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METHODIST MISSIONARIES IN MOTHER RUSSIA

By Paul Crego

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In the last years of the Soviet regime--the years of Mikhail Gorbachev, glasnost, and perestroika--one phenomenon that visitors could not miss was the revival of religions and their institutions after seven decades of ruinous persecution: sometimes violent, sometimes by forced collaboration, but almost always persistent and insidious. The restitution and renaissance of religion has happened at a fairly rapid pace. During a trip to Georgia in July, 1990, our study group visited the ruins of the medieval Iqalto Theological Academy. Its little church still stood in much disrepair, and some small candles sputtered feebly in the warm summer air, while a large boar wandered through the cemetery outside. When asked whether the church was open, our guide replied, "No." It was not long, however, before the bells began to ring, and a cassocked cleric strode in to chant vespers. Things were changing on the ground and changing very, very quickly.

In addition to the restoration of "native" institutions of religion, the lands of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, stretching from near Vienna to Vladivostok, have been covered by missionaries of all manner of denominations, sects, and cults.¹ So widespread and so diverse is the mix that Russia and the other successor states are now referred to as a religious supermarket. Some groups have been criticized for coming and going too quickly; others, because they have stayed too long and established their institutions. This sacred smorgasbord is also complicated by the influx of money and culture, largely from the West, sometimes intentionally with and sometimes inadvertently in conjunction with religion. This gives the impression that the foreigners are not playing fair.

Into this context of competing cultures, philosophies, and religions there have appeared missionaries from among the "people called Methodists," mainly from the United States. They arrived as persons offering humanitarian assistance to persons and groups that suffered most severely from the ongoing restructuring of the economies of Eastern Europe. They have made
contact with various groups of people, and their good works and witness to the gospel of
Jesus Christ as their motivation have moved some to organize Methodist societies and
churches in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Estonia has witnessed the growth of
its Methodist church as well.2 As Methodist missionaries have appeared, along with many
from other churches and denominations, they have come into contact and conflict with the
Russian Orthodox Church. The churches, although in touch through their common
participation in the World Council of Churches over the past three decades,3 have not
"enjoyed" such close encounters as they now do, and there has been misunderstanding on both
sides and wariness about motives.

In this essay, Orthodox-Methodist relations, including the conflicts, will be analyzed
from an ecclesiological perspective, in order to understand developing relationships and what
might be said and done in order to further ecumenical dialogue and sharing in the good
works of the Christian faith. It is a question of a church--the Orthodox Church, which
expresses its self-understood theanthropic essence in the creedal phrase, "one, holy, catholic,
and apostolic church," with its hierarchy and eucharistic center--over against a renewal
movement that became a separate institution in the diverse, free, and pluralistic religious
environment of the U.S.A. The former sees the latter potentially as a proselytizing Protestant
sect poaching from its faithful and converting Christians to Christianity. The latter often
understands the former to be overly bound by historical tradition, exclusivist in its
ecclesiology, tainted in Russia by its collaboration with the Soviet government, and too quick
to identify ecclesial structure as part of the church's nature.

The churches of the Orthodox Communion, including the Russian Orthodox Church,
focus their ecclesiology on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan article, "I believe in one, holy,
catholic, and apostolic church."4 The "oneness" of the Orthodox Church, by its very
definition, makes ecumenical dialogue, in the sense of the twentieth century, a very difficult
enterprise indeed. There are some Orthodox, especially the Old Calendarists, who reject the
heresy of ecumenism out of hand.5 Others struggle with the definition of church boundaries,
and the implications thereof, for the salvation of humankind. Whatever the perspective, there
is the assumption that the Orthodox Church faithfully and existentially manifests the oneness
and unity of Christ's church. When engaging in ecumenical encounter from this
understanding, the Orthodox may sound arrogant and overbearing, lacking an essential
humility that others believe to be important at the tables of interchurch discussions.
However, the seriousness of the Orthodox theologians concerning their church as church is
an important lesson for all churches and their leaders. Within the "boundaries" of their church
the Orthodox believe is manifest the unity of the church, which is God's gift to humankind.
Those participating in the ecumenical endeavor, however, are quite willing to admit that the
pleroma of unity may yet include those self-proclaimed Christians who are not now a part
of the Orthodox Communion. Encounters with Methodists, of either Western or Russian heritage, must be understood in this context.

