

Occasional Papers

PREPARING A NEW GENERATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS

A Transformed People In A Transformed World

by Sally B. Geis

Creating a transformed people in a transformed world is the vision of United Methodism in Russia, according to Ruediger R. Minor, bishop of the newly formed Russia Annual Conference. If this vision is to become reality, theological education must be affordable and available to potential leaders for the church. Since high quality scholarship is part of the Russian intellectual tradition, new Protestant Christians preparing to lead the church expect to engage in vigorous study. They want to understand the gospel in intellectual terms, as well as emotional and spiritual ones.

The church has responded to the need for trained pastors in Russia in several ways. One is the support of Russia United Methodist seminary in Moscow. This project is proving to be transformational for the American faculty who have gone to teach in the seminary as well as for the Russian students. Here is an excerpt from the report written by Timothy Bryan from the Iliff School of Theology when he returned from teaching a six-week course in theology:

For me, the real joy and heart of Moscow was not found in its imposing structures or brilliant art. It was discovered in three small, plain rooms rented in a nondescript building, tucked away near the Taganskaja Metro station and the coin sellers corner. The numismatists were unaware of the rare treasure that lay only two blocks away—the Russia United Methodist Seminary. One knock on its locked door opens up a world of enthusiasm, determination, intellect and grace. Here the bishop, Ruediger Minor, occasionally sits, not on a throne of authority, but a cathedral of the spirit that diligently spreads care over the 11 time zones of Russia. He is busy, but he easily pauses to offer a kind word and a gentle smile to a visiting professor near him is the dean, Tobias Dietze. His soul would probably find glad repose in a German countryside. Yet his heart remains committed to The United Methodist Church in Russia. His efforts are ceaseless. He is the students' dean, sometimes their father, at other times their brother, their disciplinarian, their confessor; their advisor; their friend, their mediator to the world and their local church their confident examiner and sometimes frustrated instructor; the artist who is forming them, and the negotiator trying to make it all work. The Russian United Methodist Church and the 30 women and mere of the seminary confidently depend on both of them.

The bishop and dean occupy one partitioned office. A second room is reserved for coats and a long table with tea, coffee, and bread with cucumbers, cheese, or sausage. It provides a 15-minute respite between hour-and-a-half classes. The third room is the classroom, with a small blackboard, plain drapes, a pillar supporting the interior of the ceiling, and study tables for about 30 students. It is a setting generally unremarkable except for the students who transform it.

What you notice first is their faces—accepting, kind, engaging. They are young and old, female and male, highly educated, honest, demanding, and caring. On Tuesday mornings, they embrace each other in worship. Throughout the week they grapple with up to six or more different academic subjects. But they do not waiver: Even in illness or the some times daily strain of personal problems, they persist. Their desire to learn is contagious. Their little classroom is transfigured into a lab of discovery, where experiences find names and questions are vigorously pursued. In one instance, as a student was drawing a diagram on the

board to represent her group's interpretation of the way of salvation, I noticed an intense cacophony of sound and dialogue throughout the room. I turned to my translator and asked, "What are they talking about?" She said, "Theology. They are still debating the last two presentations." This was after three-and-a-half hours of class! It was creative chaos and a tribute to their future ministry and present commitment.

The rigors of study appear to heighten their motivation. By the end of the first week they formed a theological discussion group of English-speaking students and asked me to lead it after our scheduled classes. We met for one-and-a-half to two hours in the late afternoon, weaving through the spectrum of doctrines and theological positions while trying to apply them to their local Bible study groups, pastoral care situations, children's religious education, and weekly sermons. We did not always agree, but we always listened and cherished the bond of inquiry that grasped us. Another seminarian organized a Tuesday night lay study institute that gathered at the seminary. Again I was asked to participate, to present some materials on discipleship. I'll never forget the smiling faces and a woman's spontaneous outburst of "Alleluia" when I told them of Methodism's inclusive call, its unwillingness to separate and judge with the closed fist of the Bible, but its desire to embrace all with the open hands of scripture and compassion and its conviction that we nurture one another in the spirit of Wesley who said that no one ever went to heaven alone.

In some ways, these weekly efforts seemed to be special preparations for the Sunday celebrations. Two churches, both in large rented room, had grand observances of their fifth anniversaries. Many of the seminarians participated in or attended the ceremonies. You could sense the fellowship of Methodists drawn from all parts of Moscow as each local community sent a representative to offer a kind word and gift for the anniversary. On the third Sunday, I attended a church served by one of my classroom translators. It was a smaller gathering but still filled with the same precious spirit of worship. Children listened to a wonderful sermon by their teacher Laywomen prayed for the congregation and witnessed to God's power in their lives. The young pastor preached a sermon of remarkable maturity. And Wesleyan hymns were sung in a Russian verse that transcended all linguistic barriers.

