

# They Lived On Another Planet

*By*

*Harold A. Essmann*

Personal reminiscences and a definitive history  
of the mission explorations of the  
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
in Russia and Eastern Europe

**Dedicated to my faithful wife  
Ruth  
and our children  
Rhoda, David and Michele**

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## PREFACE

It has been over ten years since the first mission exploratory journey was made to what was then the Soviet Union. From 1991 through 1995 six such visits were made to Russia and to Eastern Europe. During that time, five European nations were explored with the result that today the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod proclaims the gospel in three of those nations - Russia, Bulgaria and Albania.

With the passage of time, I felt it important to write a definitive history of those mission explorations. I do this so generations to come might understand the vicissitudes of life experienced by those making those visitations. More than that, others will be able to appreciate the grace of God in leading the mission explorers to mission fields where today hundreds of people, young and old, regularly learn of their salvation. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word these people learn of Jesus Christ and how by his perfect life and innocent suffering and death he redeemed them.

I had the distinct privilege of serving as a member of all the mission visits. However, I am grateful to those who accompanied me on one or more of those mission explorations. Those persons included my wife, Ruth, who supported me especially on the major and lengthy visit to Russia in 1992 as well as such individuals as Pastor Ronald Freier and his wife, Gwen, Administrator Duane Tomhave, Missionary Kirby Spevacek, Pastor Daniel Kelm, Pastor Don Fastenau, Pastor Stephen Valleskey and his wife Sally, Mr. Gary Miller and Mr. Robert Dusseau.

I also wish to thank Pastor Kirby Spevacek who has served as missionary in Africa, Bulgaria, Albania and among the citizens of the Apache nation. He accompanied me on all but one of the mission visitations. Thanks also go to Pastor Ronald Freier who was the chairman of what was then known as the Japan Europe Asia Executive Committee. These two men have performed a valuable service reading my manuscript and offering suggestions for its improvement and also making it accurate.

Thanks also needs to be extended to our daughter, Michele, who spent many hours laying out and proof reading this book.

Especially I wish to thank God who held his protecting hand over us and led us to promising mission fields.

May our gracious Lord continue to bless the mission endeavors of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the missionaries who work among the people of Russia and Eastern Europe, some of whom said, "We live on another planet."

*Harold A. Essmann*

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## INTRODUCTION

### WORLD MISSIONS IN THE WELS

Mission outreach into the world by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod did not blossom until the synod was about 100 years old. Its first world or heathen mission endeavor, as it was known, did not take place until 1893 among the people of the Apache Indian nation. Even then there was much criticism concerning that endeavor. Professor J. P. Koehler in his "History of the Wisconsin Synod" writes, "There is something not entirely sound about Synod's heathen-mission endeavor, the idea that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in heathen-mission work, according to the Lord's great commission: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. That idea is dogmatism, with a streak of pietism, and it provoked the criticism of Prof. (Adolf) Hoenecke. And in distinction from the mission houses abroad, the tackling of the work here was unintelligent in that the prospective missionaries were not given adequate training at the college or the seminary. .... These mistakes, outside of being a part of the general slipshod management,

also arose from the lukewarm attitude of Synod's leadership that dreaded the added cost to the budget." <sup>(1)</sup> However, these caustic words of Professor Koehler did not hinder the Wisconsin Synod from proceeding through the years in establishing missions around the world.

To be sure, the first so-called heathen mission was begun among the people of the Apache Indian nation in 1893. A century later hundreds of Native-Americans, Wisconsin Synod officials, members of the synod's Board for World Missions and friends of the mission gathered at East Fork Lutheran High School on the Fort Apache reservation in a worship service praising and thanking God for the years of grace accorded the Apache people.



*Portion of worshippers in East Fork Lutheran High School celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Apache mission during October, 1993. Missionary H. Eugene Hartzel is in the first row.*

This first world or heathen mission was established 43 years after the founding of the synod. It was not until 1924 that another world mission was established among the people of Poland. Centered around Lodz, Poland, and confined especially to Germans, it faded out of history after the Second World War. With Russian troops following on their heels, the Germans fled into Germany where they formed the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission. This group later joined the Selbststaendige Evangelische-Lutherische Kirche (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church) and ceased to exist as a

mission of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. A third world mission endeavor was begun during the 1930's in Nigeria together with the other three synods of the Synodical Conference - the Missouri (LCMS), Norwegian (ELS) and Slovak synods. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod participated in assisting with the finances of the mission field in Nigeria as well as providing, among other men, one of the first missionaries - Pastor William Schweppe. Missionary Schweppe served in Africa the remainder of his life, first in Nigeria for 25 years, then in Ghana and finally in Zambia. In Zambia he was killed in an automobile accident. Dr. Schweppe was an inspiration to many including this author. He returned for his first furlough from Nigeria in 1939. In carrying out deputation work he spoke about his work at St. Martin's Lutheran Church in Winona, Minnesota. I was only a boy at the time but his lecture made such an impression on me that to this day I can remember where he stood in the church, parts of his lecture and where my parents and I sat in the church.

Independent and increased world mission activity did not take place in the WELS until after the Second World War. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was now nearly 100 years old when a mission exploration took place in Africa in 1949. Pastor Edgar Hoenecke (grandson of the Prof. Adolf Hoenecke, who criticized the first mission endeavor of the synod) and Pastor Arthur Walker made



*Worshippers in attendance at the dedication of a new chapel in Matero near Lusaka, Zambia, in 1957.*

up the mission visitation team. The result of the mission exploration was the establishment of a mission field in what is now Zambia in 1953. About the same time our synod was serving military personnel in Japan. The result of that effort gave rise to the establishment of another mission field in that country in 1957.

