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SPECIAL REPORT

Study Seminar To Eastern Europe

Gary Nickel

A lot of information is provided to congregations and pastors about the churches and Christians in Eastern Europe, from many quarters. This report is written with two assumptions, namely that the situation in the Soviet Union and Albania are each uniquely far different than elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and secondly that we are aware of many of the problems and restrictions which are varyingly placed upon the Christian Church and Christians in the East. With that in mind, the following report is shared with you.

In October 1978, eight Canadian lay persons and pastors visited eastern Europe. In 26 days, they visited with individual Christians and church leaders (generally Lutheran) in Hungary, Rumania, Poland and the German Democratic Republic. Sponsored by the Missions Committee of the Central Canada Synod, Lutheran Church in America, transportation and itinerary were developed by those preparing the Seminar. Participants sought to learn about conditions in eastern Europe in as realistic ways as could possibly be done.

In Canada, churches and individuals continue to receive quantities of information and sometimes propaganda about conditions in eastern Europe. Some is produced by the governments in the East, some by organizations who seek to gather funds and support to carry on special ministries in the East, and by others. We found that:

1. conditions in these countries vary with each individual country;
2. there is an 'alive' Christian church functioning and witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ within these Socialist countries;
3. there are many conditions for Christians which we in North America would consider extremely difficult; and
4. conditions in the East often lie between the extremes that are portrayed for many Canadians by literature that we receive.

We visited primarily with Lutherans to compare experiences between churches of the same theology, practice and understanding of the Christian faith. It was evident that the situation, problems, opportunities and challenges were uniquely different for each Lutheran Church we visited, and appears so for each of the other Christian denominations in the East. What is a difficulty for Christians in one country may not exist as a problem in a nearby country in the East. We also visited as fellow members of the Lutheran family within the Lutheran World Federation, expressing our

interest and concern, and a commonness-through-Christ with these fellow Christians.

Excepting in Albania, which is officially athiestic and forbids churches, there are hundreds of congregations in churches centred around parishes, preaching points, and in diaspora (scattered) gatherings of Christians. Many of the problems of the Christians we visited are those common to North America and elsewhere around the world. Such examples include: concern to reach out more effectively to the youth, attendance at worship services, stewardship of members, education for young and old alike. Each church is of course existing under a socialistic government, generally a government which will promote athiesm and is led by a communist party. This produces its own challenges which the churches and their members struggle to meet with the resources they have available.

The title of a book summarizing conditions in eastern Europe up to 1974, "Discretion or Valour", by Trevor Beison, is perhaps an apt commentary upon the situation in the East. At some times the church in the East has spoken out on certain issues and continues to do so. At other times the question of discretion in confronting governmental authorities is of great concern. Challenges and problems for the church in the East cannot be minimized, but again this changes from country to country, from governmental leader to governmental leader, or bureaucrat to bureaucrat. At the local level, some governments officially promote athiesm while others do not. Yet the challenge of athiesm to Christianity is one which can always be spoken out against by the Christian church. Some Christians in the East have told of increased opportunities to witness to the faith when athiesm is taught or promoted than when the government is silent. Frequently the result is baptized, committed Christians.

Speaking out against economic or political systems is generally prohibited. However, in many countries the church can speak out individually or corporately against social issues and concerns, as well as against corrupt or inept officials. In some countries, as in Hungary, church members run and are elected to local and national parliaments.

UNDERGROUND MISSIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Smuggling Bibles and 'east mission' work seems to be promoted quite readily in Canada. There is need for Bibles throughout much of eastern Europe. However, this varies also from country to country. In Poland it is possible to order a Bible from the Bible Society office in Warsaw and have it sent anywhere in the country. It will have been printed in Poland on official printing presses, and may be exported to many other eastern countries. One may freely, as a visitor to most of the countries in the East, bring in 'gifts' of Bibles. Single Bibles may be mailed as gifts to many countries in the East. Bulk imports of Bibles from the West have been shipped into several eastern countries fairly regularly since 1945. Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia are all part of the worldwide fellowship of the United Bible Societies. Local production of Bibles takes place in the G.D.R., Czechoslovakia, Poland, Rumania, Yugoslavia and Hungary; Bibles are exported from there to other eastern countries and to other parts of the world.

Printing and import licences have increased recently for the Soviet Union in several languages.

