

Equipping Reliable Leaders in
Sound Doctrine
in

Hungary
Latvia
Lithuania
Poland
Romania
Russia
Ukraine

Spring 2007
Volume 10, Issue 1

*Serving Christ by equipping pastors,
teachers and lay leaders in Reformed,
Biblical doctrine in Central and Eastern
Europe and the former Soviet Union*

NEWSITEMS



Spring Edition



This Seminary was born by the grace of God through the efforts of ITEM (specifically, Dr. George Van Groningen, who has taught at several Reformed seminaries). Since its founding in 1998, the Seminary has had professors coming from North America every two months to lecture for two weeks on a particular course of a seminary curriculum.

BRTS: GATEWAY FOR BALTIC REFORMATION?

*By Dr. Joseph H. Hall, ITEM Board
Member*

This young seminary in Riga, Latvia, appears poised, with God's good providence, for bringing biblical reformation to the entire Baltic region: Lithuania, Belarus, Estonia, and even possibly Finland and Sweden. It's a relatively new seminary, established by ITEM with the help of Dr. George Van Groningen, which has seen steady increase in both interest and attendance. Located in Riga, the capital of Latvia, the seminary has already been of significant benefit to both Latvians and Lithuanians, with promises of a wider influence in the future. Is this a grandiose dream? Not at all, with God's blessings and the continuous pool of some of the finest Reformed professors, largely with doctorates, who have taught at BRTS for over a decade.

The goals of International Theological Educational Ministries (hereafter, ITEM), in Riga and elsewhere, are basically twofold: first, the provision of excellent Reformed on-site theological training for nationals in their own country. Second, ITEM trains nationals in Reformed theology in order that they may both teach and plant churches in their country. ITEM's desire and plan for BRTS is that the nationals themselves will be both teachers and administrators and, eventually, self-supporting.

It has been my distinct privilege to teach Church History on-site at BRTS on three separate occasions. Currently, I am offering a video repeat of one of the courses accompanied by some live international electronic hookup. While video teaching leaves something to be desired, it appears to be working rather well as a pilot course. The Latvian students are both a joy and challenge to teach. Most understand English well, freeing up the professor in speaking, and they are quick to apprehend the information conveyed. Teaching these students has been one of the highlights of my

teaching career. I might add that BRTS now has one of the finest area Reformed libraries, graciously provided by the Lord, and in which I have been privileged to have a small part in building.

What does a day teaching in Riga look like? Because most of the students work during the day or are pastors, or university students, they must of necessity gain their training in the evening. Classes are held from 6 pm to 9:30 pm. A typical class size in Riga is about twelve to fifteen men and a few ladies, mainly Latvians and Lithuanians, with a few Russians. The men preparing for ministry are very diligent and sacrificial in giving themselves in this effort for six months of the year. The instruction is in English, and for those not understanding it, there is an interpreter able to translate into Latvian or Russian, the latter of which all can understand. There is simultaneous translation which allows the professor full range of continuous lecturing. Exams are given at the conclusion of the lecturing period, usually two weeks, and for the students who know only their native language, translation assistance is given for their exams, in both taking and grading.

What will be the future of BRTS? Again, with God's good providence, with continued excellent teaching, good administration, and both the prayers and funding of our faithful supporters, there is every reason to think the seminary will continue, as it has for the past decade, to be a blessing for many in the Baltic region. We ask your continued support in both prayers and funding of ITEM for this and other works. Without them, the works like this one cannot exist.

Dr. Joseph Hall, March 2007

Inside this Issue

- 1** BRTS: GATEWAY FOR BALTIC REFORMATION?
- 2** UKRAINE: AT THE CROSSROADS OF VALUES
- 3** A LONG TERM IMPACT OF ONE MAN'S WORK

International Theological Education
Ministries, Inc
P.O. Box 31456
St. Louis, MO 63131
Tel.: (314) 961-0169
Email: item@item.org

UKRAINE: AT THE CROSS-ROADS OF VALUES

By Andre Bouravnev, M.Div., ITEM Media Director

Intro

Kiev, being Ukraine's capital, is indicative of the rest of the country. In a piercing description someone has observed that the decrepit concrete of its massive housing blocks humbly admits the failure of communism; the cross-topped, golden onion domes of its monasteries and churches tell of ancient traditions and staying power of national beliefs; the brassy new casinos and strip-bars boldly announce that the free market has liberated once-repressed vices. Today, more than a decade after Ukraine declared independence from a splintering Soviet Union, Kiev is a cross between Chicago of the 1920's and Rome of the Avignon Papacy – replete with ruthless gangsters and hard-eyed cops, scheming clergymen and angry churchgoers, nouveau-riche businessmen and struggling workers, corrupt officials and simple citizens. This curious jumble is mixed with nostalgia for security that the Soviet era provided and a sense that the future is up for grabs.

