

INTERVIEWS WITH SOVIET RELIGIOUS OFFICIALS AND DISSIDENTS

by James A. Scherer

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This report will attempt to summarize impressions and information gathered during three successive days of formal meetings and less formal encounters with Russian Christians. The meetings took place during and immediately following the 15th Christian and Marxist Dialogue on Peace, sponsored by the Soviet Peace Committee and held in Moscow from October 14 - 16, 1988. We were five Americans, mostly academics and with varied church backgrounds, all participants in the peace symposium. The Soviet citizens we met included both official church representatives and members of religious dissident movements. Because no transcripts of the conversations were made, what follows consists mainly of general impressions reconstructed from personal notes taken at the time.

Meetings with Official Church Representatives

Our first opportunity came on Saturday evening, October 15th, when we were driven to the Moscow Baptist Church by the Rev. Anatoly Sokolov, Director of Press Service for the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB, the umbrella organization for Protestant evangelicals which includes, along with Baptists, Pentecostals and Mennonites). Sokolov himself was a participant in the Christian-Marxist dialogue on peace and he seemed delighted to be able to escort us to the Moscow Baptist Church, which also serves as headquarters for the AUCECB, and as center for part-time theological training for the church body's 40 - 50 candidates for ministry [OPREE, VIII, 5: 25]. On the following Sunday morning, he told us, he would be preaching in two of the seventeen All-Union Evangelical-Baptist churches in the Moscow suburbs.

The two-hour long five o'clock youth service was just getting under way as we made our way to the second-floor loft and sat in the section reserved for visitors. The congregation numbers 5000 members, with three choirs, including a youth choir, and two orchestras. It holds worship services on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at 6:30 p.m., on Saturdays at 5:00 p.m., and on Sundays at 10:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. At this service I counted easily 600 persons present. The youth choir did indeed have a prominent role, alternating in the singing of hymns and anthems with soloists and a senior choir. Four preachers, of which three were apparently young male student pastors in training - completing their preparation while holding secular jobs - and the fourth a more practised senior pastor, offered fifteen-minute homilies on selected texts. The singing was lively and joyous. This time I observed that the participants, mostly older people and predominantly women, but with a sprinkling of young people and military cadets or soldiers, were singing from hymnals.

During a previous visit to this church fourteen years earlier, the song leader had to line out each verse line by line because the worshippers had no song books. But now many people appeared to have access to Bibles and hymnals, whether their own or provided by the church.

Copies of English and Russian language "information bulletins" prepared by Rev. Sokolov's office and available on a rack in the visitors' reception room of the Moscow Baptist Church enabled us to assess the effectiveness of the AUCECB's efforts at public relations directed toward foreign visitors. One bulletin very prominently highlighted Dr. Billy Graham's participation in the Russian Church Millennium celebration. It referred to the world's most famous Baptist preacher's sermons in the Moscow Baptist Church and in an Orthodox Cathedral, his speech given at the Bolshoi Theatre, his trip to Kiev as the guest of the local Orthodox Metropolitan, and his closing press conference. While All-Union Evangelical-Baptists take considerable pride in Graham's frequent visits to the USSR, it may be noted that he has drawn the ire of many religious dissidents [OPREE VIII,5: 37] for his close contacts with the Russian hierarchy and his too ready pronouncements about the positive state of religious freedom in the USSR.

Other reports gleaned from the information bulletins spoke of impressive group baptismal services in various All-Union congregations to coincide with the millennium of Christianity: sixty-three persons baptized in a five-hour service attended by 3000 people on the banks of the Desna River near Bryansk on June 12th; eighty three-persons baptized in the Baptist church on Pukhov St. in Kiev on June 19th; 100 persons baptized in two churches in the Kiev area on July 3rd; a three and one-half hour millennial celebration in the Leningrad Baptist Church led by Rev. A. M. Bichkov, AUCECB General Secretary, attended by "many unbelievers who were given the first rows in the hall . . . and many young people." Also in Leningrad we hear of the third meeting between student members representing the Atheistic Club of the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute and students, professors and young people from the Leningrad Baptist Church. Among the suggested topics for discussion were: Bible origins, the person and teachings of Jesus, morality of believers and unbelievers, beginnings of the evangelical movement in St. Petersburg, and foundations of family life. The questions most frequently put by atheists had to do with Baptists' attitudes toward the welfare of the people, believers' views of perestroika, the social composition of the congregation, why Christians observe Easter, and what the "millennial kingdom" will look like. The meetings, described as "friendly, good-humored, and in the spirit of the times", were covered in a Leningrad Radio Program called "For Believers and Unbelievers." Such reports stand in sharp contrast to tense and hostile encounters between believers and atheists in rural areas as reported in earlier issues of OPREE.

