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V Bruce Rigdon
McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago

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JOURNEY TO THE USSR--JUNE, 1984

by V. Bruce Rigdon

Dr. V. Bruce Rigdon (Presbyterian) is professor of church history at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. He has had extensive scholarly training in the history and theology of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and has made practically countless trips to the U.S.S.R. and other Eastern European countries over the last two decades. He is a former chairperson of C.A.R.E.E., having served and continuing to serve in various other capacities with C.A.R.E.E. He is the chairperson of the US-USSR Church Relations Committee of the N.C.C.C. and the author of many articles as well as an N.B.C. television series, "The Church of the Russians."

In June, 1984, two hundred sixty-six Christians from Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox communions in the U.S. paid a historic visit to fourteen cities in the Soviet Union. One Canadian also participated. This was the largest group of American church people ever to visit the churches of the U.S.S.R. They were the guests of the Russian Orthodox Church, the All Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists, and several other Christian churches, including the Lutherans, the Armenian Orthodox Church, and several Jewish synagogues.

The visit was the first time that the Soviet churches and the government travel agency, Intourist, had undertaken a joint project. Each separate group was accompanied by a Russian Orthodox priest and an Intourist guide. The program was the responsibility of the church.

The visit was under the auspices of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., which has been involved in exchanges for nearly three decades. The purpose of the 1984 journey was to demonstrate, in a visible way, that the unity which God has given the church transcends all boundaries of ideology, nationality and social system; and to contribute to the peacemaking programs which are an integral and increasingly central part of church life in both the U.S. and U.S.S.R.

On the first Sunday in Moscow the group visited 21 churches and on Pentecostal Sunday, in Zagorsk, the group joined thousands of Soviet Christians in the celebration of Pentecost. This opportunity to meet with many fellow-believers was a meaningful experience of worship and a foretaste of the contact they had throughout the journey.

The Americans who traveled across the Soviet Union in 10 groups discovered vital religious communities wherever they went, from Tallinn to Tashkent. In Soviet Georgia, as well as in a few other places, the group heard not only of the restoration of churches but also of two or three examples of new church construction. The travelers expressed their solidarity with Soviet citizens who suffered the loss of 20 million during World War II with visits to war memorials all over the country; they laid a wreath at the mass graves connected with the 900-day siege of Leningrad.

The Soviet and American Christians pledged to work together in the cause of peace, seeking to lower the causes of fear and mistrust. They intend to do this here at home, and their counterparts plan to do so in the Soviet Union in a variety of ways, including a continuation of exchanges.

An official delegation from the Governing Board of the NCCC visited Moscow October 12-24, 1984, for theological discussions. Under the leadership of General Secretary Claire V. Randall, the discussion for that visit centered on the World Council of Churches' study documents on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

Those of us among the group who had been in the Soviet Union before have witnessed certain improvements in the situation of the religious communities. We remain optimistic that this trend will continue. The strength and witness of the churches in the Soviet Union remains a cause of great concern to all of us.

Civilized people everywhere have a stake in keeping contacts, communication and creativity as broad, deep and free as possible . . . Our quarrel is not with the Russian people, with Ukrainian people or any other of the proud nationalities in that multinational state. So we must be careful in reacting to actions by the Soviet government not to take out our indignation on those not responsible. And that's why I feel that we should broaden opportunities for American and Soviet citizens to get to know each other better.
So spoke President Reagan at his June 26th news conference, as reported by the New York Times.

Six days earlier the largest delegation of American Christians ever to visit the churches of the Soviet Union returned to begin evaluating their experiences during two very full weeks of encounters with Soviet citizens. Our journey occurred at a time of virtual stalemate between our nations on all important issues, and significant discussion between government leaders is almost non-existent. A United States Embassy representative in Moscow told us on our first day in the Soviet Union that even normal social contacts between American and Soviets at diplomatic receptions have been informally suspended. Trade and cultural relations have been reduced and restricted. Even the possibility for athletes to meet in Olympic competition has been ruled out for the second time in this decade. Given the awesome power of our two governments and the death-dealing threat of the nuclear arms race, this isolation of our peoples is a growing danger to the future of every man, woman, and child on earth.