History Bits

The word "Ukraine" means borderland, and for centuries Kiev was the capital of a buffer state on the edge of the Russian and Soviet empires. A legend says that the Apostle Andrew sailed up the Dnieper from the Black Sea and preached to the tribesmen, predicting a powerful, holy city where he erected a cross-- the site where the Church of St. Andrew now stands. Another legend has it that at the end of the 9th century, the relics of Pope St. Martin, exiled to the territory of today's Ukraine by the Greek Emperor of Constantinople (654–655), were retrieved by brothers from Macedonia, Saints Cyril and Methodius, while passing through "borderland" on their mission to the Khazars of today's Russia. They lay the foundation of Christianity in Ukraine by creating an alphabet, known as "Cyrillic" which enabled the local population to worship God in Slavonic, then the common language.

As with most Europeans, Ukrainians were originally a pagan nation of idol worshippers. In 988, Prince Vladimir the Great of Kiev accepted Orthodox Christianity and brought the entire country under the influence of the Byzantine Empire. The period was characterized by mass baptisms and conversions to Christianity. The introduction of the Orthodox Christianity to Ukraine came at a time when understanding of the Scriptures was limited. They accepted the god of Christianity but still clung to many of their pagan traditions, resulting in a syncretistic

merging of the two. For instance, characteristics of Perun, a Pagan god of war, thunder and lightning, found their way into the Biblical character of Ilya (Elijah). Thunder and lightning were said to be caused by the rumbling of the wheels of his chariot as it hurtled across the skies heralding Ilya's approach.

In later centuries, pieces of Ukraine were devoured by the Russian, Polish, and Austro-Hungarian empires. However, most of the territory remained with the Byzantine Patriarch's Eastern Orthodoxy following the great East-West Schism (1054). While most ethnic Ukrainians remained Orthodox, since 1598 the Eastern Rite Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church claimed significant membership in Western Ukraine. Roman Catholicism is predominantly practiced by non-Ukrainian minorities, like Poles and Hungarians. These parishes remain mostly empty after the WWII due to the fact that much of the Polish population was killed in the war and interethnic violence caused forcible evacuations and deportations.

In the 16th century, small groups of Anabaptists appeared in Western Ukraine, but the influence of the Reformation in Ukraine remained marginal. Protestantism arrived in Ukraine together with German immigrants in the 18-19th centuries. They were initially granted religious freedom by the Russian Imperial authorities, unlike the native population. While some were Roman Catholic, the majority were either Evangelical (Lutheran) or Mennonite (Anabaptist). Of the 200,000 or so Germans in 1900, about 90% were Lutheran. Lutheranism went into a major decline during the World Wars as Germans left the region but there are still small remnants today near Odessa and Kiev.

In 1924, Ukraine came under the Soviet rule. Initially the Soviets allowed and encouraged the Autocephalous Orthodox Church (formed in the 1920's) but soon suppressed it and only the Russian Orthodox Church was permitted to survive, since it was easier to control one state-sanctioned religion than to permit the existence of many. In addition, the Russian Church proved useful in rallying people against the Nazis, and the power of Kiev's religious heritage was impossible to deny. Even the upraised sword of the statue of victory on the monument to the Great Patriotic War (WWII) could not be taller than the tallest tower of Percherska Lavra, a medieval monastery, on the hills overlooking the Dnieper.

In 1988, with the millennium anniversary of Christianity in Ukraine, there was a drastic shift in the Soviet attitude towards religion coinciding with the Perestroika. The Soviet Government publicly apologized for oppression of religion and promised to return all property to the rightful owners. As a result thousands of closed religious buildings in all areas of the USSR were being returned to their original owners, and squabbles among different religious groups grew into violence but subsided somewhat after the Russian Orthodox Church raised its Ukrainian Exarchate to the status of an

autonomous church in 1990. This left three major Ukrainian Orthodox church bodies coexisting and often competing: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate), formed in 1991, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. However, the differences are purely political rather than doctrinal and Orthodox Christianity remains the main religion of Ukraine today.