I returned to my apartment that Sunday afternoon, tired and unable to sort out the experiences that I had had the past three weeks. The physical demands of life in Moscow and the intensity of teaching and preparation were quite evident. But as I sat on the couch I was transfixed. A wave of emotion swept uncontrollably over me. I was staggered, yet enlivened. My sparse apartment appeared as a palace. The rumble of the subway train was new blood flowing through my veins. The rain and mud outside was God's grace poured on me and enveloping me. In fact, there was no judgment—only grace. These people and their lives had captured me, and I understood (maybe in a not very Wesleyan way) what Augustine meant when he talked about "irresistibility."

The last week in Moscow rapidly spun toward the last day of class at the seminary. We all could feel the urgency of the moment. I was trying to tie up loose ends. They were ready to celebrate. If I had not had a quiz, I would have never gotten their attention. Even my ramblings on the medieval plague could not dampen their enthusiasm. Class was a preliminary to a party. Cakes were prepared. Gifts were given. Speeches were made. And I was again touched by their humanity. I told them that if they should ever despair and wonder "Where is courage, where is compassion, where is intelligence?" they need look no further than this room and each other:

Each instance, each moment is different. I am too much of an empiricist not to be convinced of that. As I returned home on the plane to Denver; I knew that I was returning home to the threat of my own insignificance and an uncertain future; to each day having to renew the struggle for meaning and purpose. However, I returned a different man. For now I carried with me the echoed ecstasy of love and enthusiasm from Russia.

Birth of a Seminary

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), and the 13 United Methodist seminaries in the United States have maintained collegial relations with the seminaries of Europe for many years. In the spring of 1989, seminary presidents

from the U.S. visited the seminaries of Europe, including Warsaw, Poland, and what was then East Germany. No one could have conceived at that time the radical changes which would take place before the end of that historic year.

Following the dramatic events of 1989 and 1990, representatives of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the General Board of Global Ministries, and Russian church leaders met in 1991 to discuss the need for the development of theological education in Russia, and the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools considered their role in such a project. In 1992 Bishop Minor asked Donald Treese, associate general secretary of the Division of Ordained Ministry, to send a representative of the division to Russia for a consultation on the future of theological education and help in developing a strategy for theological education in Russia. The task seemed daunting, almost overwhelming. Bishop Minor's episcopal area covers 11 time zones populated by more than 150 million people. Churches without trained leaders were springing up across the land. His call was urgent.

In his report to the Council of Bishops that year, Bishop Minor identified "Leadership Training and Theological Education" as an immediate need. He said, "The basic training at the level of lay training, lay speakers and local pastors' schools will be supplemented with personal study. The United Methodist Publishing House has started to translate some of its materials in this field. As soon as possible formal theological training should begin. Some ideas have been drafted, and we are eager to discuss them with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the United Methodist seminaries both in the United States and in Europe."

In January 1993, Robert Kohler, DOM's director of Board of Ordained Ministry Relations, met with Bishop Minor, Elena Stepanova, former dean and professor of philosophy at Yekaterinburg University and currently a pastor and district superintendent in the Russia Annual Conference, and other church leaders in Yekaterinburg. The committee examined Dr. Stepanova's proposal for the development of an independent school of theology in the light of the immediate need for a course of study for pastors.

Out of this meeting a strategy for theological education emerged which included: 1) foundational training for emerging church leaders, 2) a seminar program for pastors and other church leaders, and 3) the eventual establishment of a seminary. They assumed the project would unfold gradually over a number of years, but within a year the scene changed with unexpected speed.

At the request of Bishop Minor, the General Board of Global Ministries funded a team from the Iliff School of Theology to meet with United Methodist educators in Moscow in August, 1994. Donald E. Messer, president of Iliff and a director of GBGM, was accompanied by Jane I. Smith, academic dean; David L. Petersen, professor of Old Testament; and Sally B. Geis, director of the Iliff Institute. All of these persons have experience in cross-cultural education. W. James White, General Board of Global Ministries executive secretary for Europe accompanied the team. They met with Bishop Minor and a small committee including Dr. Stepanova and Pastor Cho Young Chuel, a Korean missionary who had begun an ecumenical effort to offer basic theological education for interested persons. That fall a team from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, including General Secretary Roger Ireson, Robert E Kohler, John E. Harnish, and Ken Yamada met with university officials and church leaders in Russia, exploring contacts in both higher education and theological education.

