MISSIONARY SENDING STRUCTURES IN THE RUSSIAN BAPTIST UNION: *the Past, Present, and Future*

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Abstract

Due to various historical, political, and theological reasons, the evangelical movement in Russia has never developed full-fledged, indigenous missionary sending structures This factor has seriously hindered the growth of the evangelical church and the productive use of available resources to advance the work of the gospel. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons underlying the current situation and offer a constructive proposal that might contribute to the development of missionary sending structures in the Russian context. In order to accomplish this, the author first looks at the factors that contributed to the emergence and success of mission agencies within Western Protestant Christianity. Second, he outlines major historical periods in the history of Russian evangelical missions with special attention to the factors that contributed to, or hindered, the creation of missionary sending structures. Finally, the author suggests a possible course of action that might prove helpful in developing mission agencies in the contemporary social and political context in which Russian evangelical churches find themselves.

Keywords: мission society, evangelical movement in Russia, the Russian Union of ECB, Protestant missions, economic factors, theological factors, socio-political factors, Johannes Oncken, personal evangelism, partnership, parachurch organization, denominational, pastor, seminary, local church autonomy, centralization, mission board, coordinated efforts, the mission of God.

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Introduction

Contemporary missiologists have to increasingly take into account the double fact of "simultaneous emergence of a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity."[1] While the church in the Western world is numerically decreasing and moving from the center of cultural life to its periphery, we are observing an unparalleled growth of Christianity and indigenous mission work in the majority world. In fact, in 1793, when William Carey went to India as a missionary, only two percent of the world's Christians lived in Asia, Africa, and Latin America combined. Today, the historic William Carey Memorial Church in Lester, England is a Hindu temple, whereas the church in India sends out over 41,000 cross-cultural missionaries.[2] In Nigeria alone, according to *World Christian Encyclopedia*, more Anglican Christians worship in any given week than all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Europe and North America combined.[3]

The phenomenal growth of Christianity in non-Western countries would have been hardly possible without missionary agencies, or voluntary societies established with the purpose of spreading the gospel beyond the borders of Christendom. Historically, mission agencies "in various shapes and forms have been the primary vehicle for churches to send and support missionaries,"[4] becoming especially instrumental in the emergence of the modern missionary movement in the last two hundred years. However in my country, Russia, the evangelical movement (itself, at least in part, a product of Western missionary efforts) has never developed full-fledged mission sending structures due to various historical, political, and theological reasons. This factor has been seriously hindering the growth of the evangelical church and the productive use of available resources to advance the work of the gospel.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate various historical, theological, and structural reasons for the current situation and to attempt their theological evaluation. I also hope to offer a constructive proposal that might contribute to the development of missionary sending structures in the Russian context. In order to accomplish this, I will first look at the factors that contributed to the emergence and success of mission agencies within Western Protestant Christianity. Second, I will outline major historical periods in the history of Russian evangelical missions with special attention to the factors that contributed to, or hindered, the creation of missionary sending structures. Finally, I will propose a possible course of action that might prove helpful in developing mission agencies in the contemporary social and political context in which Russian evangelical churches find themselves.

Given the size of this paper, I will limit the scope to one particular denomination, the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians – Baptists (or Russian Baptist Union, RBU), the oldest, and so far the largest, evangelical denomination in Russia. How-

[1] Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Kindle Edition, Locations 248).
[2] Ibid., Kindle Locations 92-93.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Craig Ott, and Stephen J. Strauss, Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 202.

ever, some other smaller and more recent denominations face similar issues. Thus the problems discussed in this study can, to a certain degree, apply to their situation as well.

Missionary Sending Structures in the Western Church: Historical and Theological Considerations

As seen from the Acts of the Apostles, the gospel initially spread through unintentional means, such as persecution (8:1-4; 11:19-21) and itinerant preachers or pilgrims (8:26-40). The first *intentional* sending of missionaries came many years after Pentecost with the sending of Paul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch.[5] This event marked an important development in the missionary strategies of the early church. In a sense, Paul and his fellow missionaries were not only sent to the mission field, but became the first missionary sending structure. As his work progressed, Paul "recruited additional missionary coworkers from the churches he planted. He was financially supported in part by-churches, such as the Philippian church... and in part by self-support through the secular work of tent-making."[6]

Through the Middle Ages, both in the West and the Christian East, monastic orders were highly instrumental in carrying the gospel to new places and peoples.[7] The Medieval church formed a synthesis of diocesan and monastic forms of Christianity, or modality and sodality, with the latter becoming "much more important in the perpetuation of the Christian movement than the organized system of parishes."[8] Later on, the Roman Catholic Church used the system of patronage with the purpose of converting colonized peoples into Catholicism.