Although antipathy among the three main groups remains virulent, the split may ultimately benefit Ukraine. After all, it has undercut efforts to establish a state religion that would play into the hands of the country's hard-line nationalists. But unification remains unlikely. At a time when many Ukrainians are trapped between the failed promises of Marxist utopianism and harsh realities of Western materialism, the Orthodox Church is in a position to offer the best aspects of tradition. But the church's internal strife undermines faith in that tradition and undercuts its ability to help alleviate the spiritual anxiety and economic suffering brought on by the painful transition to a democratic, free-market society.

To make matters worse, during the Soviet times many high-ranking priests provided information to the KGB. Nevertheless, this carries little weight in a society that has not forgotten that opposition to the old regime could mean death or imprisonment or the cutting off of one's livelihood. There was an understanding among people that they believed what they believed privately, but that they would say and do what they had to say and do in order to survive. Perhaps because of this, many believers are removed from the struggles of orthodox leadership.

Today

Today many Ukrainians own a Bible, but few read it and most struggle to understand it, since little effort has been made to explain its message. In addition, Communist atheism has had a strong effect on the people of Ukraine: at universities, besides an enormous number of ideological subjects, there was also a mandatory course on 'scientific atheism.' The subject was designed to prove that there was no God. Anyone who wanted to reach success in their career was forced to pronounce themselves an atheist. Religion was seen as the most serious obstacle to building Communism. For many, this led them to believe that though there is a god, he is more readily found in other religious circles than their own.

Religions in numbers

The Russian Orthodox Church has some 6,500 parishes, according to the State Committee on Religious Affairs. The Kiev Patriarchate claims 1,300, and the Autocephalous Church about 1,200. Besides Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, there are Ukrainian Catholics, Protestants and Jews as well as a number of minority religious groups. A recent poll revealed the following numbers of people associating themselves with a particular

group: Ukrainian Orthodox (Kiev Patriarchate) - 19%, Orthodox (with no particular jurisdiction) - 16%, Ukrainian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) - 9%, Ukrainian Greek Catholic - 6%, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox 1.7%, Protestant 6.6%, Jewish 0.9%, Jehovah Witnesses 2.3%, Muslim 0.5%, none 38%, (2004 est.). Average church attendance for Catholics is 10% and is even less for the Orthodox.

Paganism

There has been a new surge of neo-paganism in the past 15 years with Ukraine's new found nationalism and independence. Some say a thousand years ago, Christianity was forced upon Ukrainians, and they now need to go back to their roots, their old way of life and their old gods. A new study completed in 2005 took a close look at the resurgence of neo-paganism (a.k.a Ukrainian Native Faith). The author of the study, Adrian Ivakhiv, says that pagan traditions and folk customs have never really disappeared. The Christianization adapted to existing practices, resulting in syncretism. There are many neo-pagan groups in Ukraine that are focusing on ethnic nationalism. Most of the groups are accepting a set of writings called the Book of Veles as their scripture, seen as embodying the historical memory of the Ukrainian people, its "covenant" with its gods, its ancestors, and its land. Considering growing nationalism, coupled with the disillusionment of materialism and dissatisfaction with the organized church, neo-paganism is likely to continue to grow.

Protestantism

Protestantism, which has had some presence in Ukraine since at least the 16th century, was preached mostly by foreign visitors and settlers. While this situation has changed somewhat in recent decades, Protestants in today's Ukraine remain a relatively small minority.

It grew rapidly during the liberal reforms of Alexander II, Tsar of Russia, in the 1860's. Shortly thereafter, however, the authorities started to restrict Protestant proselytism of Orthodox Christians, routinely preventing prayer meetings and other activities. During the Soviet period Protestantism, together with Orthodox Christianity, was persecuted, but the 1980's marked the start of another major expansion of Protestantism in Ukraine.

Today, the largest Protestant groups in Ukraine include Baptists (All-Ukrainian Union of the Association of Evangelical Baptists), Pentecostals (All-Ukrainian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith-Pentecostals) and Seventh-day Adventists (Ukrainian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists). Of note is Hillsong Baptist church in Kiev. One of the most prominent Protestants in modern Ukraine is its pastor Oleksander Turchinov, who after the Orange Revolution is the head of the Security Bureau of Ukraine (KGB's successor). Despite the rapid growth and aggressive missionary

activities, today Protestants in Ukraine remain a small minority in a largely Orthodox country.

