Sawatsky's and Penner's, eds. "Mission in the Former Soviet Union" - Book Review

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ultimately matters is the impact of understanding gained from scholarship for the sake of building Russia’s future, at least its civil and religious dimensions, and, to take Coleman and Zhuk’s claims seriously, it also matters how such scholarship causes us to rethink modern history more generally, then reading each other’s work with judicious breadth and linguistic diversity remains even more vital as scholarship proliferates. Dissertations are indeed a major resource for entering the discourse, but keeping abreast of further findings and shifting interpretations that mark the good scholar’s stream of articles, seems the elusive ideal. Seldom do the monographs suffice.

Walter Sawatsky, Professor of Church History & Mission, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart IN.


The past fifteen years have seen a myriad of changes in the former Soviet Union (FSU), not the least of which is the mission of the evangelical church. Many Western organizations have claimed huge successes in this period, while the Russian Orthodox Church and many national evangelicals have been extremely critical of Western evangelical missions work. How should the progress of mission be viewed today? What successes can legitimately be claimed, and what needs to be changed? What role should the West play in the future of mission work in the FSU?

This book, based on a conference at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague in 2003, is an important survey and analysis of mission in the FSU from several different perspectives. This book would be very useful in helping anyone doing ministry in the FSU to gain a better grasp of the historical factors at work, as well as in challenging people to think about new ways to do ministry. The book would also be helpful for anyone seeking to more knowledgeably pray for and give to the work going on in the FSU.

Of the book’s 12 chapters, eight are written by the two editors, Walter Sawatsky and Peter Penner, with additional contributions from Marina Sergeyevna Karetnikova, Johannes Dyck, Mark R. Elliot, and Viktor Artemov. Overall, the book develops several very important themes for analysis, including the many creative ways that mission has been conducted in the FSU in the past, how the West and nationalists work together in mission, the importance of inter-church dialogue, and how contextualization of mission has taken place (or needs to take place) in the FSU. I would like to comment on how these four themes are developed by the contributing authors.

First, it is quite encouraging to learn how many different ways mission has been done in the FSU. As Sawatsky argues, mission has always been at the heart of the Slavic evangelical church (chapter 3). From the first days of mission work in the 19th century through the last 15 years, the creativity of nationalists is to be applauded. From the ministry of the “book bearers” in the 19th century (p. 65) to Christian camping in the 21st century (chapter 11), many types of creative and effective ministry have been done (of special note are the many interesting examples from Karetnikova in
chapter 4). The focus of the church on sanctification and discipline, for example among the ethnic Germans in central Asia (as argued by Dyck, chapter 5), has helped the church to survive, and at times, experience revival in the midst of persecution. Western evangelicals should be aware and respectful of this rich history of mission in the FSU.

Yet, as Sawatsky points out, mission has not always been successful in times of persecution. The persecuted church in the FSU has often wavered back and forth between caution and aggressive evangelism (p. 55). Sawatsky also notes that the failure to theologically train its leaders and to maintain a unified structure has severely weakened the national church in the face of persecution (p. 51). These are issues that will be very important for future mission in the FSU, especially as the initial wave of spiritual interest from the 1990’s fades and as persecution returns to the church in various parts of the FSU.

Secondly, both Penner and Sawatsky stress the importance of westerners and nationals working together productively. Sometimes the West has an overly positive outlook on its ministry in the FSU (see chapter 7, especially pp. 121-122), and this needs to be tempered with a better understanding of the historical situation, as mentioned above. In more recent history, both Penner and Sawatsky bring up the Co-Mission of the 1990’s as a highly negative example of partnership, in which the West spent millions of dollars and largely ignored national church leadership in their endeavor.

The Co-Mission involved 23 different para-church organizations, yet had practically no ties with the national evangelical Protestant church and was largely dismissive of the Russian Orthodox Church (pp. 105-108). Many of the workers sent to teach ethics to public school teachers did not have proper training in their field or enough preparation to understand the local culture or existing church (p. 128). This led to many negative repercussions, including the Russian Orthodox Church working to end missionary activity from abroad in Russia (p. 108) and the unfortunate consequence that many of those who were led to Christ by these short-term missionaries had no church to connect with after the missionaries had left. Specifically, Sawatsky cites statistics compiled by Perry Glanzer in 2001 that include Dimitriy Pospielovskyy’s figure that about 58% of Russians confessing Christ have no confession or church (p. 110). Clearly, many lessons need to be learned from this about the importance of working more closely with the national evangelical church and having a proper respect for the Russian Orthodox Church.

