

## **EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS IN FSU NOW ACCREDITING**

by Walter Sawatsky

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At the end of three amicable days of discussing policies and major issues for contextualizing theology, members of a new Euro-Asiatic Accrediting Association celebrated the accreditation of specific degree programs from three schools on October 14. The association now has forty nine members, with more schools still joining. The EAAA recently became a recognized member of the International Council of Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE).

This achievement is still quite amazing even for the participants themselves. Only ten years ago when all eyes were riveted on the remarkable events of the velvet revolutions that swept Eastern Europe, resulting in the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1990, Soviet evangelicals still had only one correspondence school for training its pastors. Currently the number of schools are well over a hundred. By means of conferences on theological education since 1994, usually funded by the Overseas Council for Theological Education (based in Indianapolis), school entrepreneurs from Evangelical Christian Baptist, Pentecostal, and newly emerging independent and free church associations have begun the slow process of learning to cooperate and trust each other. Thus even though denominational relations between those groups are tense, this meeting of leaders (mainly newly trained indigenous ones) was characterized by respect and academic professionalism.

Since its previous organizing meeting in October 1997, the EAAA under the leadership of its president Alexei Melnichuk (Rector of Donetsk Christian University) and executive secretary Sergei Sannikov (till then Rector of Odessa Baptist Theological Seminary) had conducted numerous team visits and accreditation visits following the usual self-studies. Three schools - St. Petersburg Christian University, Odessa Baptist Seminary and Donetsk Christian University - had now passed the

accreditation test. This means that instead of functioning as affiliates to American schools accredited by the ATS, and so far remaining unsuccessful in securing accreditation through the education systems of their states, these schools have chosen to form their own peer review structure. The area covers schools from Lithuania through Russia, Ukraine, Central Asia to the Far East. It seeks to clarify standards for seminaries, liberal arts programs, Bible colleges, Bible schools, and what in English are termed non-formal education programs. More information can be obtained by checking EAAA's new web site ([www.eaaa.org](http://www.eaaa.org)).

Several themes kept re-emerging as speakers reflected on what they were learning from the sudden exposure to western theology and literature that threatened to make them into foreign imports. There were frequent references to the need to review their Soviet history theologically in order to better contextualize their own theology. A conference on oral history followed the EAAA sessions, where former students, now teachers, reported findings from oral materials just beginning to be collected. A conference of theology teachers is projected for the next biannual meeting. There have been several previous educational seminars for educational staff, one of the projected results is "The Virtual Theological Library" and a related inter-library loan system.

Several years ago several mission organizations had organized the Bibleiskii Kafedra series to facilitate the translation, printing and distribution of text books for theological schools. Not only is there now a systematic catalog of books available, the entire project was transferred to the control of the EAAA. The next agenda approved at this meeting was the expansion of the Bibleiskii Kafedra mandate to include the launching of a journal on theological education, and a series of publications fostering indigenous scholarship.

These developments may not have captured the headlines in the religious press the way large evangelistic rallies have done, but in many ways the work of many teachers and students, represented by the EAAA, has been more substantive. After all, it is through the sustained teaching of trained pastors that one can hope that a Protestant, mainly evangelical, movement makes its common witness across the former Soviet Union. From these ranks too came calls for more dialogue with the Orthodox Church, one person urging that one avoid confrontation and recognize the need to coexist. Indeed, given the rootedness of much of the evangelical tradition in the reformist impulses within Orthodoxy, he suggested that Protestants might think of themselves as the spark to ignite the Orthodox motor.