

Debate on the Russian Baptists

Very few people in the West are aware that the Soviet Union is now allowing some ethnic Germans to emigrate to West Germany, although Kathleen Matchett's article on the Soviet Lutherans published in *Religion in Communist Lands* Vol. 1 no. 6 must have brought this to the attention of readers. Also among recent émigrés are a number of Baptists, many of them from unregistered congregations in the USSR. Two pastors, Arnold Rose and Johann Jundt, have been sent by the unregistered churches to care for the spiritual needs of the émigrés. In early December the Director was able to meet these two men during a visit to Norway, and spent almost five days continuously with them.

"One hour with these people", Michael Bourdeaux wrote in an article about the meeting published in the *Church Times* on 28 December, "teaches one more about the Church under persecution than a month of reading. It is really amazing that the Church at large has not yet discovered these men to benefit from their experience. Not that their message will be popular. Hard words, even though grounded in love, never are. What did I learn from the experience? Confirmation that the basic facts about religious life in the Soviet Union are true."

Although the pastors' statements necessarily refer to those aspects of the situation with which they are personally familiar (they freely admitted that the position of unregistered churches varies widely from one area to another), their testimony to the strength of the reform movement in the Baptist Church goes beyond what the CSRC has previously been able to report. The All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists has led Western observers to believe that the *initsiativniki* movement was on the wane and that the majority of those who broke away ten or more years ago had now been reconciled to the officially tolerated Union. Pastor Rose stated, however, that the baptised membership of his illegal congregation at Sigulda in Latvia consisted of 300, with usually 500 at regular meetings and more at festivals. The local registered congregation, on the other hand, although in a more central position, had no more than 30 members. These were the old (who could not travel to the unregistered meetings) and the frightened – but even many of these sent their children to the illegal Sunday school. Interestingly enough, this large unregistered congregation was for many years able to worship relatively unmolested in the building of a *registered* Lutheran church, with the leaders of which they had excellent relations.

Summing up the situation, Pastor Rose said that the registered churches have no parish activities. The unregistered, however, have built a whole

life around their worship, although every detail of it is against the law. Young people flock in. The "renewal" is almost entirely a youth movement. The picture which this gave of massive activity by the illegal groups is repeated in all areas known to them personally, they said. "Over half" of all Baptist congregations are unregistered, and almost invariably larger than the legal ones, except in the biggest cities. In the Omsk region (where Pastor Rose lived earlier) there are 80 unregistered congregations, 50 in the Novosibirsk region and 30 around Alma-Ata.

While stating that the overwhelming majority of believers in the registered congregations were good people, the pastors were more deeply critical of the official Baptist leadership than is the common view outside the Soviet Union. Reconciliation cannot even begin, they said, while every member of the top leadership of the Reform Baptists is either in prison or in hiding from the police.

The strength of these two pastors' statements has in fact drawn a comment from Baptist leaders in the West. Dr. Ronald Goulding, Secretary of the European Baptist Federation, in a letter published in the *Church Times* on 4 January, stated that aid for Soviet German Baptists now living in West Germany had been provided by his organization. While agreeing that the number of unregistered Baptists in the Soviet Union almost certainly exceeded the official figure of 18,000, he pointed out that moves towards reconciliation were taking place. The West German mission *Licht Im Osten* recently published a report taken from *Bratsky Vestnik*, the publication of the official Baptist denomination in the USSR. This states that in February 1973 the official and dissident congregations at Davlekanovo buried their differences and became fully reunited. "Both parties asked the other's forgiveness", the report goes on. "In conclusion the whole company thanked the Lord in united prayer for His help in reconciliation. A group that had withdrawn from the registered church in Barnaul has also returned and is now serving the Lord joyfully and enthusiastically. In the district of Ternopol a group of Pentecostals has joined the local church at Nastaasovo".

Clearly the currents at work within the Soviet Baptist Church are complex and variable, and an assessment of their relative significance is difficult with the present amount of information available. Pastors Rose and Jundt vehemently denied that the numbers rejoining the registered churches were at all considerable, and cited recent examples of moves in the opposite direction. The CSRC hopes to be able to make a thorough study of the subject in the near future, the results of which will be published in *Religion in Communist Lands*.

KATHARINE MURRAY