In that context the President's words are a welcome sign of change from the angry rhetoric of recent months, and emphasize some of the reasons which had compelled 266 of us to embark on what our hosts called a "peace invasion." We went to challenge our common enemy, silence which breeds fear, gives birth to rigid stereotypes, nurtures ignorance, and leads to paralyzing despair. We went to look for signs of hope, large and powerful enough to sustain and direct us to work for a future of justice and peace. As Christians we went to seek such hope in the Gospel as it is addressed to fellow believers in both nations.

We returned home, however, to face a barrage of newspaper and television commentators, some of which took a very dim view of our journey, suggesting that our visit was worse than useless and that participants were conducted through a standard tour, a sort of Potemkin pilgrimage, which was designed to keep us from seeing the Soviet Union as it really is. Others asserted that we wore rose-colored glasses, uncritically accepting Soviet propaganda. We have also been accused of ignoring glaring Soviet human rights problems to promote peace at any price. Most disturbing is that so many of these commentaries were
written second and third hand without any attempt to ascertain or corroborate the facts. We can only conclude that the numerous incidents of misquotation, misrepresentation, and error which we have experienced with some segments of the press and television are themselves a symbol indicative of the problem of communication between the peoples of our two nations. But we are grateful that our journey appears to have been a helpful catalyst in facilitating an urgently needed national discussion about our relations with the Soviet Union and the role which religious communities in both countries can play in these relations: We are also glad that six professional journalists, including one television newsperson, travelled with us to bring first-hand experience to their reporting of our journey. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with some basic information about our encounters and some reflections as to what they may mean.

Our seminar, traveling under the sponsorship of the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCC) in the United States of America, was but the latest, and by no means the last, in a regular exchange of delegations maintained for nearly three decades between the NCC and the Soviet churches. Our group was one of five specific exchanges during 1984-85 arranged during the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver. Commenting on these years of dialogue, Dr. Claire Randall, the General Secretary of the NCC has written:

It was a bold move, and not one without risks, but it was inspired by a vision of the necessity of members of the one body of Christ, in the United States and in the Soviet Union, reaching across the deepening chasm between their two nations.

Decades have passed since those early journeys for understanding and for strengthened Christian unity. The intervening years have seen these contacts grow into a long stream of developing relations.

We have been building a sense of trust and church unity that penetrated the "coldest war" barriers years ago and that has grown into warm Christian relationships. These relationships not only can strengthen our churches but can also make a contribution toward peace. Together we have already articulated a shared concern for peace in a world threatened by the power of our two nations and by the gulf separating our nations' leaders.
Our group was distinctive not only for its size, but also for its composition. Representation included Roman Catholic and Orthodox participants, as well as Protestants from churches both within and outside NCC membership. Among the 266 were Roman Catholic nuns, a Syrian Orthodox archbishop, denominational executives, the moderator and vice-moderator of a major Protestant denomination, canons and deans of Episcopal cathedrals, university and seminary presidents, and members of the NCC Governing Board. The diversity of the group embraced lay people from a wide variety of occupations, and included Hispanics, blacks, and Asian-American participants. We were about evenly divided between men and women, and our informal discussions revealed that we also spanned the American political spectrum.

No less significant than the composition of the seminar was the way in which it was developed. Without a single published advertisement, several hundred applications were received in a three-month period, largely in the result of 27 local councils of churches who spread the word and encouraged applications. This overwhelming response indicates that the issues reflected in the project represent a deep and genuinely ecumenical yearning to find a way out of our present impasse and to contribute to more constructive relations with the government and people of the USSR. Congregation after congregation sent word of their desire to have a sister relationship with a Soviet congregation in order to make a contribution as Christians toward reducing the threat of nuclear destruction.