One bulletin contained an exchange of correspondence between the General Secretary of the AUCECB, the Rev. A. M. Bichkov, and the teacher of the second grade Sunday School class in the First Baptist Church of Tular, California. The California Baptist second grade pupils wanted to know many things about the church, about life in Russia, and whether it was true that "Russians hate Americans." Bichkov's reply stated that "the Russian people and Russian children have very friendly attitude toward Americans,

"hinted that neither side wanted war, said that both must do their best to "preserve the sacred gift of life on earth," and suggested that the American children should come the Soviet Union to see for themselves. Bichkov also used the opportunity to report that the Fellowship of Evangelical Christians-Baptists had received 100,000 Russian Bibles from the United Bible Societies. New church buildings, he said, were under construction, over 360 church buildings of Evangelical Christians-Baptists having been built in the USSR during the recent seven-year period. The Moscow Baptist Church, he noted, was experiencing a "blessed time," over eighty persons having been baptized during the first six months of 1988.

Visit to Danilov Monastery

On the following Sunday evening, our entire peace symposium group was invited to visit the Danilov Monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the city of Moscow, and to be present for the Orthodox Sunday evening liturgy. Danilov was originally built in 982 A.D., confiscated during the 1917 October Revolution, and returned to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1982. Since then it has undergone costly restoration, and now houses three churches, a library, the headquarters of the Moscow Patriarchate (His Holiness Patriarch Pimen), and the Office of the Department of External Relations (headed by Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Byelorussia). A hotel to be owned and operated by the church is under construction just outside the walls of the monastery. We learned that Danilov now has forty monks, some of whom have transferred from Zagorsk, twenty priests and some additional deacons. The layout of this tenth century medieval fortress-likewalled enclosure - some of its churches however dating from the 19th century - seems to replicate the withdrawal of the Russian religious spirit from the encounter with secular atheism!

As we arrived at the monastery toward dusk we were given a tour of two of the churches, with special attention to restoration efforts being carried out by professionals and some volunteers on ikons and ancient ikonastasis screens. We learned that workshops on ikon painting, wood-working, ecclesiastical vestments and book-binding are held at the monastery. Restoration work had been going on since 1983, and some students from the Moscow theological seminary were also assisting. We joined the evening vesper liturgy, which was

preceded by a service of prayers and benediction for a group of women leaving for hospital ministries. We observed the presence of many worshippers, including some young people and families. Our exit from the church was greeted by the majestic tolling of powerful bells from the monastery's entrance bell-tower. The guide informed us that the original bells had been spirited away to a location in New Jersey during or after the October Revolution!

Our hosts then escorted us to the building housing the Department of External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, where we were greeted - in the absence of Metropolitan Filaret, Director of the Department - by the Abbott on behalf of the "fraternity of the revived monastery." Following opening greetings there took place a short briefing on life

in the Russian Orthodox Church, after which questions and answers about various phases of religious life in the USSR were entertained. It was striking to see Marxist academicians from the Soviet Peace Committee sitting side by side with Orthodox monks in black cassocks at the head table, both groups sharing in the hosting and occasionally breaking in to modify or supplement each other's answers to visitors' queries. At the close of the session the Abbott offered each visitor, on behalf of Metropolitan Filaret, a two-disc set of recordings containing portions of the Orthodox liturgy as sung by a Moscow church choir, along with a UNESCO booklet documenting the restoration of Danilov, as mementos of the visit. Marxist delegates from the Soviet Peace Committee were seen snapping up the treasured liturgical recordings no less eagerly than their foreign visitors!

What, someone wanted to know, was being taught at the theological seminary regarding "religion as the opiate of the people"? In answer one of the monks stated that theological students come to the seminary with a thorough indoctrination in the teachings of dialectical materialism from their studies at the secondary school level and at universities. Their studies at the seminary were directed toward basic theological disciplines and church practices. Fundamental theology explained the relation of Russian Orthodox theology to other world religions and philosophies.