Protestantism could have played a significant role in identifying Ukraine's national heritage, but the Ukrainian movement of the 16th and 17th centuries did not take a reformist course, as it was intent on creating a national church. It feared breaking with church tradition. Protestant movements, particularly the Socinians, Anti-Trinitarians, and Reformists, quickly lost influence. The Adventist, Baptist, and other movements, disseminated in Ukraine in the 19th century, did not become national religious options for several reasons: (1) overly simplified denominational religious practices; (2) subordination of national living to the religious; and (3) sectarianism. Perhaps this explains why not a single Protestant denomination acted as an agent of ethnic creation or integration in Ukraine. The multiplicity of sects facilitated the national disintegration and spiritual disorganization of Ukraine.

Religious Intolerance

All four large traditional churches continue to vigorously oppose state acceptance of new religious movements, seeking to block their official registration, foreign missionary programs, and local evangelical activities. Since 1995, Ukraine, on paper, protects new movements against the suppression desired by the dominant churches, but some regional and local authorities have been pressured by powerful religious bodies and have illegally restricted or suppressed activities of other religious groups. Officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, who administer religious policy, are the most visible supporters of full-tolerance perspective. However, parliamentary parties of the left and far right seem to be defenders of the traditional churches and exhibit a non-tolerance or limited tolerance perspective.

Ukrainian security agencies have a limited tolerance toward nontraditional religions. The old Soviet KGB perspective that foreign missionaries are agents of foreign security agencies, and that membership in nontraditional and especially new religious movements is sufficient grounds to initiate security surveillance, has been carried over into the SBU. There have been quite a few instances of local violation of national policy and laws. A troubling example of this is Decree #0109 of the Cabinet of Ministers, dated 26 March 2001. The State Committee for Religious Affairs was ordered to "improve the mechanism for countering the penetration and growth of destructive religions that cause damage to the State and its citizenry." These "destructive religions" are not identified in the decree, leaving the directive open to various interpretations. There have been examples of city officials forbidding the renting of meeting halls to Protestants. Directors of local movie theaters and clubs were forced to break contracts. Another example of such opposition is the emergence of a new association of representatives in the Ukrainian Parliament entitled: "For the Advocacy of Canonical and

Traditional Faiths in Ukraine." Its objective is to advance the interests of traditional churches.

At the local level, regional committees of religious affairs have refused entry to representatives of many religious organizations and to foreign missionaries. There are cases where Americans were barred from missionary activity. Attitudes of the local government often determine the fate of this or that congregation, rather than the law. The absence of a clear state policy regarding religions and churches and the arbitrariness of local power structures that flout existing legislation, balking at granting registration rights or construction permits for church buildings, make life difficult for many congregations.

Furthermore, to counteract missionary activity, Orthodox priests were known to have asserted in their sermons that "the devil himself" is incarnated in the person of a missionary: "Coming to humanity in the image of an 'angel of light,' extraterrestrial teacher/missionary imparts 'wisdom' that in the end leads a person to commune with Satan." Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Filaret compares the belief of a person of any faith other than Orthodoxy to atheism. "Recently," he says, "it has become unfashionable to contradict God. Therefore, other creeds—false, though externally respectable—have intertwined themselves with true faith in God."

Evangelism

While Ukraine's spiritual climate has been dominated by the Orthodox Church, the Protestants maintained a solid testimony throughout the long years of persecution under the Communist government, coupled with a dedication to be Christ's people by life or death.

Historically, Ukraine has been the "Bible belt" for this part of the world. Momentous spiritual and cultural changes have usually begun in Ukraine and spread eastward. One way God's unique work in Ukraine reveals itself is in the growth of the Church. Churches are being started at a rate greater than 150 per year. The Baptist Union alone baptized 12,000 new converts last year. Another sign of God's work in Ukraine is the zeal of the new believers and their willingness to study the Word. Individuals who hear the gospel are very receptive. The new converts recognize that they may not know spiritual truths deeply, yet are eager to share the Good News.

God is working in Ukraine in remarkable ways. People want to know about the God their government tried so hard to hide. They are finding the truth in Jesus Christ. The growth is so rapid that there are not enough trained church leaders to handle these groups of new believers. The most significant need of the evangelical church in the former Soviet Union is the training of pastors and leaders for these new local churches. This is particularly where the work of ITEM is so crucially needed.

Continued on page 4

A LONG TERM IMPACT OF ONE MAN'S WORK

By Rev. Dr. Joel Nederhood, former director of *The Back to God Hour*, Preaching Pastor of Cottage Grove Christian Reformed Church, South Holland, Illinois.

For some of the first Reformed believers to travel through the Soviet Union when it opened its doors to the rest of the world in 1987, it was obvious that the nation's churches were in dire need of theological education. When Rev. Nicholas Vogelzang heard a speech that described the plight of the Russian churches, he knew at once that he was being called to go to Russia to do whatever he could to establish Reformed theological education in that needy country.