The "holiness" of the Russian Orthodox Church is precisely understood because it is the continuation of the theanthropic enterprise begun in the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Fr. Georges Florovsky summed it up this way:

The Church is completeness itself; it is the continuation and the fulfillment of the theanthropic union. The Church is transfigured and regenerated mankind. The meaning of this regeneration and transfiguration is that in the Church mankind becomes one unity, "in one body."6

This is further ratified in the sense that the church is "catholic," not in the understanding of catholic as "universal" (a problem in the West), but in the sense that the catholic church contains the wholeness of doctrine in an integrated fashion7. Catholicity for the Orthodox includes the communion of saints, here and in the church triumphant, as well as all of the hosts of the heavenly realm. Catholicity is not, therefore, a universality only in the horizontal geography of this world, but it is also vertical. This is summed up in the cherubic hymn of the Divine Liturgy: "We who mystically iconify8 the Cherubim, singing the thrice holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity..."

The "apostolicity" of the Orthodox Church is intimately tied with its understanding of tradition and history. For the Orthodox their ecclesial structure is a potent symbol of the apostolic integrity of the faith. Structure is often seen as part of the essence and nature of the church, not as an accidental by-product. This leads to one of the difficulties in Orthodox dialogue with the separated churches in general and with Methodists in particular. In this context the Orthodox believe the Faith and Order Commission's Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry to be a most helpful document. They do, however, have grave reservations about the ministry section,9 these misgivings now exacerbated by the ordination of women in various parts of the Anglican communion. This also is a point of conflict with Methodism.

It is, moreover, important to note that, for the Orthodox, tradition in the context of apostolicity is not just their understanding of the historical succession of bishops and the adherence to a fossilized set of doctrines and practices. Florovsky put it well when he proclaimed, "tradition is not a historical, but a charismatic principle."10

This, in brief outline, is an understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology. We move now to a discussion of Methodist ecclesiology and find ourselves in a much different historical context and with a different set of ecclesial understandings. One must first mention the origins of Methodism in the eighteenth century in Britain and the way a movement took on an ecclesial life of its own, especially in the U.S.A., for it is chiefly this latter manifestation that has come into contact with the Russian Orthodox Church late in the twentieth century.

John Wesley, whose disciplinary associations began to gather in the 1730's, had no intention of leading yet another group into Protestant schism. He believed that his evangelical
movement, searching for and proclaiming "scriptural holiness" was part of the larger "catholic Church." His "Catholic Spirit" was such that he never left the Church of England, nor did his followers in England during his lifetime. One might conclude that Wesley's movement, although looked upon with no small amount of suspicion in the English Church, was part of that long tradition of prophetic and charismatic movements that formed associations in the greater church for purposes of renewal. The genius of the medieval Roman church had been its ability to include such movements as the Franciscans within its fold. Orthodox brotherhoods also served as renewal movements in times of need. One need only to think of groups formed in response to Uniatism and the Zoe movement in Greece in the nineteenth century.

Wesley intentionally avoided breaking off from the Church of England and encouraged the members of the societies to attend to worship and the sacraments in that Church and the other churches already in existence. Albert Outler, in his article, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" asserted:

It was on this principle that Wesley deliberately designed the pattern of Methodist preaching services so that they would be liturgically insufficient, leaving the Methodist people still dependent on the priests of the national Church for the sacraments and the full round of Christian corporate life.

Wesley, however, sowed the seeds of schism with his irregular ordination of Thomas Coke in 1784 to be a superintendent over the Methodist movement in the newly freed U.S. The Christmas Conference of that same year furthered the institutional separation of the American movement, both from its British roots and from what would organize itself to be the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States.

Insofar as the new denomination would struggle with its ecclesiological self-understanding, Methodists found themselves on the defensive against those who attacked the validity of Methodist orders. Much literature documents this controversy. This literature upheld Methodist orders and was clear about the Methodist Church as church. Others, however, understood the ecclesiological predicament of a movement-turned-sect. Asbury lamented that "we are a church and no church." This attitude made for a contingent sort of ecclesiology, namely, that Methodism would exist only as long as it felt the need to spread "scriptural holiness" and other distinctively Methodist doctrines.

