

DENOMINATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MINISTRY IN EASTERN EUROPE

by Duncan Hanson

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In 1993 the Presbyterian Churches USA (PC USA) adopted a statement entitled Mission in the 1990's describing what the PC USA's mission around the world would be for the rest of the decade. We have not made a statement for the decade beginning in the year 2000 so the Mission in the 1990's statement is as close to current as we have. That statement envisions five major program emphases for Presbyterian work worldwide.

One of these five major program emphases speaks of supporting the churches in the socialist and former socialist countries. In one way or another each of the mainline Protestant churches in the USA has decided to respond to the challenge of supporting the church in the former East Bloc.

Some of this mainline USA Protestant effort in the former East Bloc has been very well received. The Episcopal Church USA, for instance, has done a remarkable job in building relationships, at a distance, with the Russian Orthodox Church. Other efforts, on the other hand, have been quite poorly received.

If you ask how CAREE can help mainline denominations in their work in Central and Eastern Europe, I would say that at least in certain ways most of the mainline denominations still need help in sorting out what they are doing in this region and what initiatives they could appropriately undertake in that part of the world. The PC USA, for instance, has been thinking about what might be constructive ways to engage with the Russian Orthodox Church as well as with the several major Protestant churches. One of the ways of constructively engaging Russian churches that we have been thinking about involves theological education and leader development. We imagine providing financial support for Russian

Christians to attend educational conferences organized by their churches in Moscow or other central places. We also can envision helping fund study by Russian students at Orthodox and other seminaries in USA. These are issues we are just beginning to think about. Maybe we will not have the funds. But perhaps we will be able to make a major contribution toward theological education and leader development in the former Soviet Union and it would be great if CAREE members could give advice concerning all the various strategies the PC USA is thinking about. Specifically it would help the PC USA to know what restraints, warnings, or encouragement you might offer as it thinks about work in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe.

Some USA churches, not including the PC USA, are actively engaged in planting congregations of their own tradition in the former Soviet Union. Clearly there are indigenous peoples in Russia and Central Asia among whom there is no culturally accessible expression of the church, that is to say no church that uses their own languages or that organizes its life according to their distinctive culture. As one would expect there are very few Christians among these indigenous peoples. I believe the mainline churches in the USA are called to help churches in that region evangelize indigenous peoples. I do not see that we are called to try to make indigenous peoples in Siberia and Central Asia or elsewhere into Presbyterians or Disciples or Lutherans. There is a call for us to support the efforts of Russian Orthodox and Russian Lutherans and Russian Baptists in planting culturally and linguistic relevant churches among the indigenous peoples who are their neighbors.

A second issue has to do with the mission work of congregations. A lot of what congregations do is more creative, more thoughtful, and more flexible, than anything a denominational office can do. Partly this is because there are so many demands on the time and attention of denominational staff. The Europe Office of the PC USA deals, for example, with fifty-one countries. A congregation can focus on just a single country or even just one project or one relationship in a single country. As a result of this greater ability to focus, congregations can do some wonderfully inspired things. But they can also do things that are terribly problematic. For instance, some years ago a couple of congregations in the PC USA wanted to found a

Presbyterian denomination in an eastern European country. The commitment of the PC USA, on the other hand, is not to divide the church where it already exists but rather to support the church in that place. There is already an Orthodox church in that country. Unfortunately, as a result of conflicts inside the Orthodox church there are already at least three Orthodox churches in that country as well as a Baptist Union and small indigenous Lutheran and Reformed churches as well as a large and strong minority-language Reformed church in that country's most western part. So I told the pastors and some lay leaders of the two PC USA congregations that the PC USA's policy could not support PC USA congregations attempting to found a Presbyterian denomination in that country.