During the several hundred years after the Reformation, the Protestants had basically no mechanism for missions. As Timothy Tennent observes, "The Reformers did not carry over the idea of sodalities into the ecclesiology of the Reformation. Therefore the reasons why Protestants did not send any missionaries out for the first two hundred years were not only theological but also profoundly structural."[9] Andrew Walls makes a similar comment, "The simple fact was that the Church as then organized... could not effectively operate mission overseas... The Church structures could only do what they had always done; a new concept needed a new instrument."[10]

This is why William Carey's role was so crucial to the genesis of Protestant missions. Although not the first Protestant missionary, he is generally recognized as "the father" of the modern missionary movement due to his role in the creation of the first missionary society in 1793. The type of voluntary society in which "individuals,

[5] Ott and Strauss, *Theology of Mission*, 202.

[6] Ibid., 202.

[7] Ralph D. Winter, "The Kingdom Strikes Back: Ten Epochs of the Redemptive History," in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 204.

[8] Ralph D. Winter, "Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," in Winter and Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, 224.

[9] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*. Kindle Locations 2913-2914.

[10] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 243-46.

churches, and congregations freely act together for an object of common interest"[11] became a model to be followed by other Christians in different places in Great Britain and the United States. Essentially, it was a "pragmatic approach, the design of an instrument for a specific purpose."[12] As Tennent puts it, Carey "stepped into a kairos moment, which stimulated the founding of dozens of new voluntary missionary societies and propelled hundreds of new missionaries out into the field in what became the largest missions mobilization in history."[13]

In his seminal article on the role of voluntary societies in missions, Andrew Walls lists several important factors that contributed to the emergence and success of missionary sending structures. First, theological considerations played a crucial role. The mission societies became possible because there were "relatively few Churchmen who thought seriously about evangelization outside the normal sphere of the Church."[14] These people had a vision for "the conversion of the heathens," and therefore they sought ways to communicate their vision to multitudes of laity and clergy, mobilizing prayer, financial support, and missionary force.

Another factor was the social and political situation of the church in Western Europe and North America at the time. What is in view here is more than the absence of despotism. For voluntary societies to flourish one needs:

A social system that allows for plurality and choice, in which people are not required or prepared to act in the same way as all their neighbors, in which there is a highly developed sense of the individual and of individual autonomy. The voluntary association is part of a wider community but does not act solely by means of that community's recognized channels of activity. Many communities that are by no means despotic do not provide these conditions.[15]

Third, a certain level of economic development was important. "For the voluntarily society to operate... implies the existence of cash surpluses and freedom to move them about. It cannot operate if the surplus of production is marginal or if the movement of surpluses or controlled by the wider community."[16] Finally, there were important ecclesiastical considerations. Voluntary societies flourish "through atomization of the church, the decentralization and dispersal of its organization."[17] Using the advantages of all these factors, the visionary leaders such as Carey "could make possible the response of obedience" to the Great Commandment in the end of the 18th century.[18]

Another relevant ecclesiastical factor is noted by Ralph Winter. Looking at the historical development of missionary societies, he divides the epoch of the modern missionary movement into three partially overlapping eras. The first era (1793–1910) which was mostly directed to the coastlands was dominated by European missionaries primarily under denominational agencies. The second era (1865–1980) was largely a time of American missionaries, dominated by "faith" missions, focused on

[11] Ibid., 246.
[12] Ibid., 242.
[13] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*. Kindle Locations 2888-2889.
[14] Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 243.
[15] Ibid., 225.
[16] Ibid..
[17] Ibid..
[18] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*. Kindle Location 2932.

the inlands, and significantly interdenominational. The third era (1934 - present) has been a time of "specialized" mission agencies focused on unreached people groups rather than on geographical regions.[19] In terms of ecclesiastic partnerships, therefore, there has been a progression from denominational to interdenominational, and then to non-denominational or professional mission agencies.