Penner offers a theoretical model for cooperation in which nationals and Western missionaries work together, moving from the national context, to Scripture, and finally to community (chapter 2). Although one might argue that Scripture should be the starting point for cooperation (and even Penner quips that choosing Scripture versus context is similar to asking about the chicken and the egg, p. 11), the focus on understanding the local culture and needs and the desire to build a Christ-like community in partnership is certainly a good model, especially considering some of the mistakes of the past.

Furthermore, many specific suggestions are offered throughout the book to deal with more specific issues of partnership, such as authority, strategy and finances. For example, Western missionaries need to have more respect for the authority of national church leaders, and should
encourage the younger generation of leaders to respect their elders as well (p. 60). Westerners need to be intentional to work together with nationals and not consider that they “know” all the answers (pp. 129-130). Considering the work of South Koreans, for example, they often do all of their mission work using the same mold for ministry as back home. This leads to a large failure rate, although they do experience more success in central Asia than elsewhere (pp. 130-132). Dependence on foreign finances, a long-standing problem, even before communism (p. 132), is a key issue that must be addressed as mission moves forward in the FSU. Today, most mission agencies, denominations and theological schools are largely dependent on foreign aid. As Penner points out, it is difficult to talk about real partnership where there is financial dependence (pp. 132-133). There is a great need to develop true partnerships of respect, where authority and financial responsibilities are shared. The West needs to show greater patience in this, allowing the national church more time and space to choose its own priorities and invest appropriately.

Thirdly, Sawatsky has two chapters devoted to the importance of inter-church dialogue. This is needed both between the Russian Orthodox Church and evangelical churches, and among the evangelical churches themselves. Often the Orthodox Church and evangelicals use completely different languages when speaking with one another (e.g. Orthodox focus on “canonical territory” whereas evangelicals talk about “religious freedom”), and more needs to be done to find common ground. The fact that the Orthodox Church and many governments in the FSU consider evangelicalism to be a “foreign religion” is the basis for rejecting visas and much of the conflict that takes place. This has become a particular concern in recent years in Russia, as Elliot points out that President Vladimir Putin signed a law connecting foreign espionage with foreign religion (p. 193). Sawatsky makes some important suggestions in chapter 10 (pp. 212-217) for discussion of the martyrs under communism as a way to bring people and churches together. One way that the church in South Africa has moved forward after apartheid has been to discuss the past and come to a point of forgiveness. Sawatsky suggests that perhaps revival has not yet come to the FSU because they have not dealt with their past (p. 216). Evangelical churches need to make a greater commitment to dialogue and try to find a common language. And the goal of this dialogue, as Sawatsky suggests, must be to come to grips with the past and to come to a point of repentance and forgiveness.

Finally, mission has been contextualized into the FSU in many important ways in the last 15 years. Both Sawatsky and Penner note that much progress has been made, for example, in developing healthier models for theological education through the development of the Euro-Asian Accreditation Association (EAAA). Also, many different national Christian organizations are building new partnerships together. These partnerships are extremely important in order to reduce dependence upon the West. The idea of mission continues to be refined, but it includes doing social ministry hand-in-hand with evangelistic ministry, in stark contrast to many Western ministries. As a specific example of contextualization, Artemov points out that Christian camping is particularly effective in the FSU due to the communist heritage of pioneer camps and how churches come together to finance and organize them (pp. 241-243).
Furthermore, Sawatsky suggests in chapter 12 the need to move beyond the ideas of “the West’s mission” and “national mission in the FSU” to God’s mission, Missio Dei. Penner’s model for cooperation in chapter 2 is based on this idea as well. Nationals and Westerners need to humble themselves before God and seek to follow Him in mission, realizing that mission starts and ends with God Himself. Yet, God chooses to use us as His instruments. This is what Sawatsky means by entitling chapter 12 “Without God we cannot, without us God won’t.”