These various consultations were among the first steps in the birth of Russia United Methodist Seminary, which, by the spring of 1997, had enrolled more than 40 students. In the brief years which have passed, an administrator has been appointed, seven faculty members from United Methodist seminaries have taught courses and faculty from German and Korean Methodist seminaries are scheduled to teach in the near future. A packet of visiting-faculty orientation material has been prepared by missionaries and American faculty who have taught at the seminary.

An anthology of contemporary writings in biblical criticism has been assembled by David Petersen and translated by Elena Stepanova. While in residence at the Iliff School of Theology, she added an extensive introduction to the work, written especially for a Russian audience. This important manuscript will be entered in the OCLC International Bibliographic Data Base. The task of translating an anthology in theology is currently underway. Scholars from United Methodist seminaries including Candler, Wesley, Perkins, Saint Paul's, Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio, and Iliff have been involved in the work.

In 1996 three students who began their education in Pastor Cho's ecumenical program graduated; and in December, 1997, the first class of students educated exclusively in the Russia United Methodist Seminary graduated, ready to serve the ever growing number of churches.

How Was So Much Accomplished in Such a Short Time?

Dedicated persons in Russia and the United States began with a dream. Through faith and commitment the reality has taken shape.

Without the visionary leadership provided by Randolph Nugent and Robert Harman, of the General Board of Global Ministries, and Donald Messer, president of the Miff School of Theology, the seminary we know today- might well not exist. These men grasped the vision and took the necessary steps to see it fulfilled. They understood that a project of this magnitude required two commitments from the church. One was the assurance of significant financial support to launch and sustain the venture through its early years. The other was the development of an academic support structure that would give credibility to the education offered. They also understood that the leadership of the program must come from the Russians, if it is to become a truly Russian expression of Methodism without the imposition of an American model of theological education.

The support of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry helped lay the foundation for the seminary by providing a course of study program in Russia, under the leadership of Robert Kohler.

Initial Support

Randolph Nugent and the GBGM responded generously and provided more than \$400,000 in support of the seminary. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry has provided support for the travel expenses of numerous American faculty members. The \Women's Division supplied a grant for women scholars to participate as visiting faculty. The United Methodist Publishing House has funded the translation and production of materials and secured copyright permissions for the materials used.

The Reverend Bruce Weaver, director of the Russia Initiative, has promoted the seminary along with the other Russian projects. Through this program, hundreds of United Methodists across the country are giving generously of their time and money to support the growth of United Methodism in Russia. They understand that new Russian congregations need trained leaders and are therefore willing to support the seminary as well as churches.

Academic Advisory Committee

John Harnish and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry supported the suggestion made initially by Bishop Minor that an American Academic Advisory Committee for the Russia seminary be created. The deans and presidents of the 13 United Methodist seminaries in the U.S. (the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools) affirmed a plan and five of the schools committed themselves to participate. Candler, Miff, Perkins, Saint Paul, and Wesley are represented on the committee by the school's dean or president and/or a tenured faculty member. Donald E. Messes of Miff was appointed chair, Robin Lovin of Perkins assumed responsibility for the Academic Resources Subcommittee, and Kevin LaGree of Candler chairs the Financial Resources Subcommittee. The ongoing administrative oversight of American involvement in the seminary has been the responsibility of James White, GBGM's executive secretary for Europe.

Commitment in Russia

A Russian Oversight Committee was appointed by Bishop Minor at the same time as the Academic Advisory Committee. Observers from abroad are constantly amazed at the tenacity and commitment of those involved in the day to day operations of the seminary.

Pastor Tobias Dietze, the seminary executive administrator, works tirelessly to cope with a host of problems most of us would find insurmountable. His job includes more than the usual administrative headaches. He also faces hostile landlords, an unfriendly political environment, soaring inflation and housing shortages in Moscow, our formidable United Methodist bureaucracy and non-Russian speaking American faculty who must teach in translation.

In spite of her heavy responsibilities as local pastor and district superintendent, Elena Stepanova frequently makes the day-long trip from Yekaterinburg to Moscow to teach in the seminary and help with the translation of materials. The students have been patient and enthusiastic. They have tolerated numerous unavoidable problems including an unfocused curriculum, faculty members who do not speak their language or know their culture, personal financial hardships, lack of study materials and an erratic schedule. Many must travel long distances each day in order to attend school, some must leave family behind when they come to Moscow to study.

Meanwhile new churches continue to blossom across Russia, each in need of trained leadership, all looking to the course of study seminars and the seminary for training. In spite of our concerns about the present and future of this newborn program, the most significant reality about the seminary is that it is THERE. Its very existence is nothing short of a miracle. Its presence symbolizes the importance of scholarship as an integral part of the religious experience. With Bishop Minor's leadership and the efforts of all involved, the Russian church is modeling the United Methodist tradition of loving God with the mind as well as the heart.