Evangelicals in Russia, for most of their history, have been separated from these developments, but when the "Iron Curtain" finally fell in the late 1980s, they encountered multiple representatives of Western mission agencies of various forms who began their work in the country. As will be seen from this paper, this experience became a mixed blessing for the Baptist church in Russia.

Baptists and Missionary Structures in Russian History: Lessons from the Past

The First Period: 1867 – 1917

The evangelical movement in the Russian empire had its beginnings in the second half of the 19th century. Two main factors contributed to its birth: the publishing of the New Testament in the contemporary Russian language in 1824 and pietistic influences through multiple communities of German Lutherans and Mennonites in southern Russia and Ukraine. The ground for these factors had been "prepared... by the deep spirituality of the Russian Orthodox God-seekers"[20] who were disappointed with formality and moral decay of the dominant state church. Initially the few peasants interested in understanding the Bible for themselves tried to get some help from the Orthodox clergy. When, however, they were turned away, they asked German settlers for help. August 20, 1867, marks the official date for the beginning of the movement: on that day when Martin Kalweit, a German Baptist, baptized Nikita Voronin who later became the first Russian pastor.

Initially, the evangelical revival spread more or less independently in three regions: Ukraine, Georgia, and St. Petersburg. Among several attempts to unite the three tides, the congress of 1884 in Novovasilievka (Odessa region, Ukriane) stands out for our purposes in this paper. About 40 representatives from 13 churches discussed 24 issues on the agenda, but missions became central to the whole event. Johannes Willer, the chair of the conference, suggested a fourfold "scale of priorities" for the emerging Baptist communities: (1) visiting and strengthening small communities of believers located far from the centers; (2) stimulating and encouraging a "missionary mood" in brothers and sisters; (3) strengthening love and unity in local communities, and (4) evangelizing "unconverted souls."[21] To facilitate the missionary work

[19] Ralph D. Winter, "Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions," in Winter and Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, 259.

[20] Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 14.

[21] Johannes Dyck, "Dependence of Independence: The Local Church in the Context of the Union." Presented at the annual congress of the Ukrainian Baptist Union on December 6, 2007. In Russian. Source: http://www.baptist.org.ru/articles/history/614

of the emerging churches, a missionary committee and a missions fund were established. Based on the available funds, eight full time *blagovestnik* (evangelists) were chosen – three for one year, four for six months, and one for three months of support.

Summarizing the results of this early unifying conference, Alexey Sinichkin, a leading historian of the RBU, says, "The conference deepened the interdependence of separate evangelical communities. The result of this first phase of consolidation was a general (i.e. united) missions program. Decisions about missions were accepted as mandatory for every church, decisions about doctrinal issues were accepted as advisable, and all other issues were considered the prerogative of a local church. Later, conferences became annual, but they made no attempts to regulate internal life of local communities."[22] The conference therefore made no attempt to create a centralized denominational structure; rather, the purpose of developing the inter-church structures was the coordination and enhancing of mission efforts.

On April 17, 1905, Tsar Nicholas II signed the Edict of Religious Toleration which marked "a significant shift in religious policy that was to have enormous consequences for the growth of evangelical movement in the Russian Empire."[23] The decree allowed for free practice of religion, and, in the wake of this, the Congress of the Baptist Union in Rostov in 1907 made a decision to create a missionary society. What prompted its creation was the conviction that "for a successful work of a mission society it should have its own leading board separated from the union but remaining connected to the union's leadership by moral and spiritual ties."[24] The society's constitution was developed, and the first assembly took place right during the congress. As a result, 20 full time *blagovestniks* were chosen, from three months to one year of support. Independently from Rostov, a similar society was created in Siberia which would support 19 *blagovestniks* that same year in the eastern part of Russia.