This self-awareness of Methodists in the early part of the nineteenth century gave way to a more triumphalist sectarianism toward the end of that century. This can be understood as part of the trend within and without the Methodist Church: from the inside, one can trace the development of programs and institutions that gave more permanence to the various Methodist churches. From the outside, the religious environment was such that a plurality of denominations and sects became the norm of American religious life. What may be seen by some as the hopeless splintering of the Body of Christ might be seen by others as the
culmination of the sort of freedom of opportunity and religious liberty that correctly characterize American society.

In the twentieth century, Methodists have struggled again with the antinomy of being sect and church, and this has been done in the new ecumenical contexts created by the National Council of Churches, the Faith and Order Commission, and the World Council of Churches. Methodism's "contingency plan" ecclesiology has allowed some to work for the unity of the Christian church and be less encumbered by the need for denominational self-preservation. The fissiparity of nineteenth-century Methodism has given way to the achievement of several stages of inter-Methodist unity in the twentieth: in 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Protestant Church formed the Methodist Church; in 1968, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren (themselves the union of the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ) formed the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church has also been in discussion with the three major African-American Methodist Churches as part of the ongoing and multilateral dialogue in the Consultation on Church Union.

On the larger stage Methodists have played important roles in the Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches, again emphasizing their own contingent ecclesiology as an example to other churches in the struggle to achieve, from the human aspect, that which is given to the church as a gift from God. To quote Outler again: "We don't do as well by our lonesome as some other denominations appear to do—and for a good reason. . . . We need a catholic church within which to function as a proper evangelical order of witness and worship, discipline and nurture."15

This brings us to the late twentieth century, after a period of time when the Methodist and Orthodox Churches have known some contact, albeit fleeting and greatly colored by the exigencies of twentieth-century politics, especially those of the Cold War era. The contact and conflict in Russia between the Orthodox and Methodists can be investigated further in the context of three issues: bishops, the eucharist, and the role of women.

One must also say at this point that the appearance of Methodists in Russia and other lands of the former Soviet Union is not a completely new phenomenon. The small, and not always consistent, amount of religious tolerance that existed during the reign of the last tsar, Nicholas II, permitted the appearance of Methodist societies. These societies spread to St. Petersburg from the direction of Scandinavia through Finland and were also found in parts of the Russian Far East. Although never large in numbers, there are stories of saints, such as Anna Eklund, who braved, ideologically and economically, the fierce early years of the Bolshevik regime. At the same time Methodists involved in humanitarian relief in the 1920's flirted about with the reformist, but state-sponsored, "living church."16 This may be a source of some of the Russian hierarchy's suspicions toward the Methodist Church at this end of the
twentieth century. (Methodists should always remember that the Orthodox have much better historical memories than they do!)

The Methodists, like so many others, however, were victims in the persecution of the Stalinist period, and the Methodist societies in the Soviet Union disappeared during the 1930’s. A faithful remnant of East European Methodism did carry on in a Lutheran environment, surviving in Estonia after the Soviet occupation in 1940.

Encounters between the Russian Orthodox and United Methodists resumed prior to the collapse of Soviet power in 1991. United Methodists organized by the General Board of Global Ministries (eventually under the program name “Russia Initiative”) supported relief efforts including food and medical supplies and personnel. United Methodists have also been involved in the revelations made about Soviet nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk (in Kazakhstan).

The first new congregation of Methodists in Russia was established in what is again called Ekaterinburg in the Ural Mountain region in the spring of 1990, when local officials in that city allowed Dwight Ramsey to establish a congregation. This church has been particularly noted for its prison ministry, a not insignificant ministry in the midst of the post-Soviet crime wave. Other Methodist congregations have been established in the meantime, and the Methodist presence extends from at least Minsk and Tallin to Tomsk.

While engaged in good works of various sorts, United Methodists have also attended to the establishment of the Russian Methodist Church as an institution, thus following Asbury in this respect perhaps more than Wesley. In other words, Methodism is setting itself up as a separate denomination in the Russian religious environment instead of being only an agent of reform and renewal within the existing church structures.