They promised to be back in touch. The next time I heard about these congregations was when Milan Opo_enský, who was then still General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), called to say that WARC had just received a translation of our church's Brief Statement of Faith that was being circulated in the name of the Presbyterian Church USA of that country, which implied, of course, a concept of the PC USA we simply don't have. Milan asked if I knew about it and I said, of course, I did not. I called the pastors of these two congregations and soon found out they were in fact circulating this statement of faith, and were pushing the formation of a Presbyterian Church, in the sense of denomination, in that country. So one more time we talked about the church situation in that country and I mentioned again the existence of an indigenous Reformed church in that country. I reiterated that Presbyterian missiology says work with the church in the place and said again that one cannot start a church with the name of the PC USA without authorization. A couple months later they called back to say they were going to work with one of the Reformed churches that is already in that country.

Then there was the time when a PC USA presbytery wanted to annex a region inside the former East Bloc to its territory. The presbytery sent an overture to our General Assembly asking the Assembly to vote to extend their boundaries into the former East Bloc. The Assembly turned down this overture. Has the Assembly voted to accept this presbytery's request, relations between the PC USA and the Orthodox Church and other churches in that country would have been devastated.

Charles West comment: It was just a little more complicated, because this proposal originated among members of an indigenous people group in North America that actually extended into Northwest Asia. So the question was, could not Presbyterians who live in the USA share their church life with members of their own people group who happen to live in Asia?

Duncan Hanson: Yes, there were a lot of sub-themes to this particular question. This story just illustrates the set of problems we are addressing. A lot of this sort of initiative happens, much of which is never even mentioned to a national church office.

A third problem has to do with the unintended support of religious nationalism by mainline church people. There are a lot of such problems. For instance, there are bishops in central and eastern Europe, including at least one Reformed bishop, who use religion as a prop for nationalist political agenda. I got a telephone call from a woman in Texas, for example, who is raising money for him. She happens to be a member of another church, but she is raising money for a Reformed Bishop because she is a member of his ethnic group and she sees supporting him as a way of addressing oppression of her ethnic group in the country that bishop is serving in. His ethnic group is indeed experiencing oppression in his country. But it is also true that this bishop is extremely nationalistic. PC USA is never willing to support nationalism. We are not alone in that, WARC will not support it, and all the other Reformed Churches in the region try to keep as much distance as they can from that bishop. It can become quite awkward when a national church is asked to support church leaders whose work we feel we just cannot endorse.

Another issue concerns the tendency of many in North America to want to take sides in church conflicts in central and eastern Europe they do not know much about. For instance, a number of people from congregations in PC USA have called our office to tell about a new church leader in southeastern Europe and then to urge us to help him in his effort, as they see it, to renew the church in his country. We are not going to do that. In my opinion, there is a lot of naivete in the thinking of those who

want us to support this person. He is not just a fresh young leader. He is also a pastor who was disciplined for reasons having to do with his personal behavior. As a result he became a critic of the bishop who disciplined him and since he couldn't criticize him for how he was disciplined he is criticizing him for allegedly failing to be loyal enough to the majority ethnic group in that church.

Another major issue for our respective national churches is the relative paucity of non-designated funds. In the PC USA we have very few non-designated funds. When we want to support some project in Europe or the former Soviet Union, we have to go to congregations to ask them for support. I think it would be a great witness if CAREE members would ask their congregations to give at least some of their mission support in undesignated form to their denominational centers.

Another practical issue is the limited number of appropriate positions to fill, since we are not willing to include positions in Europe that are not ecumenically and missiologically appropriate for the national church. There are also a limited number of persons who could take these positions because they need to meet a number of tests. There is the test of cross-cultural sensitivity, of willingness for language training, of a commitment not to proselytize, not to use manipulation or gifts to win converts. There are a number of additional qualifications as well. We need to find people for these limited number of positions. It is astonishing how few such positions there are, but the fact is that the people who are able to fill them appropriately, are even fewer.