The decade of the 1960's found an explosion of new world mission openings. These included entry into the countries of Malawi, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, Taiwan and Mexico. Likewise, the 1970's afforded opportunity to open new mission fields in Cameroon, Colombia, Nigeria (not to be confused with the earlier effort together with other synods in the Synodical Conference) and Indonesia. Most of these mission openings were due to the energetic and inspiring leadership of Pastor Edgar Hoenecke the Executive Secretary (now known as Administrator) of the Board for World Missions.

In the 1980's, because of a lack of funds, only one new world mission field was opened and that in the country of Brazil.

This brings us up to the 1990's and to the consideration of how the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod entered into world mission work in Russia and Eastern Europe.

The road had been long and hard. It began with the opening of the first heathen mission field among the Apache Indians. It included nearly 100 years of experience in opening mission fields around the world. During those 100 years many missionaries had been called, labored hard, lacked or enjoyed success. All had experienced the blessing of God on their labors. During those years policies were developed, seminary programs initiated in world fields, mission conferences held, alternate mission methods proposed. By the grace of God it was possible for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to enter new mission fields in Russia, Bulgaria and Albania. This is now a history of the birth pains, entry and development of those mission fields.



## I

### **PRELUDE TO ACTION**

In order to better understand the actions of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in beginning mission work in Russia and Eastern Europe, we need to understand what was happening in the Soviet Union politically and its implications for church work.

The Russian revolution in 1917 transferred authority from a heavy-handed czarist government to an equally heavy-handed and more ruthless Communist government. Such governments stifled initiative on the part of everyone from the intelligencia to the lowly peasant. Decades of repression conditioned the Russians to be passive and cynical. <sup>(2)</sup> Persecution of the church initiated by Joseph Stalin was increased during the time of Nikita Khrushchev. The repression of the church in Communist times is illustrated in a story about church bells. Bells have a great symbolic importance in Russian history. Historically bells have been used to summon Russians - to worship in their churches, to gather in town meetings, or to defend their cities against fire or invaders. In the 1930's, Stalin ordered that thousands of churches all over the Soviet Union be closed, and their bells

destroyed or their clappers removed. Among those were the famous bells of Rostov, a city near Moscow. In silencing the bells, Stalin was metaphorically silencing the people of Russia. Not until Mikhail Gorbachev's clarion call of glasnost did the bells of Rostov ring out freely once again. One man smiled as he remembered the ringing of the bells of Rostov in 1987 - for the first time in more than half a century. "That," he said, "is the sound of glasnost." <sup>(3)</sup>

## **GLASNOST AND PERESTROIKA**

Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985. In a short time the new leader brought into being two principle actions that affected the social, political and ecclesiastical life of the Soviet Union. One was perestroika, which means restructuring, and the other was glasnost, which means openness. Seventy years after the October Revolution, perestroika constituted real changes in attitudes, in ideas and in practice. (Cf. Appendix 1, especially number 10 and the conclusion)

Mr. Z. Brzezinski, at the time an advisor to the administration of President Jimmy Carter, writes "Gorbachev spearheaded the drive for reform and in doing so deliberately sought to generate social pressures from below on its behalf. That was the tactical significance of the glasnost campaign, which stimulated nothing short of a nationwide debate over the Soviet present and past. In the course of the debate, things once held to be sacred were publicly profaned; matters long ago swept under the rug exposed; the seeming unanimity of the country shattered; and in some eyes even the future of the system placed in doubt. As a result, the totalitarian Soviet Union increasingly was becoming a volatile Soviet disunion." <sup>(4)</sup>

Glasnost also had an effect on the Russian Orthodox Church. Previously this church was under the effective political domination of the government and the secret police had even penetrated its clergy. The year 1988 was the one-thousandth anniversary of the beginning of Christianity in the Soviet Union. This jubilee celebration reawakened public interest in religion. It is interesting to note that a previous dictator, Georgyi Malenkov, one of Stalin's most loyal henchmen, in his last years was a devote member of a religious choir. He insisted on and received a Christian burial upon his death in 1987.

<sup>(5)</sup>

Events in Russia were having an effect on the thinking of some members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. At the 8th biennial convention of the South Atlantic District held in Leesburg, Florida, June 13 to 15, 1988, the following resolution was adopted:

- Whereas 1) this is the 1,000th year since Christianity was introduced to the Soviet people, and
- Whereas 2) in the spirit of glasnost the Soviet Union has been receptive to greater religious contact with world-wide Christian churches, and
- Whereas 3) we have millions of fellow Lutherans in Soviet Central Asia; and
- Whereas 4) this group of Lutherans falls within the purview of our legitimate fraternal concern;

Therefore be it

Resolved, That we urge the Administrator of the Board for World Missions to write the Honorable Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, requesting his aid in the cordial reception of a delegation from our Synod to make contact with these Lutherans now during this jubilee year.

I do not know if such a letter was ever written or sent, but I do know rapidly developing events in the Soviet Union and in our synod led to action to determine if and how we might begin mission work in the Soviet Union.