What about unity between the Russian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholics? That, came the reply, had not existed since 1054, but the Orthodox were appreciative of friendly gestures toward them by Popes Paul VI, John XXIII, and John Paul II. The Orthodox feel that unity is not achieved by agreements between church hierarchies, and should not be a matter of external unification or absorption. The Orthodox view places the emphasis on unity of faith and love.

How does the Russian Orthodox Church raise such enormous sums for projects, e.g. a thirty million rouble contribution to the work of peace, and charitable contributions? It must be understood, replied the speaker, that church is separated from state in the USSR, and that all funds come from believers as voluntary contributions. The religious community of the USSR is enthusiastic about peace activities, he continued, and willing to make great sacrifices. The church's diaconic activities are now broadening through involvement in hospitals, infirmaries, and the training of workers for orphanages. In cooperation with the Soviet Culture Foundation, the church had recruited thirty five volunteers to sit with bed-ridden hospital patients. (Evidently these were the women who received a blessing during the earlier prayer service. How this hospital service might affect the legal prohibition of public diakonic work by churches was not explained.)

What about theological exchanges with overseas institutions? Is the Orthodox church interested in having some monks trained abroad? Orthodox theological seminaries already carry on some student exchanges with western theological schools. Send us your offers in writing and we will let you know.

What about the building of new theological seminaries and academies? How many priests are to be trained? The Russian Orthodox Church presently has three seminaries and two academies, and the advisability of enlarging present institutions or building new ones is

under study, together with the desirable number of theological students. Currently 160 students are enrolled in first year seminary studies, compared to a mere forty in the 1930's. Many new parishes are being being opened across the country, viz. 300 in 1988 alone. Some of these newly opened churches are really old churches that were formerly closed, but others are new buildings in places where churches did not exist before. Apart from new parishes we also have a new diocese, Vladivostok.

What about religious publications, devotional books, and Bibles? During the millennial celebration the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church held a special discussion about this issue, on which there has been much criticism directed toward the church. It was decided to enlarge the number of titles published and to increase the number of copies printed. We are planning to publish a church weekly, and to publish the writings of the Holy Fathers and other literature for believers. We have received many gifts of Bibles and prayer books from abroad. An exposition of the faith of the Russian Orthodox Church - a kind of catechism for the general population - is also being prepared.

Meeting with Gleb Yakunin and "Church Reform" Dissidents

Thanks to the excellent advance contacts made by the leader of our group, who also serves as the editor of OPREE, Dr. Paul Mojzes, we were able to spend most of the entire day on Monday, October 17th, in intimate conversations with two groups of religious dissidents. Such informal meetings with representatives of the Soviet religious underground would have been entirely clandestine some years ago, but they may now take place without much secretiveness. Following closely on the heels of our formal reception by ecclesiastical officials of the Department of External Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Danilov Monastery, these interviews threw the entire Soviet religious picture into sharp contrast as we received from the dissidents quite a different picture of religious life in the Soviet Union. The contrasts are so glaring that the inexperienced viewer is bound to wonder just where the exact truth lies.

On Monday morning our contact person with the dissidents, Andrei Mironov, [OPREE VIII, 5: 32] arrived at the Hotel Ukraina to take us by taxi to our first pre-arranged meeting with a dissident group. Andrei is an unmarried and by his own admission unemployed "peace activist" who was sentenced to four years of hard labor for "anti-Soviet agitation and agitation" but released after only one and a half years. He has taught himself English, serves as a liaison for visitors, and often makes himself available as a translator. Our group had no feeling of being under direct surveillance. After a short ride we arrived at the flat of a young married Orthodox deacon and his family. Here we were welcomed by a group of six believers of various backgrounds, all members of the "Movement for Freedom of Faith and Conscience." Their principal agenda seems to be to bring about reform and renewal in the Russian Orthodox Church, and they are strongly united in their common opposition to many activities of the official church. They also stand in solidarity with other Soviet human rights organizations, both religious and secular. The group is well-known for its bold appeals to the world, but it does not engage in the publication of underground newspapers.