An important step in the institutionalization of the Methodist Church in East Europe occurred when Rüdiger Minor (who grew up in East Germany) was consecrated and appointed bishop of all of Eurasia from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok. This brings us to the first major point of conflict with the Russian Orthodox Church--one perhaps not fully understood by the Methodists but understood all too well by the Russian Orthodox. By this appointment, the Methodists changed from being just another Protestant sect to being a more serious ecclesial rival in the eyes of the Orthodox. Already understanding certain Roman hierarchical appointments as provocations on Orthodox territory, the Russian Church could only interpret the appointment of yet another bishop as violating the essential "one church-one city" principle. The Orthodox are very serious about the bishop's being the symbol of the God-given and Spirit-ratified unity of the Church, and in Russia they have not had the experience of overlapping ethnic Orthodox jurisdictions as in the U.S., nor have they operated in a milieu of competing denominations. For the Russian Orthodox, to have another bishop was a reminder not only of their weakness in their own country but also a reminder...
of the early days of their church when heretics and schismatics set up their own bishops and ecclesial structures. While some might say that the Russian Orthodox were being jealous of their territorial rights and privileges, we might give them the benefit of the doubt and allow that they would understand another bishop as not merely a "friendly rival" but a potential replacement.

This conflict concerning the consecration of the Methodist bishop for Eurasia was part of the agenda at a September, 1995, meeting in Moscow between representatives of the United Methodist Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. It is apparent from a summary of the meeting that the Methodists are gaining some awareness of the meaning of appointing another bishop:

Likewise the United Methodist Church's efforts in meeting human needs were affirmed. In reviewing developments in recent years the United Methodist delegates expressed regret that even though individual efforts were made to be in conversations with leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church no formal initiative was undertaken by the United Methodist Council of Bishops to confer with leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church prior to the assignment of a United Methodist bishop to the Eurasia Area.21

It is in the context of "threats" from Rome and from Protestants of all sorts that the Russian Orthodox Church supported laws that would limit proselytization in Russia. From our perspective in the West this seemed to take the principles of the church's essence and make them into questions of territory and turf. From the Russian point of view, however, this meant a protection of Russia from a hopeless fragmentation of Christianity, particularly at a time when they feel historically, culturally, and financially challenged.22 It is relevant here also to mention briefly the added phenomenon of Orthodoxy's mix with nationalism. Certainly, there are many in the Russian culture who have seen Orthodoxy as a symbol of past and future glories. Unfortunately, this "symbolization" of the Russia church is an example of the symbol's being wrenched from its reality. Parallel cases exist in Serbia and Georgia where nationalists, moving from dissent to power, use the notion of Orthodoxy as a means of building their political base--and this at a time when the population is only just again learning what it means to be Orthodox.23

Another moment of ecumenical contact and potential ecclesial conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church and the United Methodist Church can be seen in each church's doctrine of the eucharist. This speaks to the point of Methodism's ecclesiological development from a time when Wesley consciously avoided the sacraments as a part of Methodist worship to a time when the Methodist churches as churches developed their own sense of sacramental sufficiency (being satisfied with much less than Wesley). There does exist a very different attitude between Methodism and Orthodoxy concerning the "openness" of communion, and this has been discussed widely in ecumenical literature during the second half of the
twentieth century, when the Orthodox and others, especially in the W.C.C., have been confronted by the painful fact of disunity around the table of the Lord.

The Orthodox have been quite clear in their rejection of the notion of "eucharistic hospitality" as a concept of sharing in the eucharist before full unity has been achieved. It is again for them an ecclesiological matter—a matter of defining what and who the church is. For the Orthodox the eucharist is the final and consummate symbol of the unity of Christians in the church:

For the Orthodox the very nature of the Church of its unity and catholicity and mission are addressed when we approach the eucharist. Indeed, the ecumenical problem is raised in all its fullness. Since membership in the Church is tantamount to communion with the holy things of the ekklesia (ta hagia tois hagiois) and since the eucharist is the very manifestation of the Church in its fullness "it is impossible to allow any approach to divine communion by way of hospitality . . ."24

