It consists of around 25000 members in a little more than 300 local congregations, and is headed by Leonid Padun. Padun was reared in Classical Pentecostalism in Ukraine, but will not be discussed in this article because of our focus on Russia but his religious background underscores the thesis here. The total present number of Word of Life-oriented churches represented in these different organizations seems to be around 1000. The largest centers are Word of Life Church in Yerevan, Armenia with 10000 members, Word of Life Church Donetsk, Ukraine with appr. 5000 members, and Word of Life Church in Moscow with appr. 4000 members.11

What is the role of Classical Pentecostalism in this development? As will be shown in the following pages,

- the missionary efforts of representatives of Classical Pentecostalism in Sweden preceded and continued in the mission of Word of Life, Uppsala,
- Classical Pentecostalism in the former Soviet Union has formed the breeding ground of several of the major leaders of the Neo-Pentecostal churches and denominations described above,
- Classical Pentecostalism in Russia has supplied a legitimate organizational framework for the Neo-Pentecostal churches.

Carl-Gustaf Severin and early Word of Life Mission in the Soviet Union

One of the most popular and well-known figures in the missionary effort of Word of Life Church, Uppsala, was, aside of Ulf Ekman, Carl-Gustaf Severin. Severin was raised in a secular home in southern Sweden but was converted in his teens through contacts with local Classical Pentecostals. In his twenties he began working as an evangelist in the local congregations of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement. In the late 1970s he became assistant pastor in one of its larger congregations, Södermalms Fria Församling, located in Stockholm. This congregation began to grow after contacts with the Charismatic revival in Sweden and became a center of Faith teaching, while still being a part of Classical Pentecostalism. Carl-Gustaf Severin studied at Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, in 1983-84 and became then a representative of Faith teaching in Sweden. In 1985 he traveled for the first time to Soviet Union together with Tapio Tamminen, a pastor from the Finnish Pentecostal Movement. During the later part of the 1980s Severin continued his travels to Soviet Union, preaching at several groundbreaking conferences held in Tallin, Estonia and Gattjina outside St. Petersburg, Russia. The conferences in the late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in Russia and Ukraine was mostly organized by Classical Pentecostals and introduced Faith teaching and Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship among them.

In the spring of 1989, Ulf Ekman and Word of Life began its mission in the Soviet Union after a vision. In this vision Ulf Ekman saw a train filled with preachers going through Russia. The vision was literally realized in 1992 and 1993. Severin moved to Uppsala in 1990 to take part in the missionary work and became one of its leading representatives, adding his network of contacts to the new mission effort. What is interesting from the perspective of this article is the role of Classical Pentecostalism in the ministry of Carl Gustaf Severin and the early stages of Word of Life mission in Soviet Union. The conclusion is that Classical Pentecostalism in Sweden and its network of contacts in Finland and Russia provided the initial environment for the spread of Faith teaching and Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship. This network was established before the advent of Neo-Pentecostal churches in Russia, and was a result of older, more or less secret, transnational contacts between Classical Pentecostals in Sweden, Finland and Russia. It preceded Word of Life’s large


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scale missionary effort during the 1990s and gave it its first points of contact. Although the leadership of Classical Pentecostalism in Sweden and Russia at this time generally rejected Faith teaching and the high profile Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship of Word of Life, individuals and local congregations thought otherwise and provided a needed stepping stone for the Neo-Pentecostal movement in Russia.\textsuperscript{12}

**Andrey Dirienko and Church of God, Yaroslav**

One leader of Neo-Pentecostal churches in Russia in 2010 is Andrey Dirienko. Dirienko is senior pastor of Church of God, Yaroslav, with about 3000 members, and leads an association of around 40 churches in the Yaroslav area, three to four hour’s drive northeast of Moscow. The association is part of ROSKhVYeP and Dirienko is it’s the current Deputy Chairman in the Central Federal District of Russia. Dirienko’s spiritual pilgrimage is a striking example of the continuity between Classical Pentecostalism and the Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Russia. Dirienko is a Pentecostal in the fourth generation. His grandparents belonged to the denomination started by the legendary Pentecostal leader Ivan Voronaev in the 1920s, where also his father continues as a pastor. Dirienko explains that he grew up in a local congregation in Kirgizistan where Voronaev’s widow was a member until 1963 and that he experienced the hardships that characterized the lives of Pentecostals in the Communist period. In the late 1980s he came in contact with a Charismatic revival in Tallin centered around Finnish missionaries and received books by Kenneth Hagin and Ulf Ekman. After finishing military service in 1990 Dirienko went to a conference outside Moscow, where missionaries from Word of Life Uppsala preached, and relates the conflicts that arose among the Classical Pentecostals concerning Faith teaching and Neo-Pentecostal worship forms.

The contacts with Word of Life Uppsala, Ulf Ekman and Carl Gustaf Severin, were major factors in helping him accomplish his vision of starting a church in the city of Yaroslav. In 1992 his then small church received it’s first visit of missionaries from Uppsala, followed by many later. In addition to this he has regularly participated in conferences arranged by Word of Life, both in Sweden and in Russia. When his church in Yaroslav started to grow, a program of church planting in the Yaroslav area developed and is now accomplished. Dirienko has during the last decade developed other international contacts, both with the so-called G12-churches and to the American Classical Pentecostal denomination Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). To conclude, Andrei Dirienko was reared in Classical Pentecostalism but received the impulses to start a church and develop a program for church planting from Swedish Neo-Pentecostals. They provided him with Faith teaching and the new concept of Neo-Pentecostal worship. In his life and ministry the continuity in Pentecostalism in Russia is visible.\textsuperscript{13}