The most illustrious member of the dissident group was Father Gleb Yakunin [OPREE VIII, 5: 35 - 37], a married Orthodox priest with three children. As early as 1965 Yakunin attacked the church hierarchy for its subservience to the government, and was suspended from priestly duties. In 1976, following the signing of the Helsinki "Basket Three", he co-founded the Christian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights in the USSR, an organization which monitors the situation of religious believers and offers legal assistance to those whose rights are infringed. In 1979 he was arrested, put on trial in 1980, and found guilty of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. Fr. Gleb was sentenced to five years of imprisonment in Siberia, plus five additional years of exile. Early in 1987, when some 150 prominent dissidents were released due to the "new thinking" and glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev, Father Gleb regained his freedom and now serves as an assistant priest in a village congregation outside Moscow. There he is free to preach, and does so without censorship, but he fears that if he becomes too active in Moscow he will be expelled to the provinces. One gains the impression that persecution has utterly failed to intimidate this dissident; indeed, prison and exile seem if anything to have strengthened his spirit and dedication.

Fr. Gleb Yakunin's Views

In 1965 Yakunin and another priest addressed an appeal to the then Patriarch Aleksii and to the government of the Soviet Union, accusing the patriarch of passivity and the hierarchy of contributing to the persecution of believers. They asked both church hierarchy and Soviet state to change their policies. Fr. Gleb complained that the hierarchy's subservience to the state dated back to the Stalin era, when Patriarch Sergii - in opposition to the policy of his predecessor, Tikhon - told Stalin in 1943, "Your joy is our joy", and thereby opened the door to state intervention in the church's internal affairs. From that time onward, said Fr. Gleb, good monks were expelled, and supporters of state policies were nominated to the hierarchy, after being vetted by the KGB. "Telephone diplomacy" became the rule, meaning that under Leonid Brezhnev Patriarch Pimen was first nominated by the Politburo and only then officially chosen by the Holy Synod. Bishops cannot propose names of candidates for admission to theological seminaries without first submitting their names for background check to the Council for Religious Affairs and the KGB. In a recent case, the KGB blacklisted six good applicants. "The Church is not free!", say these church reform dissidents, as long as the hierarchy continues to serve two masters, the state and the church. Patriarch Pimen is too old and feeble to take advantage of opportunities presented by the "new thinking". In March 1988 Father Gleb and five other Orthodox dissidents sent a letter to Patriarch Pimen requesting that the Patriarch resign [OPREE VIII, 4: 32-34]. The Holy Synod flatly rejected the proposal, but the State Council for Religious Affairs, not wishing to create even more dissidents, prevented the church from expelling Yakunin. Official church leadership seems even more wedded to the Byzantine policies of the Stalinist era than are Russian intellectuals generally, and the church is being criticized, ironically, by party members for its excessive timidity.

Gleb Yakunin spoke at length about the situation with regard to "open churches" in the USSR. Presently some 7500 Orthodox churches are open, in contrast to 22,000 at the end

of World War II. Beginning in 1959 mass closures of churches took place, 1315 churches having been closed in Krushchev's time and an additional 1000 churches after Krushchev's departure. Even now some so-called "registered" churches exist only on paper since registered churches must often fight with local authorities for the return of a building, and this may involve a lengthy wait. Moscow with nine million people has forty-four Orthodox parishes, and four more congregations are waiting to be registered but cannot get approval. Many large metropolitan centers have only a single Orthodox parish. Sources seem to agree that in 1988 about 300 Orthodox churches were either opened or re-opened. While this number may at first glance seem impressive, it represents a growth rate of only 4% in relation to the number of Orthodox churches now open. And when compared to the 80,000 Orthodox churches which were open in 1913, today's 7500 parishes available for an estimated fifty million Orthodox believers is less than 10% of the number of churches open seventy five years ago, when the total population of the USSR was about half of what it is today. (The All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, a small but rapidly growing denomination, alone has over 5500 local congregations.)