According to the reports from the All-Russia Congress of Baptists in 1911, the Union included 50,000 members and 29 fully supported evangelists.[25] The biggest hindrance to the mission work was not a political or social situation, but rather a lack of finances. V. Stepanov, the vice-president of the Union, complained that "only 11,000 rubles were collected to the mission fund this year, and that is extremely little."[26] Vasiliy Pavlov, the chair of the missionary society, wrote in the *Baptist* magazine in 1909: "Our work has significantly grown and widened but the generosity of our brothers and sisters has not. Therefore our work cannot go forward unless contributions for this purpose increase."[27]

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[22] Alexey Sinickin, *Everything for the Sake of Mission*. In Russian. Source: http://rusbaptist.stunda.org/vsjo-radi-missii.htm

[23] Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 21.

[24] I.P. Plett, "A History of Evangelical Christians and Baptist in 1905 – 1944." In Russian. Source: http://www.blagovestnik.org/books/00360.htm

[25] Sinickin, *For the Sake of Mission*, n.p.

[26] Vasiliy Pavlov, "Our Missionary Society," in *Baptist* 17 (1909), 19-20. In Russian.

[27] Dmitry Demchenko, "Missions in the Life of Baptist Communities in the Caucasus." Presented at the Congress of the North Caucasus Association of RBU, May 27, 2011. In Russian. Source: http://www.skbi.ru/aktualno/resursy-dlya-skachivaniya/category/5-istoriya

The Second Period: 1917 – 1937

The Communist Revolution in October of 1917 and the resulting decree separating the churches from the state for many evangelicals sounded like "a charter of liberties for all religious groups that had seen discrimination and persecution under the old partnership of tsar and Orthodoxy."[28] Baptists and other evangelical groups embarked on a decade of intense activity which became their "golden decade."[29] In 1921, the 24th Congress of Russian Baptists announced that "evangelism is the most important work of our spiritual life. Any form of our organization should be considered valuable only inasmuch as it contributes to the successful preaching of the Gospel."[30] By the end of 1923, the Union had 65 fully supported evangelists and about 1,000 more worked as volunteers. That same year, the 25th Congress discussed launching missions work among non-Russian speaking peoples of Russia (Tartars, Georgians, Armenians, Chuvashs, etc.). It even intended to send two missionaries to China, and two to India.[31]

By 1926, the union was a decentralized association of churches which comprised 12 regional unions. Each of them had its own mission board. To support both regional and federal boards, church members were regularly encouraged to donate 1/10 of all income to the cause of missions, which was then divided into equal halves. As a result, by June 1928, the Baptist Union of Russia had 200,000 baptized members (fourfold growth in 17 years!), 4,000 local churches, and 900 ordained pastors. It is not surprising that Ivan Prokhanov, a prominent evangelical leader, could later say about that time: "Our movement was transformed into a national evangelical revolution. We began a victorious procession in all of Russia. We were going to take over the whole country, had the atheists not prevented it."[32]

Unfortunately, the "golden decade" was followed by a decade of "such severe persecution that it remains their red or bloody decade without peer."[33] In 1929 – 1933, the number of Baptists in some areas of Russia decreased several times. By the end of 1931, most churches ceased to exist. The last church lost it registration in 1937 after most ministers had been arrested, exiled, or executed. In general, any official religious life ceased to exist by 1938. It is estimated that eight million people became victims of the Stalinist regime, and among them were thousands of evangelical ministers and church members.

The Third Period: 1944 – 1991

In 1944, Baptists were allowed to legally exist again, but under strict control of the government in all areas of the church life. The Russian Baptist Union was created as a "bureaucratic pyramid, which would exercise significant oversight over evangelical life."[34] Several developments from that period are important for the purposes of this study. First, a centralized and many-layered hierarchy took the place of a

[28] Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals*, 28.
[29] Ibid., 45.
[30] Sinichkin, *For the Sake of Mission*, n.p.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals*, 48.
[34] Wanner, *Ukrainians*, 58.

previously loose association of churches. The decisions of the council as the governing body were brought down through the institution of the so-called senior (or regional) presbyters. As Alexey Sinichkin observes, "The government imposed on Baptists an Episcopal system which was totally alien to the Baptist principles."[35] This gave the government a strong lever for managing the whole union through a narrow circle of its leaders.