The last issue that CAREE might help denominations address is the lack of coordination, even inside our own denominations. Pastors, middle governing body staff and lay leaders are invited to attend particular conferences, invitations which they would never think of accepting if they knew more about the church leader giving the invitation or the regional significance of the issues being discussed. People receive a brochure. The brochure looks good. They decide to go. If an area office is lucky, it finds out before the people actually leave. Frequently, however, the area office does not find out about a trip until whoever is invited has gone and come back. Then often the person who has attended the conference will call the area office up and

ask if we knew about the political positions or nationalist agendas being pushed at that conference and the area office will reply that yes, we did.

Selections from Discussion:

Leonid Kishkovsky: Have you seen any changes over the last decade, on these issues, is anything different than ten or twenty years ago?

Hanson: Certainly we are more congregational now than we were ten years ago. We have embraced the fact that congregations need to be actively involved in mission, and people need to be planning, implementing and doing mission even at the congregational level. What that means is that it must be done responsibly and we must be in dialogue, which is difficult to achieve.

There is a second change I have seen. You will remember the pastor who came to the NCC Europe Committee to talk about the Internet. One of the things he said was that in the old days every one did mission ecumenically (this is how I understood the gist of his remarks) so PC USA would contribute to WCC or NCC. But then we got the inspiration to do mission denominationally which was an improvement, as far as he thought. But then, if mission is better done denominationally than ecumenically, might it not be coordinated better at the presbytery level than at the denominational level? For that matter, would not mission be best coordinated at the congregational level? And then finally, said this pastor, now that everyone has his or her own computer, each person can make his or her personal mission decisions. In PC USA we hear frequently from people who picked things up on the web, got inspired by what they read on the web to give money, and then call an area office to find out if we can forward their money (making sure they get their tax break) to the place they designate.

Paul Wilson: I get requests in my office from organizations in Eastern Europe on computer email, so you do not know whether it is an individual, a family, a congregation of 5000, and when you ask for more information, they will say, "see our website". Thus the computer has made it possible not only to solicit, but also to aggrandize a mission program and make it available all over the world.

Leonid Kishkovsky: In terms of what you hear, see, or know about, is there a difference in the kind of missionary excitement that might have been very vivid in 1992-93 when the wall was down, societies are opened. Is it still as exciting or has that changed?

Hanson: I find that the questions that come have been more specific, and the excitement is now more specific. Instead of saying, we want to give Bibles for Russia in general, they will say "we want to work with Logos", which is probably a good group to work with, who work ecumenically in Russia. So that in itself is a good change. I am not discouraged more than I was, but I guess there was a shock for me when I started my present job at the beginning of this era, that there was such a lot of chaos. I had thought we had more orderliness than we actually had.

Robert Smiley: I do not sense the same amount of enthusiasm for dealing and thinking at all now, certainly about Russia. All of the chaos has made people more skittish about it. There is such confusion about what is happening. There is obviously great concern for humanitarian action, but I don't see people coming out to visit or volunteer. We started out in the early eighties, sending load after load of Presbyterian tours, back when those tours started, but you can host one of those tours now and hardly get a nibble. You could get far more interest right now for China or Mongolia.

Priscilla Felisky Whitehead: That may be true for persons knowledgeable about mission, but if you are talking about people in the congregations during the 1991 coup in Russia, for example, I would second what Bob is saying, it is not as exotic anymore. Because of the new open society, it was intriguing to go and visit. Secondly, the concern about economic instability in so many of those places has made people wary about giving money, because they have seen what has happened with the IMF, and know the experience of businesses that attempted to invest. So they are adopting a wait and see attitude, looking for other places where they can get a quicker ratification of knowing that our funds are doing what we intended.

Ken Ziebell: Could I respond to the question about change in the last ten years? In our office in recent years (UCC Global Ministries) we have not had requests from local congregations who wanted to go to Russia and start UCC churches there as I did in

the early nineties. I ascribe that to the fact that in the early nineties the collapse of Communism was fresh in people's minds, and it was a cutting edge issue to go and missionize, evangelize in the former Soviet Union. I might like to think that the change was due to our advice urging not to start churches there, but I think that it is more that the motivational factor is not as fresh as it was in 1990.