The entire synod, in convention at Martin Luther Preparatory School in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, on August 7 to 11, 1989, passed the following resolution:

- Whereas 1) the current spirit of glasnost in the Soviet Union may present mission opportunities, But may also be temporary; and
- Whereas 2) our concern for German Lutherans in the USSR is a legitimate concern of the Central Asia Radio Committee (Now the EARC) and of the Board for World Missions;

Therefore be it

Resolved, That the people of the Soviet Union be a current concern of the Board for World Missions.

As a result of this synod resolution, the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee made plans to determine how the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod might begin mission work in the Soviet Union.

### **THE WALL FALLS**

Winston Churchill, in a commencement address in Fulton, Missouri, stated that an "iron curtain" had fallen over Eastern Europe. While that remark included much more than something visual, the physical evidence of it took the form of a concrete wall that separated Western and Eastern Berlin, Germany. Many individuals attempted to escape to the west and many succeeded but some failed.

While president, Ronald Reagan, in a speech in Berlin said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall. Tear down that wall." Breaches in the iron curtain now began to occur more frequently, especially when East German citizens began to escape to West Germany through the country of Hungary.

Finally, on November 9, 1989, Tom Brokaw, TV news anchorman for NBC, made the announcement while standing in front of the Berlin wall, "The East German government announced that East German citizens can pass through the wall, no restrictions."

The hand of God was, in a most dramatic fashion by this event, opening the door for mission work in Russia and Eastern Europe for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Pastor Ronald Freier, for many years Chairman of the Administrative Committee for Japan and later for Eastern Europe and Russia, relates how this dramatic event affected their work. He says, "At the synod convention in the summer of 1989 the Board for World Missions presented a recommendation that the world be divided into five geographical sections and that the five administrative committees of the Board for World Missions "watchdog" their particular area for potential mission openings. The synod adopted the recommendation. Since our Japan Administrative Committee's only responsibility at the time was Japan, it was decided that this committee should watchdog all the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and most of Asia, which included Russia, Bulgaria

and Albania, since 'these countries would probably never open up anyway.'

"On November 9, 1989, the Japan Administrative Committee was meeting in the synod administration building (in Milwaukee, Wisconsin) for the specific purpose of exploring ways to enter these Communist countries, especially East Germany. While Chairman Ron Freier was conducting the opening devotion at this Administrative Committee meeting, office manager, Kaye Eckert knocked on the meeting room door and suggested that we come and have a look at what was taking place in East Germany. TV news anchorman Dan Rather (of CBS) was showing pictures of the Berlin wall coming down with pick axes and even bare hands. You know the rest of the story. At that memorable meeting, the name of our administrative committee was changed to 'Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee' and exploration visits were planned immediately for East Germany, and Russia." (6)

In a report of the Administrative committee for Japan Europe Asia dated June 7, 1990, the prospect for mission in the Soviet Union was outlined. This committee had made a mission visit to Germany in February, 1990. As a result of that visit the report states, "For many years Christians around the world have been praying for a breakthrough into Communist bloc countries, especially the Soviet Union. In recent months the Lord has answered these prayers and has opened a door. Perhaps only a crack. But at the present time, it is open.....It must be kept in mind that at any time the door to Russia could be slammed shut. The words of Jesus in the Great Commission do not allow us to wait for that to happen. Plans should be made and carried out as soon as possible to take advantage of this marvelous opportunity to proclaim the message of God's grace and forgiveness to a nation which here-to-for has gone on record of denying the existence of God." (7)

It should be stated that at this time, and also for some time in the future, there was great doubt as to whether or not we could begin and continue mission work in the former Soviet Union. All the plans were very tentative in nature and filled with the desire to work while it was day before the night would descend on mission work in the Soviet Union.

Therefore, the initial plans to work in the Soviet Union revolved around alternate mission methods, primarily through the use of radio, television and the printed word. One of the proposals reads, "Although there are six metropolitan areas that could and should be targeted, the area we wish to focus on is Leningrad. Broadcasting from this city would cover all eleven time zones."

A request for \$250,000 to carry out such a radio ministry was attached to the report to be acted on by the Board for World Missions at its October, 1990, meeting. Private funds would be sought to support this radio ministry to be carried out for 18 to 24 months. The first broadcast was proposed to be aired on March 31, 1991.

After investigation later, in Russia, it was learned that such an approach would not be desirable for several reasons. First, one religious group had tried it. That group received so many responses that the mailbags filled railroad cars. The government asked that group to sort the mail because the government did not have the personnel to carry out the task. Then, too, while there was considerable pressure by the members of the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee to begin work in Leningrad, later once again known as St. Petersburg, such a strategy would be difficult to carry out because there were a great number of mission agencies, including Lutheran, that wanted to work in that city. Also, this would be a seed-sowing ministry and the ultimate and real purpose of any radio ministry should be to gather the hearers into congregations so they may be served with the Word and the sacraments.

Subsequent events would change the character of this initial response to the synod to begin mission activity in the Soviet Union.



## II

### THE INITIAL MISSION VISIT TO RUSSIA

**January, 1991**

During the course of time, the Board for World Missions had set up two instruments for the evaluation of new mission fields. The first is entitled “Instrument for Determining Field Priority.” This instrument is more commonly called "The Twenty Questions" and is used for initial investigation of a mission field. The second instrument is entitled “Field Investigation and People Profile.” It is a more complex questionnaire but is based on the twenty questions used in the initial investigation of a possible mission field.