We visited the Bible Society offices in Warsaw, Poland. Centrally located with prominent window displays, they have operated since 1816 with only brief interruption between 1944-46 when the city was leveled because of the war. This Bible Society is the only one in the East able to work without interruption receiving and distributing scriptures, according to its Executive Secretary, Mrs. Barbara Narzynski. Bibles are for sale, may be mail-ordered, and are shipped for export to several parts of the world. Bibles are printed locally, although thin Bible-paper must be imported as there is little manufactured in the East. We were told of Bibles which are imported to other eastern countries from the west that arrived legally at their destinations, a work which can be directly supported through our Bible Society.

We were also told by many people in different countries that the smuggling of Bibles is often used by officials of the government and by opponents of the church to show the 'negative witness' of illegal methods which Christians use to foster their own cause. Such occasions receive publicity there and cause the observer to wonder if Bible-smuggling is worth the cost of these 'negative witnesses', a question which provides no easy answer.

Dr. Paul Hansen, Europe Secretary for the Lutheran World Federation, reminds us that "East Missions" generally tell "about exceptional cases and give the world the impression that they are typical". "For every picture of a persecuted individual or family reproduced by East Missions in their publications, we can show photos of thousands of Christians who are not being brutally prosecuted by Communist authorities. For every story about congregations which come together secretly in the woods, we can tell about thousands of others which gather in church buildings with state permission and whose members are just as faithful and committed believers as are those in the forest."

We talked privately with Christians in the East and were informed by them that many of these groups are small, splinter groups from recognized churches who have become dissatisfied with some practice of the church or who have gotten into personal conflict with someone in the church. Much of their evangelization work is with the members of established churches.

Opportunities for helping Christians in eastern Europe are openly available through their churches. One example, the Lutheran Church in America has a Designated Advance Gifts program for Lutherans in eastern Europe (DAG). Every cent of DAG gifts goes for the designated purpose, and is channeled through the Lutheran World Federation, to those in need. Nothing is deducted for salaries or promotional materials.

Many articles that we take for granted for church use are difficult or even impossible to obtain in some eastern European countries. These include such items as altar cloths and pastors' robes, office equipment in some countries, theological and religious books, texts and journals. Currency regulations prevent the churches from purchasing books from abroad with their own funds, and only three of twelve eastern European Lutheran churches of the LWF are permitted to publish theological books in the national language. Many of these items, as well as special items such as x-ray machines for church hospitals must be brought in from 'abroad', through the help of the LWF. Assistance is also provided for pastors and church workers

with pensions and health needs where the state does not include them in their pension or health programmes. Support is also given to special projects and to church construction and repair where churches are stretched beyond their limits of financial support. Also some theological students receive scholarship aid which would not otherwise be available, as do programmes for lay training. Normally the only restrictions in the East are the usual bureaucratic delays of eastern governments.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In some countries, one wonders how freely one may talk with people, while in others, there seems to be a complete freedom of conversation. Perhaps one clue comes in the countries where conversations are sometimes guarded or some questions are not answered. Those to whom one may speak freely and those to whom one should not be known to those who live there. On some occasions, answers to questions came later when the answers could be given privately; other times, answers were freely given as we travelled from one country to the other.

Comparing with previous visits, I felt more freedom and openness to speak in 1978 than in 1975 in some places. Yet I am reminded of a conversation in one country, in a private home in which we stopped talking as a pillow was placed over a telephone. By contrast, in another part of the same country there was no concern for what was said. Two Canadian pastors preached freely in worship services in one country and could have received church permission to do so in others; in other countries of the East, this would have presented difficulties.

There seems to be a double standard which the governments in the East are providing for their people. On one hand there is a need for western currency. Special shops are provided with special goods for anyone with western currency. On the other hand, there are severe restrictions against exchanging money unofficially or using the 'black market'. There is also a two-level arrangement for living in the society: one should say what is accepted in order to get ahead, but you of course have your own thoughts. We are told that many ask, "Is life only education and work for the state?" Where and when may one speak one's mind? One way is through 'black humor', joking about the errors of the government — but only in some countries. Another way is through talking honestly with people and helping them relate the Gospel of Christ to problems felt by people in Bible studies and discussion groups in the churches. For some people, the church provides a rare opportunity to speak out and express oneself freely.

If you were a citizen of one of these eastern European countries, you might find yourself "in a bag" as one person there put it. A visit to North America brings the question, "Are you a member of an underground church or a communist?" Then as one begins to struggle to answer in words, one is reminded that what is said might be reported back home to the state.

Labels are easy to apply when one is looking for easy answers to describe Christians in the East. Not having God's judgment, easy answers are not given. We must begin to try to understand these people realistically! We must think in terms of if we were born in one of these eastern European countries and had little chance of leaving it, how would we express our Christian faith in such a situation?