James Payton: I teach a course in the history of Eastern Europe and it struck me last year that students I teach in first year university have no experience of communism, so when you present the changes to them, you might as well be talking about World War II and Nazi occupation of Poland. Their jaws drop when I tell them what their parents went through, they have no awareness, it is merely an exotic new destination that used to be communist, whatever that meant, but it is not the same pressing urgency for young people that it would have been ten years ago.

Charles West: One of the most important things we do is to bring people from Eastern Europe who we think represent the church there, and itinerate them. We also use theological students who have come to study. These really make an impression because they talk about the situation as it is. Secondly is the organization of carefully chosen tours, such as the one I was on several years ago that took us into the situation. Now when you, (Paul Mojzes) talk about the situation of the Reformed Church in Croatia, we know what you are talking about, because we saw it, we got a feel for it, we know who Toke_ is because we were in the situation. That is the experience of a number of other people. It is enormously complicated, so that Duncan Hanson has picked up one part of an enormous web of relationships, which is almost impossible to control and difficult to give direction to. But that is also true of our relationships in Eastern Europe. For example, Presbyterians have two theological workers in Osijek, which is a theological seminary which trains Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists and others. Indeed, any one who is Evangelical in that part of the world is trained at Osijek. Now what is our relationship to all of those people and their understanding of mission, of proselytism, and of relationships? That is just one example, but we cannot help getting linked up with those relationships, so we need to sort our way almost case by case.

Presbyterians have had three conferences in recent years on worldwide ministries, mission and one of the things that has been coming out of that in our presbyteries is the fact of partnership, and there seems to be a growing interest in partnership. I don't see any growing interest in partnerships in Eastern Europe, but it is in different parts of the world. I keep on asking the national church, because I hear of some people that would like to have a partnership, how do you get a partnership with a church in Eastern Europe?

Hanson: If you call the national church office, we will help you do that. But that is only in some places, the Czechs, for example, have invited that. No one has invited to Belarus, for example.

Leonid Kishkovsky: You mentioned without specificity areas where the Gospel in essence has not been heard very much. I heard the story from a priest of a small number of Orthodox Christians in a Central Asian country, which was very suggestive. In that town some missionaries appeared, from the USA I think, and they certainly did not do anything aggressive against the Orthodox. They were trying to bring the Gospel to the Muslims. Soon the Muslims got more than a little bit riled up, and to Muslims to distinguish which kind of Christianity is about as remote as Christians distinguishing between Shiite and Suni. So to the local Muslims who had lived in amity with the Christian minority for many years, all of a sudden the Christians generically became a threat, and a huge mob formed, heading for the Russian Orthodox church, about to punish them for the sins of Christians. The priest, telling this story in an ecumenical setting, was appealing for care, was not accusing anyone of having done anything negative about the Russian Orthodox church. He was not a learned man, hence not a learned presentation, but the basic point was pretty clear - we live at peace with Muslims, we are Christians. People came from other countries and did their evangelism and now the Muslims are our enemies.

Paul Wilson: Leonid and I have participated in meetings of the United Methodist Church Russia Initiative, and I remembered the comments of Bruce Weaver that all of a sudden he had realized that UMC congregations were engaged in all of these activities in Russia, and we either had to oppose them or try to join them and try to control things somewhat. They tried to bring them under the umbrella of the denomination but it has not been an easy task because conferences and congregations get very excited. At annual meetings with 500 people present, all of whom had probably visited the former Soviet Union and Russia more than I have. They would talk about the third trip I made when I did so and so, but the reason I am raising this issue is that this is a pool of folk who have had a lot of international exposure, and who may be contacts within our denominational public for at least an understanding of what is going on.