Formidable Challenges Lie Ahead

All great seminaries have modest beginnings. None began with great libraries or vast resources. Currently the Russia United Methodist Seminary is housed in three modest rooms that serve as administrative office, lunchroom, library, classroom and study space. It will take continued dedication, commitment and energy to develop a seminary worthy of the goals envisioned by Bishop Minor and the church in Russia.

Development of a library and collection of teaching materials in Russian

The lack of a library is of urgent concern. The Russians realize that three avenues need to be pursued: 1) a concerted effort to locate materials in Russian that already exist, either in other seminary libraries or from book sellers 2) expanded exploration of European sources; and 3) translation of materials through the Academic Advisory Committee.

The UM Publishing House is eager to help. However, the work goes slowly. The difficulty of finding persons with a good grasp of Protestant theology, as well as written Russian, is enormous. Unfortunately translation done by persons who lack either skill is inadequate. Lack of space is another problem that must be solved. A library cannot exist unless there is a physical space in which to store the materials. The seminary's current quarters are inadequate.

Preparation of indigenous leadership

Everyone looks forward to the day when the seminary will be fully Russian, as well as distinctly United Methodist. This goal requires commitment to the preparation of Russian students who can do graduate work abroad and then return to Russia to teach. When Bishop Minor has candidates to recommend for advanced study, we must find ways to ensure these students opportunities for study in United Methodist

seminaries abroad. The vision of a strong, viable, indigenous church relies on well-trained leadership for the future.

Increased financial support

The General Board of Global Ministries cannot permanently fund this project out of monies designated for "new ventures." Other sources must be found. Currently a plan is being developed for an ongoing financial campaign to support the seminary. Bishop Minor and retired Bishop Lloyd Knox have already written to their colleagues on the Council of Bishops asking for help in generating financial support and a number of annual conferences have already responded with scholarship money: A promotional brochure has been distributed to interested persons across the annual conferences listing specific need: within the seminary, with price tags attached.

Recently, Tobias Dietze, executive administrator of the seminary, said in a report to the American Advisory Committee, "I trust that solutions (to our financial difficulties) will be found and the Russia United Methodist Seminary will be given the future it needs as the only United Methodist seminary for a people of 150 million."

Social Changes and the Church

The changes brought about by the new Russian law, "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations," effective October 1, 1997, could have major impact on the work of The United Methodist Church. In addition to this restrictive law, the Administrative Council of the Russian United Methodist Church reported to the World Methodist Council that "a very sophisticated campaign has been under way to discredit The United Methodist Church by some leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church." (Memorandum to the World Methodist Council, October 15, 1997).

At the time of this writing, it is still difficult to predict how the law will be implemented and what the effects will be. It is clear that these attempts to limit the growth of denominations could seriously compromise the mission of Russian Methodists. However the commitment of these Russian Methodists is unwavering. Tobias Dietze said "I'd rather have something they could close down than do the job for them. I don't think we will disappear!"

The current situation only increases the urgency for training pastors and church leaders who can carry on the work in the face of what could be a very difficult time. Now more than ever, the seminary is crucial to re-establishing the United Methodist witness in Russia. May God continue to nurture and strengthen the leadership of the Russian United Methodist Church for the task of fulfilling the call of the gospel in service to Jesus Christ.

How Will We Respond?

Every United Methodist has the opportunity to be part of this amazing project which can shape the faith and future of the church in Russia. Here is what you can do:

1. Brochures can be obtained on request from:

Suzanne Calvin, executive coordinator
Russia UM Seminary Advisory Committee
Iliff School of Theology
2201 South University Blvd.
Denver, CO 80210
1-800-678-3300; Fax: 303-777-3387
[e-mail: scalvin@iliff.edu](mailto:scalvin@iliff.edu)

Distribute brochures to your congregation, Sunday school class, and mission committee.

A videotape is also available to help in interpreting the work of the seminary.

2. Provide financial support. Gifts of all sizes-large and small-are significant in this important work.

Gifts can be sent to:

General Board of Global Ministries
475 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 101 15

Advance Number 012174-0 RA

Russia Scholarship Fund

Advance Number 012017602 RB

Russia Seminary Fund

3. Support the World Service and Ministerial Education Fund (MEF) apportionments in your church. To date, the very existence of the seminary is a direct result of the faithful support of World Service and the MEF Without these apportionments, start-up funds would not have been available. They are the lifeline for the Russian initiative.

"A transformed people in a transformed world." The Russia United Methodist Seminary exists to support and fulfill that vision.

Sally B. Geis of the Iliff School of Theology was the first executive coordinator of the Russian Theological Initiative.

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