An Appeal for Help from the Orthodox Christians in Russia

Fr. Gleb Yakunin and the other church reform dissidents feel that the Russian Orthodox Church, captive to a timid and passive hierarchy, and restricted by religious legislation passed in 1929 during the period of open persecution, cannot fulfil its sacred missionary obligation. It is prohibited from reaching out to preach the Word of God outside the walls of prayer houses. At the same time it is handicapped in every way in recovering the "lost fullness" of Orthodox church life. The church today is in a "pitiable state", unable to fulfill the commission of its Founder and Head, fettered not only from the outside but also from within. We were handed a seven-page document entitled "An Appeal for Help from the Orthodox Christians in Russia" which expresses the anguish of the Orthodox dissidents:

And our misfortune and our anguish is that today it (the Church) is imprisoned in a greater measure from within. Our religious leaders - our bishops - do not stand up for the rights of the faithful, do not demand greater religious freedom for their flock, do not strive to open discussion of the problems of church life with the people of God, do not work for the creation of strong Christian communities which could withstand the enemies of the Church, do not wish to enter into close contact and collaboration with the more active members of the Church - clergy and laity - so that together, in spiritual unity with the Church people, they could serve the good of the Church and the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. ¹

The "Appeal", authored by a committee of seven Orthodox dissidents and specially prepared in English for distribution to foreign visitors at the time of the Orthodox Millennium, contains a detailed litany of complaints directed principally at the complacency of the official church and its hierarchy:

We do not have enough Bibles and New Testaments, cheap and available to all who want to have them . . .

We have no exposition of the dogmatic and ethical teaching of the Orthodox Church, either catechetical or theological in character . . .

We have no libraries of theological or religious literature for the people of God (existing church libraries are not open to ordinary church members) ...

We have no preaching of the living word even within the churches (many priests do not preach at all, while others do so only on major feast days) ...

We do not have open instruction for those who at a mature age prepare to receive Holy Baptism. We have no means of instructing children in the basics of the Christian faith (the law forbids any form of Sunday school or any form of religious teaching of children outside the family) ...

We have no religious lectures or courses for the instruction of adult church members in the basics of Orthodox faith ...

We have no theological education corresponding to the level of contemporary world theology text books used in the theological seminaries were all published before 1917) ...

We have no contemporary theology in the full sense of this word (not a single work by a Russian theologian either in the USSR or in the diaspora has been published since 1945) ...

Our theological periodicals deal mostly with official church news and reach only a very limited circle of readers ...

We, the members of the Russian Orthodox Church, are unable at present to unite into compact Christian communities ...

We have practically no possibility of contact between the faithful and their bishops outside of pontifical services (the bishops are as a rule first of all administrators, zealously preserving their prestige and avoiding direct contact with believers) ...

We have no active apparatus for putting forward candidates to the priesthood from among the faithful (entrance to theological schools is covertly controlled by the state authorities) ...

We have no close and constant contact between the priest and his parish which would ensure the creation of stronger parish communities (zealous pastors and good preachers are commonly transferred without explanation by their bishops, particularly when the church is attended by young people)...

We have no form of contact between the believers of any parish outside the divine service (no parish meetings, common meals, or other opportunities)...

In practice we have no self-government in the parish (parish affairs are administered by wardens chosen by local authorities and they are often unbelievers) ...

We have no financial accounting to the whole parish by the warden and the treasurer and no possibility of real control (the post of warden is open to corruption and personal gain and thus attracts dishonest people) ...

We have no possibility of freely opening new parishes even where there is a desperate need for them (the State Council for Religious Affairs rejects many applications, and this leads to overcrowded churches and priests who cannot give adequate pastoral care to their people) ...

We have no real ways in which church people can participate in the solution of general church problems except for money contributions (and this in spite of Orthodox teaching that it is not only the hierarchy but the entire people who are defenders of the truth and of Christian piety) ...

We have no church press for the faithful, no newspapers or magazines (except for official journals), no religious radio or TV programmes, no cinema or video films on religious themes which could be shown to believers ...

We have no possibility of freely organizing new monastic communities for those who feel called to the monastic life (yet despite this monastic vocations are growing) ...

We have no contacts between the ordinary Christians either with their brother Orthodox believers or with Christians of other denominations abroad (only official delegations represent the Russian Church at meetings abroad, and these are generally the same people over and over again) ...

We are at present unable openly and freely to fulfil the command of Our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 25:35 f.) for under state legislation the church is not allowed to carry out any form of charitable work ...

We have no right of organizing material and other help to the needy, the sick and the suffering who do not belong to the people of God, either in hospitals or old people's homes, hospices orphanages, etc...