In order to obtain information about the possibility of doing mission work in Russia a visitation team was organized. The team included Pastor Duane Tomhave, the Administrator of the Board for World Missions, Pastor Ronald Freier, the Chairman of the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee, who was also accompanied by his wife Gwen, and Pastor Harold Essmann a member of the Committee for Mission Expansion of the Board for World Missions.

In order to enter Russia without causing any disturbance the mission team joined a group tour that left the United States flying from Chicago to Stockholm, Sweden, on January 12, 1991. Tension was high because of the impending invasion of Iraq called Desert Storm. Multiple security checkpoints were set up in O'Hare Field in Chicago to screen airline passengers. Mr. Larry Marquardt, a member of the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee and automobile dealer near Chicago at Barrington, met us at the airport and delivered to us 700 copies of the New Testament in Russian. It was hoped we could distribute these New Testaments while in Russia.

From Stockholm we flew on to Helsinki, Finland, where our flight was delayed two hours. All baggage was removed from the airplane and deposited on the taxiway next to the airplane. Each passenger had to identify his or her baggage. Then it was placed back on the airplane. At the end it was found that two pieces of baggage were left unclaimed. Security precautions were very evident. The airplane then proceeded on to Leningrad. At the airport in Leningrad we were not permitted to bring into the country the Russian language New Testaments. We were informed that someone living in Russia must request the Testaments.

Leningrad, in 1991, had a population of four million people. It was the seat of the government of Russia from 1714 under Czar Peter the Great until the Revolution of 1917. Peter the Great had founded the city in 1703. It was to be his window to the west. Its many canals identify it as the Venice of the North. While it is western in character, it is also cold, majestic and formal. The huge winter palace of the czars has been converted into the Hermitage Museum, one of the largest in the world.

We stayed in a hotel built by the Finns in 1980 for the Olympics. The rooms were sparsely furnished. Food was not in great abundance and sometimes poorly prepared. One morning we had a sort of sauerkraut and small sausages for breakfast. American type products were quite expensive. We had to pay \$2.00 for a small bottle of water. However, we had brought some food from America in our luggage for ourselves. Immediately across from our hotel stood an imposing monument and an underground museum dedicated to the valor of the people in Leningrad who endured the siege of the German army for over 900 days during the Second World War. Nearby there were large

mounds of dirt under which were buried several hundred thousand bodies of the citizens of Leningrad who died of starvation or wounds in that siege.

The next morning, January 14th, we took a city tour. Many buildings were rundown. The old city was beautiful with its Winter Palace, Neva River, canals and bridges. Old Russian Orthodox churches like Our Saviors and St. Isaac had been converted into museums during the Communist era. This was true of many churches, synagogues, and mosques. If they were not destroyed, they usually were converted into museums, cultural centers or music halls.

Under the czars the Russian Orthodox Church had 57,000 priests, 94,000 monks and nuns in 54,000 churches and 1,025 monasteries. In 1991 it was reported through all of Russia there were only a few thousand priests serving about 7,500 churches. There were only three seminaries - in Leningrad, Zagorsk and Odessa - as well as only 15 convents and three monasteries. <sup>(8)</sup>

On the afternoon of January 14th we had the opportunity to meet with Pastor Peter Konovalchik for two hours. He was the pastor of the largest Baptist church in the Leningrad region. He indicated that his congregation numbered 3,000 members and they had a church building seating 1,100 persons. It was the second largest congregation in the Soviet Union. The previous year he had baptized 210 persons. We met with him to discuss the work of their church and to gain insight as to how our Lutheran synod could enter and work in the Soviet Union.



*January 14, 1991  
meeting with  
Baptist pastor,  
Peter Konovalchik  
in St. Petersburg,  
Russia. Left to  
right, back row,  
Pastor Ronald  
Freier and Pastor  
Duane Tomhave;  
Front row - Pastor  
Peter Konovalchik  
and Pastor Harold  
Essmann.*

After introductions were made, we reported that Russian New Testaments were available at the airport if Pastor Konovalchik would request them. We asked that brochures we had printed be inserted in the New Testaments. That was agreed to and we know that it was carried out because in a short time letters from people who had received the Testaments wrote to our synod headquarters in Milwaukee.

In answer to the possibility of the Lutheran Church working in Russia, Pastor Konovalchik replied, "Before we could worship only in our church building, now we can have services in homes and preach on the streets. Before we could not print or receive literature, now that is possible. Before people could not openly read the Bible or know the gospel, now Bible distribution is very important." When asked about the prospect for Christianity in the future, he stated, "Many people are becoming Christians now. The Orthodox Church has many returning to the church, but they are nominal Christians. They are baptized but do not associate with the church. Very little instruction is given to the members." The question, is it possible for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to work in Russia, brought the response, "There is freedom for all religious activity in the Soviet Union. Even Rev. Moon (head of the Moonies) is seeking to begin work. He wants to take 10,000 young people to the United States to study. Work among the youth is most difficult. They are interested in worldly things. The Orthodox Church had Sunday school only for small children and no confirmation classes. Radio and television programs are possible and this method of proclaiming the gospel should be investigated." Many additional questions were addressed to Pastor Konovalchik on seminary training, the need for a license to enter the country as well as a sponsor for entry, and the possibility to supply humanitarian aid to the country. Pastor Konovalchik answered these questions, as well as others, clearly and truthfully. This meeting was of tremendous help in laying the groundwork for the entry of our synod into Russia. The visiting team spent two hours that evening absorbing the information presented by Pastor Konovalchik and then attempted to answer the "Twenty Questions" to the best of its ability.