God used him to establish Christ for Russia, later to become International Theological Educational Ministries, an organization that established seminaries and Bible colleges in Russia and in what has become Ukraine. ITEM now also has schools in Latvia, Romania, Siberia, and Poland, each one of them serving a population that experienced the cruel thought control of Communism, each one of them showing eager students the riches of the Scriptures.

Today the largest of the schools he established, now called Eastern Ukrainian Theological Seminary in Donetsk, Ukraine, serves more than 320 students who are being trained to work in churches in Ukraine and Russia, and as missionaries to other countries.

When Pastor Vogelzang died last year, his heart was full of love for the Slavic people. God used this man of unusual energy and creativity, a man with a pastor's heart and high dedication to Christ's blessed gospel, to begin a movement of higher Christian education in the Reformed tradition in a part of the world that had never been touched by the Reformation's rich heritage. When we examine the power of Reformed Christianity in bringing believers to glorify God and in forming culture and society, we know that the long term impact of this man's work will be extremely important.

Those who were privileged to know this dynamic man of faith thank God for his passion, his dedication and his vision. God raises up certain people to accomplish certain tasks and equips them for their mission. We thank him for raising up Nicholas Vogelzang to bring about a new day for theological education in Russia and the former Soviet union.

Rev. Dr. Joel Nederhood, March 2007

What's Next?

The Orthodox Church does not see as much dominance as in other countries of the former USSR. As a result, there is religious stability and minor religious groups experience less persecution than in other Soviet countries. This means that adherents of other religions enjoy a favorable religious climate. All in all, more than seventy religious denominations have sprouted in Ukraine since the collapse of communism. The future is optimistic. Ukraine has always been open to diverse influences because of its location at the crossroads of East and West and North and South, where various cultural and religious worlds intersect.

Notably the foreign missions bring the Word of God to Ukraine at a time when it lacks its own such opportunities by its traditional faiths and churches. Yet missionaries do not always take into account the existing thousand-year Christian tradition. The activity of Christian missionaries need not focus on the creation of their own organizational structures in Ukraine but in supporting the evangelical efforts of traditional faiths and aiding them in sound biblical teaching, catechizing, and preparation of cadres of church leaders and missionaries.

It is vital to stress that the enemy has used many means throughout the ages to keep the people from understanding their need for the gospel and sound life-transforming theology. The need for sharing the truth and skills in this wonderful country has never been greater. Hopefully, understanding how the enemy has blinded people in this country will also help us to do a better job in sharing the light.

Freedom has proved to be a mixed blessing for Ukrainian believers, with more ambiguities and complexities than perhaps anyone imagined in the exciting days of the early 1990's. Bible colleges have replaced many of the plank benches of the old days; new church buildings stand in prominent locations in some towns; thousands of children annually attend church summer camps; Christian doctors offer free medical clinics in remote villages; and believing musicians perform on the radio. All of these are signs of healthy changes that nevertheless are still going through a lengthy, even painful process of absorption and validation. It will take time, resources and much faithful training to prepare the emerging Christian leadership for the challenges of today's Church in Ukraine.

Andre Bouravnev, March 2007

Sources used: www.nationmaster.com; History of Christianity in Ukraine from Wikipedia; Ukraine: Christians in Conflict by Joseph R. Gregory, 2006; www.encyclopediaofukraine.com; Religion and the Churches in Modern Ukraine (Kyiv: Svit znan', 2001); www.send.org/ukraine; International Religious Freedom Report, 12/1, Winter 2004; Ivakhiv, Adrian, In Search of Deeper Identities: Neopaganism and "Native Faith" in Contemporary Ukraine, 2005 8(3):7-38; www.risu.org.ua; ICSA E-Newsletter, 5/1, Feb. 2006; www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

USA donations and correspondence:
P.O. Box 31456, St. Louis, MO 63131-0456
Tel.+1.314.961.0169;
Fax:+1.636.861.1613
e-mail: rdludwick@sbcglobal.net
internet: www.item.org

Canadian donations only:
c/o Action International Ministries
3015 A 21st St. NE
Calgary T2E 7T1
CANADA

R. David Ludwick, J.D.,
M.Div., *President*

Permission is granted to reprint in whole or in part provided the following credit is given:
"Reprinted from newsITEMs, a newsletter of International Theological Education Ministries, Inc., St. Louis, MO"



Information on the numbers of officially registered religious communities taken from official statistics of the State Committee of Ukraine on Religious Affairs.