The priests have no right openly and legally to visit the Christians in hospitals, in the army, in prisons or other places of detention to give them spiritual comfort and administer the sacraments (the law makes an exception only for the dying and the gravely ill) ...

We have no means of freely spending church funds collected in the parishes without the special permission of the local authorities (resources collected by the church and all church property legally belong to the state) ...

The "Appeal" closes with a moving and forceful final paragraph that asks for the help and prayers of Christians abroad for the Orthodox Church and for the USSR. It reads:

Christians! We appeal to you to make a public protest against the real situation of the believing Christians in the Soviet Union . . . the Bishops and Church officials proclaim to the whole world that religious freedom prevails in the USSR (but) the CHURCH OF CHRIST cannot exist without the free preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church's doctrines to Christians themselves; without Christian communities which enjoy the freedom within and are united around their pastors, and are living the true common life of the children of the One Father in heaven; without deeds of mercy, help to the needy and the suffering, different forms of charitable work openly and freely organized by the Church communities. The Church whose inner life and activity is limited to the performance of religious services and the collection of funds CANNOT BE RECOGNIZED AS FREE.²

Christian visitors to the USSR from the West are implored to protest Soviet violations of freedom of conscience. Through their own church leadership they are asked to put pressure on Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church who do not undertake initiatives to improve their flocks, while giving false or one-sided information on the situation of the church, and condemning priests and lay people who strive for greater religious freedom.

HELP US IN THIS! Remember us. We ask you holy prayers for us, for our Church and our country. The Lord be with you all!³

Sister Nijole Sadunaite of Lithuania

Another impressive dissident present at the meeting was the Roman Catholic Sister from Lithuania, Nijole Sadunaite, religious writer and journalist who has edited the "Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church." This Chronicle details the government's harassment of the Catholic Church in the Lithuanian Republic. For disseminating it the smiling sister received a six-year sentence from the KGB. In all, she spent one year in prison, two years in labor camp, and three years in internal exile. For the past few years she has lived a kind of shadowy underground existence, working on her manuscripts and active among the dissidents. Her book, A Radiance in the Gulag (Trinity, 1987) has been published in the USA from smuggled manuscripts, and she is now seeking a publisher for her latest manuscript, tentatively entitled "For the Fifth Year the Good God Hides Me from the KGB."

Sister Nijole, by now an expert on KGB methods, spoke at length of her experiences. The KGB hated her for keeping the Chronicle and tried in every possible way to suppress it. At one point she was asked, "Are you not afraid to die under the wheels of a car?" She calmly replied, "To me it makes no difference how I die - whether in a bed or under the

wheels of a car." The KGB tried to destroy her reputation, accusing her of making big profits abroad. They also tried to persuade her to emigrate - she has relatives in the USA - but without success. Why, she was asked, does the KGB continue to harass the church? Because, she replied, the KGB believes that the church gives people a "spiritual force" and turns them away from party and government. After the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, Yuri Andropov commented that "the Roman Pope is the greatest danger to communism." The church, Nijole says, is David fighting the giant Goliath, God's anointed against the Satanists who serve the powers of evil. But as soon as a believer declares him or herself a follower of God the oppressors become powerless. She is particularly pleased because the Pope recently appointed a strong defender of the faith as Cardinal Archbishop of Lithuania, one who will not compromise with the KGB. Fr. Gleb supported Sr. Nijole's account, noting that the KGB has special units for the infiltration of church activities by which it seeks to undermine the church from within. It does so by promoting morally compromised hierarchs to positions of influence, Gleb said, and by wooing young priests with the promise of power and promotions. "Cooperate with us and you may become a bishop; if you don't you will be exiled to a remote place with a small salary.

Father Gleb, Sister Nijole, Deacon Alexei and his spouse and other members of our host group served us with tea and coffee, sandwiches and cakes as we snapped pictures and continued our dialogue. Paul Mojzes, the leader of our group, had brought along several hundred copies of the Russian text of the Sermon on the Mount which he now removed from his satchel and handed to our hosts. This small gesture made them indescribably happy and grateful. We left the small apartment with feelings of admiration for our hosts and amazement at their quiet courage. We had peered rather deeply into the soul of Mother Russia and just possibly glimpsed the seeds of its future religious and spiritual revival.