*January 15th* - This morning we took the subway to Nevsky Prospect, the main street of Leningrad. The ride cost 5 kopeck or about one

cent. The metro got us to our destination in 15 minutes where a bus would have taken 30 to 45 minutes to make the same trip. The escalator leading to the metro was long, steep, and fast and went down very deep under the street. In downtown Leningrad we viewed shopping in the largest department store. There were few items available and they were of inferior quality. The store was broken up into a large number of tiny shops. People stood in line at the few shops that had goods available. Shopping in Russia was an experience. First you stood in line to view and purchase a product. Then you went in another line to pay a cashier for the product. Finally you stood in a third line to show the salesperson that you had paid for the product and then you can pick it up. In the Soviet system that gave work to a lot of people.

On Nevsky Prospect stands the St. Peter and St. Paul Lutheran Church. At one time the congregation numbered 20,000 members. Before the Communist era, the church building had three horseshoe shaped balconies and the largest organ in all of Russia. The Communist government closed the church. It tore out the organ and two of the balconies. On the main floor they put in a large swimming pool and in the chancel area built the diving platform. On the ridge, between the two main towers, a wooden box was placed over the



*St. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church on Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg, Russia. Taken after the wooden box covering the angel between the towers had been removed. The angel had been covered for 70 years during the Communist Era.*

angel and cross that was erected there when the church was built. A couple years after this initial visit to Leningrad, the Russian government returned St. Peter and St. Paul Church to the Lutheran Church. On one occasion Pastor Ronald Freier, Mr. Larry Marquardt and I met the Bishop of the German Lutheran Church, Pastor George Kretschmar, in this very building. On a trip to Leningrad several years later, while working in our mission in Bulgaria, my wife and I were present on the very day when the box covering the angel was removed and the white marble angel and the red cross were revealed for the first time in many decades. We entered the church, saw the swimming pool and listened to a choir give a concert while it stood under the diving platform. On that day the German Lutheran congregation numbered 400 members. What a sad commentary this is on the effects of atheistic communism in religious matters.

*January 16th* - This morning we had to rise by 5:30 a.m. to fly to Moscow. The plane looked like a converted bomber. It had a large clear plastic nose that could easily have been used by a bombardier. It seated 48 people and seating was very cramped. The Russian passengers were very quiet and only the Americans were boisterous and laughing. We noted that this was the case, also, when we were riding on other public conveyances such as the subway. This too was the result of the repressive Communist regime. People did not know if the person seated next to him or her was an informer and thus remained silent. Also, the extremely poor conditions of the country caused the citizens to be very depressed.

Well, we arrived at the airport terminal in Moscow. We saw huge United States cargo planes at the airport. Workmen were unloading relief supplies meant for the disadvantaged Russians. We had to walk from our plane to the terminal, which was about a half mile away. It was cold and light snow was falling. The terminal was small and dirty, very depressing.

From the airport we were driven, by bus, to the city of Zagorsk found just outside Moscow. We visited the Russian Orthodox seminary and monastery in Zagorsk. You will remember that at this time only three seminaries continued to exist in the Russian Orthodox Church. The one we visited in Zagorsk was one of the three. The chapels in the monastery were old. The one we saw was built in the 14th century. At most there were only 30 students in the seminary.

*January 17th* - I was rooming with Pastor Duane Tomhave. He had brought with him a small short wave radio. As we awoke on this cold, snowy morning we heard on the radio that the bombing of Iraq and the beginning of what is known as Desert Storm had taken place. We left Zagorsk early in the morning to drive back to Moscow. We stopped on the way to take pictures of picturesque farm homes. The homes are located in small villages. The people then go out from the villages to work the collective farms. They were given small plots of ground near their homes to raise vegetables for their own use and to sell. Such conditions made living on a farm much more desirable than living elsewhere. Very recently the government was in the process of giving back to the farmers the land the government owned. This was a part of the perestroika program.

In Moscow we toured the city viewing such things as the changing of the guard at Lenin's tomb; (Later the government of President Boris Yeltsen eliminated this ceremony.) the infamous KGB (secret police) building; and even the first McDonald's in the city. In the evening we had the privilege of attending a ballet, "Romeo and Juliet" by Prokofiev at the famous Bolshoi Theater. This theater is very beautiful. Decorated in red with white and gold trim it has six balconies, a huge chandelier and a tremendously large stage.

*January 18th* - As planned, we departed briefly from the tour we were on both in Leningrad and now also in Moscow. Today we attended the first meeting held of Protestant, chiefly Baptist, publication representatives from throughout the Soviet Union. Such a meeting was forbidden in the previous years of communism. For many years practically all Christian publishing for all denominations was prohibited. Perestroika changed all that. Even selling denominational newspapers and magazines in secular shops, kiosks and magazine stands was now taking place. One Protestant publication printed a total of one million copies of many titles in 1990. Thus, such a meeting of publishers was of extreme importance at this time in the history of the Soviet Union so the message of the gospel could be proclaimed through the printed word. This would also be important for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod as it contemplated work in the Soviet Union.