Sawatsky also emphasizes the importance of never separating missiology from ecclesiology. In agreement with the mission historian Andrew Walls, the important new issue for the global church is the discussion between churches of different cultures (p. 263). Yet, the West’s dominating position in missions often seems to determine the type of churches that are established (or not established) in different cultures. Many of the problems in the FSU are due to mission being done without the national church, leading to many professions of faith but no new national churches being formed. A more contextual ecclesiology needs to be one of the main goals of mission work in the FSU, and this requires more dialogue between East and West, which hopefully this book can start to generate.

In considering the book as a whole, some of the chapters seem a bit uneven, probably due to the varied styles and themes of the different contributors. The two editors, Sawatsky and Penner, carry the overall themes of historical and strategic analysis of mission in the FSU through their eight chapters. The chapter by Karetnikova is a fascinating survey of missionary work from early in the 19th century up to some of the work in the 20th century, though it would have been helpful if footnotes were included to allow for further research on the many interesting examples she developed.

The other three chapters by Dyck, Elliot, and Artemov are all interesting, but since they deal with such specialized topics as revival among ethnic Germans in central Asia, restrictions on missionary visas in Russia and Christian camping in Russia, it begs the question, why were these topics included? Why address Christian camping as opposed to tent ministry or cell groups? Why not write about missionary visa restrictions in central Asia or about revival among Koreans there? It might have been helpful to organize the book around a few different themes that could give more cohesiveness to the entire book such as “Historical Analysis,” “Specific Strategies,” and “Perspectives for the Future.”

Another way in which this book could be improved would be to broaden its geographical scope and to support its arguments with more statistical data. A great number of the specific examples seem to come out of ministry in Saint Petersburg. While this is a key place for ministry, the broad topic of “mission in the FSU” would have been better served by including more examples from Ukraine, southern Russia and Siberia, where much important mission work has been done in the last 15 years. It would have been helpful to see statistics on church growth and locations of mission work to get a better overall picture of mission in the FSU. Being able to compare church growth levels for the past 5, 10 and 15 years would lend a lot of support to the authors’ arguments for the effectiveness of various kinds of mission work and would allow the reader to see where the greatest needs for future work lie.
Artemov’s survey in chapter 11 of a broad cross-section of churches about the effectiveness of Christian camping was an excellent idea along these lines, spanning different denominations and locations across Russia. However, as he admits, too few churches and church leaders were surveyed to draw definite conclusions. In addition, his survey would have been improved by asking questions with more comparative and quantitative rigor. Questions such as the following might provide more concrete data: What proportion of the church’s budget goes towards Christian camping? What proportion of the children at the camp comes from non-Christian families? What proportion of the congregation repented at a Christian camp? What proportion of leaders of the church (i.e. pastor(s), deacons, small group leaders, etc.) were once camp staffers? Then, similar questions should be asked of other ministries (outdoor evangelism, tract ministries, small groups, etc.) and a quantitative comparison made.

In addition, it would have been helpful to add a couple of pages at the beginning of the book with some background information about the authors and a list of abbreviations used (especially for the various church unions).

Overall, this is an excellent book, with much to offer those in ministry as well as those interested in God’s work in the FSU. The historical information is very helpful as is the critique on mission work over the past 15 years. Westerners reading this book should gain an appreciation for all that the national church has done over the past two centuries. Nationals should be encouraged to further develop contextualized ministries, seeking healthy, two-way partnerships with the West. This book offers much food for thought for the coming years of mission in the FSU.

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BOOK NOTICE
Michael S. Jones (recent REE review contributor and editor of Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies) sent over the following note: I have recently co-edited, together with Dr. Sandu Frunza of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, a volume that may be of interest to some readers of REE. It is titled Education and Cultural Diversity. The book is based on papers presented at the workshop “Multicultural Education in the CEE Region, the NIS, and Central Asia.” It contains twenty articles contributed by scholars from central Europe to central Asia. The articles range in topic from philosophical and theological analyses of multiculturalism to practical discussions of ways that multicultural challenges have been met in these regions. Education and Cultural Diversity, ed. Sandu Frunza and Michael S. Jones. Cluj-Napoca, RO: Editura Provopress, 2006, 236pp.