**Pavel Savelev and the Association of Christians of the Evangelical Faith ‘Charism’**

Pavel Savelev is a leader of an association of Neo-Pentecostal churches, \textit{Assotsiatsiya khristant very yevangelskoi ‘Kharism’}, that belongs to ROSKhVYeP. Savelev came to a Christian belief and was baptised by unregistered Pentecostals in 1971. During the 1970s and the 1980s Savelev came in contact with Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship in Estonia. American, Swedish and Finnish missionaries were active in Estonia, especially after 1985. In 1989 Savelev invited Carl Gustaf Severin to meetings in his flat in Moscow and arranged conferences with Severin, Ulf Ekman and other Word of Life missionaries in and near Moscow during the early part of the 1990s. Savelev also took part in the service that inaugurated the Word of Life mission project in the Soviet Union. In

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Andrey Dirienko June 3, 2010

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this service a large number of video tape recorders were prayed for and sent to different churches and prayer groups for use in bible study groups and local bible schools.\textsuperscript{14}

In this process Savelev eventually broke his involvement with Classical Pentecostals in Russia and set up a house group called ‘Rosa’ in his flat. Rosa grew and became a local Neo-Pentecostal church, and after a while it also started evangelistic work in other parts of Russia. The number of members of Rosa is estimated to around 1000 in Moscow. Some of the converts have a Russian Orthodox background and the church, value the arts, use contemporary styles of music and dance in their services and have organised the Alpha course and Alpha groups with the help of Sandy Miller from Holy Trinity Brompton in London. Under the leadership of Savelev, Rosa now has around 60 satellite churches in various parts of Russia.\textsuperscript{15}

What is interesting from our perspective is Savelev’s pattern of development: from Classical Pentecostalism to contact with Neo-Pentecostal worship forms and Faith teaching through missionaries from Word of Life Uppsala, Sweden, and then church planting in Moscow and other parts of Russia. Savelev was reared in the Christian faith and introduced to Pentecostalism through Classical Pentecostals, but developed into a leader of new Neo-Pentecostal churches through contacts with, among others, Word of Life Uppsala, Sweden.

**Sergey Ryakhovsky and ROSKhVYeP**

One of the most important links between Classical Pentecostalism in Russia and the new Neo-Pentecostal churches is Sergey Ryakhovsky. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008) Ryakhovsky assumed a number of leadership roles in relation to both the Neo-Pentecostal churches and the Protestant community of Russia as a whole. On top of being the chairman of ROSKhVYeP, he is also a member of the Russian Public Chamber. Ryakhovsky represents the Protestant denominations in this chamber, which is formally appointed by the Russian President. He is also coordinator of the Russian branch of Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and pastors a church in Moscow. An important background of his leadership is his deep roots in the struggles of Classical Pentecostals during the Soviet Era. His father, Vladimir Ryakhovsky, a Pentecostal church leader, was sent to prison camps during the reign of three different Communist leaders (Stalin, Chrusjtov and Breshnev) and forced to participate in filmed show trials. During 1970s and 1980s Sergey Ryakhovsky worked as a pastor among the unregistered Pentecostals and met missionaries from Word of Life Church, Uppsala, Sweden in the Moscow area in 1989 (Carl Gustaf Severin). After a first negative encounter, he gradually moved to a more conciliative and positive relationship to the Swedish missionaries.

In 1995 Ryakhovsky registered an association for former unregistered Pentecostals but broke with them because of their condemnation of the new Neo-Pentecostal churches. In 1997 Ryakhovsky met the pastor of Word of Life Church in Moscow, the Swedish missionary Christian Akerhielm, in a way that he himself considers providential. A plan for an umbrella organization that could embrace the new associations of Neo-Pentecostal churches was conceived. Ryakhovsky succeeded in having the new umbrella organization registered because of his and his fathers church leadership during the Soviet Era. Ryakhovsky and ROSKhVYeP then proved to be the absolute prerequisite for having the new Neo-Pentecostal churches and their associations legally recognized.\textsuperscript{16} The historical background of ROSKhVYeP in Classical Pentecostalism is clearly

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Carl-Gustaf Severin, November 27, 2010
\textsuperscript{16} Interviews with Sergey Ryakhovsky June 4, 2010, and Christian Akerhielm November 27, 2010
described in the denominational history available at the website of the organization.\textsuperscript{17}

**Conclusion**

In this article the relationship between Classical Pentecostalism and new Neo-Pentecostal churches in Russia has been explored. Word of Life Church, Uppsala, Sweden, has been an important transmitter of Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship and faith teaching to Russia. Their mission work during the 1990s resulted in a large number of local churches, later organized into a number of different associations. Classical Pentecostalism played a crucial role in this process through the networks established between Swedish, Finnish and Russian congregations and preachers in the Soviet era. These networks preceded the Word of Life mission effort and became its initial channels. Many of the new leaders of the new Neo-Pentecostal churches had their spiritual background and formation among Classical Pentecostals in Russia. When the new Neo-Pentecostal churches in the later part of the 1990s developed denominational-like structures, it was the links with Classical Pentecostals in the Soviet era that provided the legally needed historical origin. A conclusion of the article is then that the new Neo-Pentecostal churches have achieved their contemporary legally recognized status partly because of the historic continuity of Pentecostalism in Russia.

The aim of this article is explorative. What new areas of research can be suggested from this short survey? One area that demands attention is of course the historical, social, political and cultural background of the success of Scandinavian missions. Another area is the sheer extent of influence of the mission in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Ulf Ekman’s theology and leadership in this development must be analyzed, as well as the role of the Neo-Pentecostal movements in Scandinavia. Comparative studies that analyzes the similarities and differences between patterns of developments in different former Soviet Republic seem also important, in order to assess the general as well as the extraordinary factors of the Russian situation.