The seminar required rather extensive preparation by each participant. Several months before departure bibliographical material, books and articles, including a special publication designed for this event by the NCC Committee on US-USSR Church Relations entitled, Togetherness on the Way, were sent to everyone. Included was information on the history of Soviet churches, encompassing the periods of intense persecution and oppression through which they have passed since the 1917 October Revolution; articles selected by American Jewish organizations on the past and present situation of Soviet Jews; general histories of Russia and the USSR; and books on liturgical and spiritual life of the Russian Orthodox Church. Still other documents dealt with general human rights problems, issues of disarmament and peacemaking and Soviet-American
relations.

In a three day orientation at the Riverside Church prior to departure, one full day was devoted to human rights in the USSR and to issues of disarmament. On that day, a number of experts spoke to the delegation, including the executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and a spokesperson for a variety of Christian groups in the Soviet Union who currently suffer for their faith. As a veteran of more than twenty years of participation in dialogues with the Soviet churches, I cannot recall any time when more effort had been made to give participants adequate orientation for the journey.

During the next two weeks the delegation spent time together in Moscow, Zagorsk and Leningrad, and travelled with their American leaders in ten groups of 26 persons to many other cities and towns. The program and itinerary had been carefully negotiated months earlier by representatives of the NCC, the Soviet churches, and Intourist; this constituted the first time that the Soviet churches had ever officially cooperated with Intourist in putting together the visit of a religious delegation. The size of the delegation made working with this official Soviet tourist organization indispensable. From the outset the NCC was able to specify the Soviet churches to be visited (Russian, Armenian and Georgian Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, etc.), Christians whom we wished to see, conferences to be arranged and locations to be visited. The result was quite clearly not a standard Intourist itinerary, but was a focused visit to the churches. Again and again we stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow believers in crowded churches, brought them greetings and spoke about why we had come. Again and again we were moved by the obvious warmth and faith of these congregations and the vivid evidence that having suffered the awful consequence of war as individual human beings and as a people, they were passionate about the need to avoid a nuclear holocaust. Many of us came to realize with renewed force that the Soviets are human beings like us, people beset by the same fears, loves and hopes. More than this, we saw with new eyes that our Christian faith is shared by millions of Soviets who are our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

There were also difficult encounters, especially with secular organizations. Meetings with representatives of the Soviet Peace
Committee, the Institute for the Study of the United States and Canada, the Soviet Friendship Society and others were sometimes disappointing and difficult. In these and other meetings with mayors and political officials, we asked hard questions, questions about the Sakharovs, about unregistered Baptists and other religious dissidents, as well as questions about Soviet foreign policy and problems related to disarmament proposals and negotiations. We also visited synagogues along the way and some of our members talked with Jewish refuseniks and dissidents in Moscow and elsewhere. We had no naive expectation that our visit would resolve any of these issues, but we raised them as frequently and forcefully as possible. At every opportunity we stressed the fact that if the Soviet government and people appreciate the contribution which their churches are making to peace, they must recognize that in the West the credibility of such contributions will be in direct relation to the freedom with which the Soviet authorities allow religious communities to exercise their full rights as believers.

Two days before we left Moscow we were guests at the Moscow Baptist Church. A special oratorio, Life and Peace, had been composed in our honor, and was performed by a choir and orchestra of young people during an evening worship service. In the midst of this service two banners were unfurled from the balcony by three unregistered Baptists. For nearly twenty years a division has existed among Soviet Baptists and Pentecostalists because of the legal requirement that churches, like all organizations, must register with the authorities. Some refuse this registration because in conscience they believe that it involves compromises with the state which run counter to their faith and the teaching of scripture, and this refusal has brought many of them great suffering. The banners, written in English, told of this suffering by imprisoned pastors and believers and requested our prayers.