In the afternoon we met with the officials of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist at their headquarters in Moscow. This union,

chiefly of Baptists and Pentecostal churches, was the only church group, other than the Russian Orthodox Church to survive the Communist era. It comprised about 2,500 churches and a half-million adherents scattered throughout the Soviet Union but found



*January 18, 1991 meeting with officials of the Union of Evangelical Christians - Baptist. Left to right, Vice-president Alexei Bichkov, President Gregory Komendant, Treasurer, Pastor Peter Clemenchok of Trans-world Radio, who introduced the visiting team to these Baptist officials, and Pastor Ronald Freier.*

especially in Ukraine. Pastor Gregory Komendant was president of the union. In our meeting he was accompanied by his vice-president, whom we later met separately, and the secretary-treasurer of the union. These men were very helpful in being willing to help our synod to become registered in Russia and to begin work. Pastor Komendant stated, "Now is the time to preach the gospel in the Soviet Union. Evangelism among the children is important. If in a concrete form, some form of literature would be important." After this meeting, we met with the vice-president, Pastor Alexei Bichkov. Pastor Bichkov informed us that a Lutheran Church had been established a year before in Moscow. It had about 50 members. He also reminded us that there is an open door for evangelism in the country and that radio work can be carried out without interference from the government. He outlined for us the educational system that the Baptist Church was using to train teachers of Sunday schools and

pastors. They had 22 Bible Correspondence Schools scattered throughout the country that had graduated 800 teachers. The Baptist Church had the goal of establishing 100 such schools. The next step in the training program was to establish 30 Bible schools and the third step was a seminary program for the students. All of this was valuable information for us visitors.

Standing near the Kremlin, our mission team was reminded of the long history of the Russian people. Already in 1156, on the banks of the Moscow River, the first kremlin or fortress was built. In succeeding years larger and sturdier fortresses found their place on the same site, until at the end of the 15th century the present walls were completed. Within those walls the wheels of government ground out the regulations that affected the lives of the 290 million citizens of the Soviet Union. Those laws and regulations also had an effect on the religious lives of the Russian people. While standing in Red Square near the Kremlin, Pastor Freier remarked, "Who would have thought just a year ago that we would be standing here today."

Our visit to the Soviet Union was now completed. We flew back to Stockholm on January 19th. We were amazed at the cleanliness of the city in comparison to what we had experienced in the Soviet Union. After a night's stay in Stockholm we happily returned home on January 20, 1991.

## REPORTS

In a report to the synod, printed in the Northwestern Lutheran, I stated the following: "What did we gain from our mission visit? We gained knowledge to facilitate our entry into the Soviet Union to proclaim the gospel. We learned that alternate means to do mission work, namely, to use radio, television and literature can be successful. Also, we gained the names of many useful contacts that can be of use to us in the future. Above all, we learned that there is a tremendous opportunity to proclaim the gospel in the Soviet Union to a people awakening to new freedoms, including especially the freedom to worship.

"Now it is for us to supply these thirsting souls with the message of God's love through Jesus Christ that they too might have eternal life. The door to do this is open now, it wasn't yesterday, and it may not be tomorrow.

"World Mission Administrator Tomhave summed up our mission visitation in these words. 'As we look out over the Soviet Union with its long history and its many monuments to the accomplishments of man, we also realize that the Lord is in control. We ask that he would give us the understanding and wisdom to know what might be possible to reach the 290 million people of the Soviet Union, some of whom are searching in a way never before possible for some spiritual truths and some eternal meaning of life. You and I, who have the answers in Christ Jesus, look beyond the works and monuments of men and we hope to bring to these hearts and souls the message that Christ died for all. In a time when politics and economics don't look so well for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, we feel that there is a window of opportunity that is open now and we don't know how long. We thank the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for the privilege for being on the scene and being your representatives to find the entrance means to this culture so that we might determine, under God, what he would have us to do to bring the message of salvation to the USSR.' " <sup>(9)</sup> (Cf. Appendix 2)

When we made our mission visitation, we were aware that a special gift, in the amount of one-half million dollars, had been given for work in Eastern Europe and Russia. The stage had been set to carry out a plan to proclaim God's Word in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

At its January, 1991, meeting the Board for World Missions allotted, as its second priority, \$125,000 for radio outreach into the USSR from the Lift High the Cross synod-wide offering.

Dated February 14, 1991, a full report entitled "Field Investigation and People Profile - Soviet Union" was submitted by Pastor Harold A. Essmann, who had participated in the January mission visitation to the Soviet Union. In answer to many of the questions in the report the statement was made "unknown or unknown at this time." This report would lead eventually to an extensive and intensive mission visitation to be conducted in early 1992.

During the April 1991 meeting of the Board for World Missions the following report on mission work in the Soviet Union was given: "To begin with, we would send two workers to develop a radio ministry in Russia. We have developed and are developing more materials for

Bible study and correspondence courses for those responding to our broadcasts. Initially our workers will live in Germany or Finland since the availability of dwellings and food items in Russia are quite scarce at this time. (Later the decision was made to have the mission team live in Plzen, Czechoslovakia, where an Evangelical Lutheran Synod mission team was living. Also, a Lutheran Christian day school was available for the three daughters of Missionary and Mrs. Spevacek who remained at home - Anna, Tanya and Roxanne.) As soon as conditions allow, the workers will live in Russia. Our work in Russia is funded through special offerings made through special gifts and from our synod's Lift High the Cross offering. We pray for our Lord's rich blessings as we reach out with the gospel in a land that has been closed to open and active mission work for over 70 years."