An Underground Christian Publisher

Our second interview of the day took place, following a five kopeck ride on the efficient Moscow Metro to a remote station, with Alexander Ogorodnikov [OPREE, VIII, 4, 1 - 4, and VIII, 5: 32 - 35], the thirty-eight year old publisher of an underground ("samizdat") publication. Known simply by its generic title of "Bulletin of the Christian Community", the Bulletin is an ecumenical effort by an underground editorial board known as the "Seminar Group", and under Alexander's leadership it has now been published in nine issues. He hopes that it will soon be issued monthly. Printed by clandestine and still illegal reproduction methods in a limited edition of 150 copies, the Bulletin goes to key Seminar Group members throughout the USSR and is then photocopied and locally distributed, adds Alexander, "like a nuclear chain reaction." The Bulletin thus finds its way to readers in the Ukraine, the Baltic states, and even Siberia, he proudly notes.

Issues of the Bulletin contain papers on the state of religion in the USSR, along with reflections on the meaning of Christian identity in a Marxist secular state. The goal of the Seminar Group, Alexander says, is to "implement the whole will of God and to give a Christian witness in the world." In contrast to the strictly personal and avowedly non-

political piety of the official church - with its emphasis on candles, fasts, ikons and liturgy - the Seminar Group wants to develop a robustly extrovert type of piety that attacks public evils and aims at cultural transformation. Alexander's group hopes to take advantage of the liberalized atmosphere afforded by glasnost and perestroika. Some essays printed in the Bulletin originate as presentations given at meetings of the Seminar Group. These are held roughly every three months in apartments of members, who offer hospitality to visitors from the provinces. Three hundred persons attended a recent seminar meeting. One gets the impression of clandestine house parties buzzing with subversive theological thoughts and demonstrating something akin to the underground solidarity that once characterized the party of Marx and Engels before it became the party of the official establishment and the entrenched bureaucracy.

Ogorodnikov's Personal Odyssey

Looking much like the western image of a bearded nineteenth century literary figure, Ogorodnikov shared his remarkable personal odyssey. Unlike the cases of some other religious dissidents, there were no ties with "old believers" in his lineage. Alexander was raised and educated in a small town as the child and grand-child of staunch Communists. His grandfather, an old Bolshevik, was shot by invading Czech troops. His father, an engineer, was brought up in the Soviet Comsomol (Communist Youth League) movement. At the age of fourteen Alexander himself joined Comsomol and by sixteen he had become the leader of one of its "militant battle units", an organization which he likened to the Hitler Youth in Germany. Its aim was to attack long hair, western music, and various forms of western cultural decadence. At age eighteen Alexander went to work for a factory, becoming a petty bureaucrat in the local city council and writing articles for a local paper on socialist morality. His view at the time was that socialist ideals were correct but they were not being correctly implemented. As a council member he got his first glimpse of the mechanisms and perquisites of political power. His disillusionment began with the discovery of special shops reserved for party bureaucrats. He refused to submit falsified factory production reports, came into conflict with the authorities and was forced to leave.

Enrolling in the Department of Philosophy at Moscow University, Alexander was expelled after only two months for criticizing Lenin's view of matter. He then entered the University of Sverdlovsk in the Urals, where he tried for a time to work within the official political structures. But his habit of dissidence again caught up with him - he posted critical wall newspapers, organized discussion groups and read prohibited books - and the local party organization began an investigation. Who was responsible for these activities? Alexander was now expelled from both Comsomol and the university, and his case was turned over to the KGB. He was not yet sent to prison but exiled to his home town. But he left shortly for Moscow and enrolled in the Soviet Institute of Cinematography where he managed - apparently without the knowledge of the KGB - to study for two and a half years before being expelled. All this time, he says, he was looking for something, reading many books, and questioning different concepts. Now for the first time he became fascinated with earlier Russian Orthodox thinkers like Berdyaev - himself a Marxist student activist who was exiled by the Czar and later led a religious

revival within Orthodoxy - and Solovyov. Increasingly Alexander turned to these Orthodox philosophers for inspiration and guidance.