Methodists, for the most part, however, find themselves on the other side of this issue and, while establishing congregations in Russia, need to be aware of the pastoral concerns surrounding this issue. Methodists, like their Anglican brothers and sisters, generally practice an open communion—and this in the context of an Orthodox society will be problematic. In fact, the United Methodist Council of Bishops in their 1990 pastoral letter, Vital Congregations--Faithful Disciples, go a step further and explicitly extend the openness of communion to the nonbaptized!25 United Methodists would here see the eucharist as the means to evangelizing nonbelievers and as a means to the greater unity of Christians. As Methodism spreads in Russia and other lands of the former Soviet Union, there should be more and deliberate discussion about this matter.

Another point of potential conflict with an ecclesiological perspective concerns the role of women in the two churches. This is related to the question of the nature of the church, its traditions, and how the structure of the church is a living symbol of that nature. Specifically, the issue of women’s ordination is one of potential conflict and one on which Methodists will (and probably already have) made "points" with some women in Russia. For example, a leader of the Ekaterinburg Methodist congregation has been a woman named Lydia Istomina.26

The question of women in the pastorate is one that is now all but over in the United Methodist Church. Still, it has not been that long that women have been regularly and consistently ordained, and many parishes have yet to have a woman pastor. The Orthodox have discussed the question of women in the priesthood but have concluded in the context of their icon/symbol system that it is impossible for a woman to be ordained. Although there will be more discussion within Orthodox and ecumenical settings, the presence of Methodist women pastors—Americans and native Russians and others—will be liberating for some and disjunctive for others.
This is a history that is still in the making, and there will be no easy solutions, as the Orthodox and Methodists have developed their own distinct traditions and histories—institutions and structures—all of this making for different understandings of the church. The United Methodists (or at least some of them) have proceeded cautiously in the foundation of Methodist churches in Russia and the former Soviet Union, preferring that the initiative for such foundation be from Russians and other natives of the former Soviet Union themselves. Often the mission projects include the building and/or rebuilding of Russian Orthodox structures that had been destroyed or badly misused in the Soviet period.

It is my opinion that the Methodists would best be in mission by adhering more to the Wesleyan model of societies (or as an "evangelical order"—see Outler) within the greater church. It might be that Methodist societies would encourage "scriptural holiness"—the study of scriptures and the renewal of the Christian life in a society that from all reports is in need of much moral renewal. To foster a more diverse and denominationally fractured Christian world in Russia may be, however, to weaken the force of Christian moral action and add confusion to any idea about the church—what it is and what it does in Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century.

ENDNOTES


3. Although the Orthodox in general were among the founders of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement (cf. "Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate 1920," in Gennadios Limouris, ed., Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism [Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994], pp. 9-14), the Russian Orthodox Church in its Stalinist captivity was unable to participate until 1961 (cf. "Resolution on the Ecumenical Question," in Limouris, Orthodox Visions, pp. 18-19).

4. In the Slavonic of the Russian liturgy, "vo edinu, svyatuyu, sobornuyu, i apostolskuyu tserkov."

5. Cf. Robert G. Stephanopoulos, "Eucharistic Hospitality: Implications for the Ecumenical Movement," in Limouris, Orthodox Visions, p. 262: "My own frustration . . . was compounded by the disagreeable fact that upon emerging from the worship tent we were all met by a small and determined group of Greek Orthodox (Old-Calendarist) demonstrators from Australia who were there to protest the very presence of Orthodox in the WCC and in the 'ecumenical heresy.'"


8. eikonizontes.
15. Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine?" p. 27.
20. One must acknowledge, of course, that the Orthodox do this with some frequency on their own, especially among the ethnic diasporae of North America. There are many overlapping jurisdictions, not to mention the presence of bishops whose dioceses in partibus infidelium necessitate their residence in more friendly surroundings.
22. One might recall the example of Protestant and Roman Catholic missions in the lands of the Middle East in the past three centuries. Although there may have been some idea on the part of the missionaries that they were off to convert the heathen "Mohammedans," they were, in fact, most successful in the conversion of Christians to Christianity.
27. Reports of various groups are available from the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries' "Russia Initiative."