(10)

A field strategy and job description for a Mission Coordinator for the USSR and Eastern Europe were developed by the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee.

Among other things, the Mission Coordinator was to be responsible for outreach, exploring and utilizing any media necessary to bring the gospel to the countries where he would be assigned. He was to seek out technical expertise and meet with publishers, translators and video producers. He was to share with the Committee for Mission Expansion any new outreach opportunities for appropriate reaction. He was to learn the Russian language and live in or near the USSR as soon as feasible.

Strategy for work in the Soviet Union included the following:

### **BASIC STRATEGY**

The basic approach to mission work in the Soviet Union will be entirely different from our usual way of gospel outreach in a foreign country. Should a national church eventually exist in the USSR or any other of the eastern countries, it will be begun by nationals and staffed by nationals.

### **INITIAL STRATEGY**

Initial gospel outreach will begin with radio and/or TV as the primary media. Programming will be directed to the youth - ages 10 - 19. Give-aways, Bible study courses, Bibles and New Testaments would

be offered in conjunction with the broadcasts. Christian Information Centers in metropolitan areas and/or smaller towns it is hoped would become a reality. The use of "Communicating Christ" instructional videos and manuals in the Russian language would be used since no church body, to our knowledge, presently utilizes such materials. Should a Bible school and/or seminary eventually become a reality, it would be because a national church made it happen.

### **LONG-RANGE STRATEGY**

It shall never be our intent to establish a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod church in the USSR or any other eastern country. What we could foresee are church bodies in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.<sup>(11)</sup>

The Committee for Mission Expansion of the Board for World Missions reacted to this report and the strategy proposed. In its report dated April 2, 1991, the CME stated: "The CME strongly favors getting into this field (the Soviet Union) as soon as possible. We have received a detailed exploration report and the JEA Executive Committee has shared its proposed plans from this field with us. We endorse much of what this committee has prepared, but we are asking for an opportunity to have one or more of the CME to meet with the JEA Executive Committee so as to express our reservations with regard to some of their planning."<sup>(12)</sup>

Among the concerns the Committee for Mission Expansion wanted to discuss were the following:

1. Do we need a coordinator or a missionary for this field?
2. Calling a man for two years with a view to making recommendations regarding continuing work by the end of that time.
3. Asking this man to clear up as many of the "unknowns" on the exploration report as he can as soon as possible.
4. Having this man spend as much time within the USSR as possible.
5. Having this man live in close proximity to the USSR.
6. Engaging a second person to help in areas where special expertise is required.
7. Keeping the work in Germany a separate item since it is a matter of assisting the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church.

The answers to these concerns were given by the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee and plans proceeded to call a Mission Coordinator. The call was sent to and accepted by Pastor Kirby Spevacek. Following his graduation from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Pastor Spevacek served as a missionary in Zambia, Africa, for 10 years from 1968 to 1978. During those ten years he served at the Mwembeshi mission station until in 1972. Then he taught at the Bible institute and seminary at Chelston, a suburb of Lusaka, Zambia, until 1978. He then accepted a call to serve as pastor of Centennial Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After serving that congregation for 8 years, he accepted a call to serve the Apache Indian mission at Cibecue, Arizona, in 1986. Now he was destined to serve in Russia and later in Bulgaria and Albania. The commissioning of Pastor Spevacek took place August 7, 1991 during the synod convention held at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota. The wheels were now turning in the plan to begin mission work in the Soviet Union.

"The Spevaceks' love for missions and for people is obvious to all that meet them. 'We've enjoyed life very much, wherever we went,' says Mrs. (Audrey) Spevacek. 'When you see the joy of people who learn of Christ crucified, it's an experience you wish you could have with more people.' Looking to the future, Spevacek is filled with enthusiasm. 'We know Russia has a great hunger for the Word.... We await God's will.'" <sup>(13)</sup> A few days after the synod convention Pastor and Mrs. Spevacek traveled to Russia and to their new home in Plzen, Czechoslovakia, to acquaint themselves with the area of their new calling.

On August 13th the Spevaceks arrived in Moscow. Their hotel was adequate and had hot water, soap and a sink stopper. This was an interesting comment. The latter item, sink stopper, is important because world travelers are advised to take one along since many hotels do not have them. The same is true of soap. The next day was spent in taking a tour of Moscow.

August 15th found the couple in Minsk, White Russia, and on the 16th they flew to Leningrad and toured the city. It was on August 19th, while the Spevaceks were in Leningrad, that an attempted coup took place. A huge demonstration was held in Leningrad and the Spevaceks feared they might not be able to get out of the Soviet

Union. They wanted to fly to Czechoslovakia and go to Plzen. This would be their home while serving the people of the Soviet Union.

But, now in his own words, we learn from Pastor Spevacek about their visit to the Soviet Union.

"OUR VISIT TO THE USSR AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MOST MOMENTOUS EVENT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

"Words will never convey what we not only saw but heard in our brief time in the USSR. Surely, we are by no means experts now that we have been there. We have gone through what I like to call the 'National Geographic Stage.'

"For me there were lots of very emotional experiences. For example, seeing some ladies cry at the sound of church bells in Minsk or seeing the gratitude of people to whom we gave Russian language New Testaments.

"Our flights, thank the Lord, were good. They were on time in Russia. At the Minsk airport our luggage was brought to the terminal on a dump truck!