During the confusion created by this protest regular parishioners asked the demonstrators to put down their banners. In the end church members escorted them from the balcony. Our TV newscaster filmed all of this, and some of our members spoke with one of the women outside about the imprisonment of her husband, a pastor. The other two unregistered Baptists declined to identify themselves and hurried away. This incident and what it represents was and continues to be a deep concern to all of
us.

The next morning Rev. Bichkov, one of the pastors of the Moscow Baptist Church and General Secretary of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists, told of the pain of this division for both sides and indicated that serious discussions had been held to heal this division:

Last year was a year of great movement toward reunion. We had three brotherly meetings, and 67 churches from that group are now registered, including 8,000 members. But this has provoked extra action on the part of those who have not remained in the Union. So I open a piece of our grief, our sorrow to you.

As I have reflected on this event it seems clear to me that we as American Christians must offer our solidarity and support to every Christian community in the Soviet Union, to all of our brothers and sisters there. We must not speak or act in such a way as to deepen the pain of their division or to withhold our earnest support from any whose faith and obedience to conscience causes them to suffer persecution. Although it is not always easy to contact unregistered Christians directly, I believe that the NCC will continue its efforts for future delegations to hold such discussions.

None of us returned believing that it was easy to be a Christian in the Soviet Union. Indeed, that is why we rejoiced in the discovery that the churches show such signs of vitality and faithfulness, despite all difficulties. No one said that religious liberty has been achieved. Though we witnessed crowded churches, we also spoke about the need for more working churches to accommodate believers. It is good that more Bibles have been printed recently, but we emphasized that continuing great need not only for Bibles, but for other kinds of religious literature. Nowhere was this need more obvious or desperate than among Soviet Jews for whom there is a scarcity even of materials to maintain worship in the synagogues.

With regard to issues of peace and disarmament, as with many others raised by our journey, the 266 of us are certainly not of one mind, which is both inevitable and appropriate. Our seminar did not make us experts, but rather forced us to reformulate our questions, to re-examine our presuppositions, and to move to new levels of complexity. I believe that all of us came away, however, impressed by the deep desire for peace demonstrated by ordinary Soviet people and committed to
working to achieve an ethos which would be conducive to the long term
task of critical negotiations which lies ahead if peace is to be
secured. As one member of our group commented, "We hope that our talking
to each other in the churches can be a helpful symbol, aiding our
governments to talk to each other again."

Ours was an ambitious undertaking, and like all such ventures it
was imperfect. Yet through it we reached out to even more challenging
future tasks. We spoke with church leaders about a program for the
"twinning" of American and Soviet congregations. We asked about the
possibility of a project in which Soviet and American Christians might
work together with people of a third world country to relieve human
suffering and need. We rejoiced that a group of Soviet theological
students and professors will come within the next year to visit and talk
with their counterparts here. And we spoke of the role of future
exchanges, large and small.

One resounding affirmation punctuated our entire visit, from the
crowded Pentecost service in Zagorsk on our first Sunday, to the formal
reception given by Patriarch Pimen on our final day in Moscow. It was
that we Soviet and American Christians are brothers and sisters in the
body of Christ. This is true whether we like it or not, and whether we
acknowledge it or not, for it is not our achievement, but the mysterious
work of the Holy Spirit. Such a unity transcends narrow nationalisms,
ideological disagreements and political conflicts, for we share one
ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ in whom the world has been reconciled.
Sinful and broken as we are, the Gospel calls us to accept this gift and
to struggle to manifest it to each other and the world as a sign of
God's gracious intention for all of God's children. We have received the
possibility of approaching one another in trust, which is not dependent
upon our mutual agreement, but is itself the basis on which we can dare
to struggle through dialogue to find peaceful and just resolutions of
our differences. Perhaps in that sense our visit was a small but
eloquent symbol of hope, hope that peace is possible and that our
churches can serve as bridges between our peoples at a time when other
points of connection are few and far between.