Then occurred something like a conversion event. At the state film depository, Ogorodnikov saw the Italian film director Pasolini's "Life of Christ according to the Gospel of Matthew", and came out of the the viewing a convinced Christian! He had procured a copy of the New Testament and begun reading it on the train. He became, as he says, an incessant reader of the New Testament, and "came out of darkness into the light." Alexander now began preaching to his fellow students, something which caused him to be reported once again to the KGB. At about the same time he began making a film on what he referred to as his "religious search", though for official purposes the script that he filed with the Institute authorities was on a totally different subject. A faculty member discovered Alexander's duplicity and quickly put an end to his film-making. Now he was expelled from the Institute, arrested and turned over to the KGB.

Ogorodnikov's case came to the attention of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which wanted to make use of the incident to get at the root cause of the disillusionment afflicting young Soviet intellectuals. The party tried, he says, to "bring me back into the Soviet establishment", but matters had already gone too far. In his reply to the Central Committee he declared his conviction that "Soviet society deprives people of God and turns them into animals." Atheism, he was now convinced, leads to the dehumanization of human beings. When society becomes godless, people live like animals. All values are eliminated except for material gain. Since Soviet society provides few material rewards, and since the state is the owner of all property, people simply take what they think belongs to them. They begin to steal and now, says Alexander, organized crime has made its appearance.

The KGB began a four year period of constant surveillance of Ogorodnikov's movements, but did not yet arrest him. But in 1978, when Yuri Andropov was head of the KGB, Alexander was arrested and accused of violating Article 70 the Criminal Code. In three separate trials he was charged with 1) parasitism, 2) anti-Soviet agitation and 3) propaganda, and sentenced to prison. His total sentence was eight and one half years, years spent in prisons and labor camps from Leningrad to the Far East. At one point he asked for but was denied a Bible; he went on a hunger strike that extended over two years. A priest who attempted to visit him in prison was suspended for his effort. Church authorities said that he was imprisoned not for his religious beliefs but for crimes against the state. Alexander blames the hierarchy for contributing to his imprisonment. While incarcerated he was systematically deprived of all possibility of reading or writing - no books, no pens or paper, not even toilet paper was provided! After his release from prison in 1987 he was able to compile a list of 180 religious prisoners - a list he says includes Muslims, Jews, and Hare Krishnas as well as Christians - and to present it to U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz. Some of these prisoners have since been released.

Now that the KGB can no longer imprison him, says Alexander, it has resorted to a new technique: character assassination and defamation. The KGB instigated a letter-writing campaign, coopting other dissidents and intellectuals to write fourteen derogatory letters

against him that were printed during July and August 1988 in the pages of Krokodil, Pravda and Izvestia. Reports about him were also aired in English and French language broadcasts of Radio Moscow. The letters and broadcasts claimed that Alexander, deeply preoccupied with personal matters and wishing to save his own marriage, wanted to break off all ties with western people and with the dissident community. He admitted that his wife, fed up with dissident life and under KGB coercion had demanded a divorce and left him. Alexander had refused her pleas to emigrate. At the time of our meeting, he seemed totally committed to the role of an underground Christian publisher.

The December 1988 meeting of the Seminar Group would, he informed us, be dealing with the fundamental principles of the Christian movement in the USSR. Once again members would come from the provinces to share their hopes and ideals. The goal, he insisted, must be the total independence of the church from the state. The underground movement is not outside the church but within it. Its aim is to give faith to Soviet society in a moment of deep crisis. "A free church in a free state", accepting the tradition of the Russian Church but reinterpreting it, an ecumenical movement embracing Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants - these are some of Ogorodnikov's hopes for the future. To carry out this program he asks us to tell people in the west what is needed to maintain and upgrade the Bulletin: state-of-the-art typesetting and printing equipment, computers and word processors, photo-copy machines, video-cassette cameras, recorders, blank cassettes, portable tape recorders - items mostly unobtainable in the USSR except at exorbitant black market prices. The "video boom", he noted, had also come to the underground movement. Home videos and printed materials are among the most powerful weapons in the movement of church renewal. How ready and willing, he wonders, are people in the USA to help Soviet dissidents?

ENDNOTES

1. "An Appeal for Help from the Orthodox Christians in Russia to the Christians of all Denominations", 7 p., Moscow, 1988.
2. "An Appeal for Help" (abbreviated and slightly paraphrased).
3. "An Appeal for Help".