"From the air and on the way to/from the airports we could see that the USSR is a beautiful land, with lots of evergreen forests. Unfortunately, we did not get outside of the cities but did see a lot of the little private farm plots and weekend houses as we descended into the airports.

"In the USSR almost everything is massive. Moscow is huge, with five airports. Buildings are huge. Aeroflot (then the national airline) is huge. There are many wide boulevards in the cities. Apartment complexes are huge.

"Most people, however, are squeezed into tiny, dingy flats. (We got into a man's flat in Leningrad while invited by him to buy his fur army hat and army writing case.)

"Unexpectedly, we were free to walk wherever we wanted, and we could talk with anyone we wanted. As far as we know we were not followed by anyone. All the people were very friendly. But very few allowed us to take their pictures. A few people knew English. Some people even knew a little German!

"For us as tourists food was plentiful but not always great in variety. Yes, we had stroganoff, borscht and chicken Kiev. There was always a lot of bread, cheese and sausage for breakfast. Never have we tasted better tea and ice cream (called moroshenoye). For the people on the street, however, there was a lot of scarcity as we saw a lot of lines at the gastronomes or foodstores.

"The Slavic world is filled with bookstores as they all are avid readers. TV has not had an impact on them as yet. Especially Czechoslovakia seems to have a bookstore on every block. But in every bookshop that we visited we did not find one Bible. The only Christian magazine we found was in the hotel shop in Leningrad. As referred to before, people were very happy to receive New Testaments.

"We saw a lot of evidence of spiritual hunger after decades of atheistic indoctrination by the Communist party. There were a lot of young people visiting a newly opened church in Minsk...even some army youth. Our tour guide in that city said: 'I do not believe in God, but I believe that we have souls. We need something for the soul.'

"We gave away over 25 New Testaments which Larry Marquardt provided us with. I wish we had taken far more. We didn't need all the granola bars, which we had taken along in case of food shortages.

#### DURING THE COUP BY THE 'GANG OF EIGHT' OR 'JUNTA'

"Yes, we were there during the first day and a half of that unusual event. Never again will I travel without a short wave radio. We were under a TV blackout of some sort. All we could see was the 'gang of eight.' I did not sleep very well our last night in the USSR. I did not tell Audrey what I knew might happen. It was only after we got to Prague and could watch CNN (television channel) that we learned that the order had gone out to army units 75 kilometers outside of St. Petersburg to attack the city where a huge demonstration (pro-freedom) was going on in the square near Alexander's triumphal column. Fortunately, Mayor Sobchak persuaded the commander not to obey orders.

"I tried to get to the airport early on the day of departure, but the Intourist (a visitor's bureau) ladies said: 'Don't worry.' A desk clerk said: 'Do not worry. Moscow is Moscow and Leningrad is Leningrad.'

Well, we got out to the airport OK, passing the site of the demonstration on the way there. No problem again getting through customs and passport control. Never in the USSR did they inspect our luggage or ask how many rubles we were taking out of the country (illegal).

"We enjoyed the city of Minsk in Byelorussia. People there were well dressed, at least in the city center. Never did we see so many blond and blue eyed people. The city lost one quarter of its population in World War II...Leningrad too (better-called St. Petersburg) is a very beautiful city. We especially enjoyed the massive and exquisite Hermitage museum. One could spend a week there easily. Another treat was the Krasnoyarsk Siberian Folk Ensemble with its acrobatic dances and balalaika playing.... Prague lived up to its reputation as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. It truly was golden and flooded with tourists so that it was difficult to walk in some places. Highpoints were visits to the Jan Hus memorial and the old Lutheran center....In Moscow we were lucky to hit Red Square on a sunny day and it is impressive with the changing of the goose stepping guards. One cannot fail to be impressed by the golden church domes and crosses right there in the heart of the old Communist empire. Hopefully soon the red stars will come down and Lenin's tomb will be removed. Our hotel window overlooked the Russian 'White House' which unknown to us would see events only after we left. Moscow is gray and dirty, potholed.

"In conclusion: the former (?) USSR is a vast new mission field. We haven't even seen Siberia as yet. To work in that region, we have to wait a bit for the dust to settle. Then we must go in two by two (that is, in teams with at least one proficient in Russian). A big job will be to learn the 'system' of doing things. At the present we can only go in as 'tourists.' To do church work we must be invited in by some organization or group. We need to avoid dealing with previously 'officially recognized' organizations, which are tainted by their collaboration (with the Communists). Our hope is that soon we will be invited to come with the Good News by one or more of the many contacts that have been made by us, and the previous Board for World Mission's team.

"Thank you for your prayers. We solicit them for the future.

"Remember the motto of Jan Hus 'Pravda vitezi' which means the truth prevails. Once again this has certainly proven to be true." (14)

The Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee now engaged Mr. Gary Miller to serve with Pastor Spevacek as the mission team for Russia and Eastern Europe. Mr. Miller had attended Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota. He had knowledge of Russian so he could serve as an interpreter. His wife's name was Barbara. They had a young daughter Johanna when they moved to Plzen, Czechoslovakia, to live near Pastor and Mrs. Spevacek and their family.

*Mr. Gary Miller, his wife Barbara and their daughter Johanna in 1992.*



*Pastor Harold Essmann and his wife Ruth on Red Square in Moscow.*



*People on the streets of Moscow.*



*Changing of the guard at Lenin's tomb, Red Square, Moscow.*



*Kremlin walls with its palace and the bell tower of Ivan the Terrible in Moscow.*