Second, traveling preachers and their work was prohibited. Only ordained pastors who had a special license from the leadership of the union had the right to visit other churches. Third, church services became standardized as elements of liturgy were introduced in every church through a centralized magazine *Bratskiy Vestnik* ("Brotherly Messenger") and a hymnal edited by the Soviet Ministry of Religion. The purpose was to "strip Baptism of any traits attractive to the masses."[36] Fourth, Sunday schools, youth and women's gatherings, and relief funds were forbidden. Finally, the activities of local churches were to take place only inside the church buildings, but the definition of the activities themselves was narrowed to the "administration of cultic rites." The purpose of this tactic was to "refocus their propaganda from widening their numbers to deepening the spirituality inside their communities and self-perfection."[37] As a result of all these developments, the interchurch structure that had initially were established to facilitate mission, now were re-erected in order to limit and suppress mission.

It should be said that despite the persistent attempts by the government to impose these limitations, not all churches always followed them. Moreover, in the early 1960s the union experienced a turbulent division that led about 1/3 of churches underground exactly because they refused to obey the government's interference in their internal affairs (the division continues to this day). Yet in general, a centralized and rigid structure, an inward-focus and the priority of "self-perfection" over mission and evangelism became deeply ingrained in the DNA of many, if not in the majority, of the RBU churches. It was in this condition that new opportunities for mission work emerged along with the collapse of the Communism regime.

Baptist Churches and Missionary Structures Today: From 1991 to the Present

The freedom that arrived with the collapse of the Communist government opened the doors of the former Soviet Union to thousands of foreign missionaries. Their enthusiasm encouraged many local Christians to share the gospel and start planting new churches. As early as in 1989, the first missionary society, "The Light of the Gospel," was created in Rovno, Ukraine, which sent several dozen missionaries as far east as Yakutia and Kamchatka.[38] Some other similar mission societies followed. However, these types of mission agencies can hardly be described as indigenous.

[35] Alexey Sinichkin, "Church Ministers and State Powers in 1944 – 1949," (unpublished manuscript), 3.

[36] Ibid, 4.

[37] Ibid, 8.

[38] Jesus Christ. – http://jesuschrist.ru/news/2001/9/6/165#.UoMCGuLjU0c (10.07.2016)

Although their leadership boards consisted primarily of local people, almost all financial support came from the West.

The same is true about the missionary department of the RBU that was created around that time. According to Steve Emerson, a US missionary who was highly instrumental in the creation and development of the department, the amount of indigenous support that came to the department never exceeded what was needed to support two or three missionary families, whereas outside donations were about 20 times more. The department thus became "the middle man, or clearing house" between Western supporters and local missionaries.[39]

Today, when most Western missionary organizations have wrapped up their work in Russia, the reality is that the number of Baptists has not grown significantly; in fact, it remains approximately at the same level of 0.05 % of the population.[40] What is more, no indigenous missionary sending structure has been created as a result of the enthusiastic activity of the last twenty years, except for the mission department in Moscow discussed above. Some ministers have hopes that seminaries and Bible colleges will be able to fill the void through attracting students to mission training programs. But in my view, such hopes are hardly justified. A mission training program cannot, as it were, "hang in the air," without broader structures that *mobilize* potential missionaries in local churches and *support* graduates in the mission field. To hope that we can produce missionaries just by changing a set of courses in our curriculum is, I am deeply convinced, naive. The relative success of missions programs in the beginning of 1990-s is best accounted by the fact that in our churches we had many well motivated youths who, after completing seminaries, normally were able to find support through either foreign mission agencies or their affiliations in Russia. Today we have little of either motivated youth or agencies. I do not reject the idea that seminaries can be helpful in mission endeavor – in fact, they surely can. Bu in my view, only if they function as the middle link in a chain that has to have at least two more links (see attachment 1). In other words, if they become incorporated into, or partners of, broader structures that mobilize, train, and send missionaries.

Are the churches of the union ready to make this important next step? In the following section, I will attempt to look at this question in light of the four factors noted above by Walls. What are some of the theological, social, economic, and ecclesiastical factors today that might contribute to the establishment of mission agencies under the auspices of the RBU?

Theological Considerations

Originally, and especially since early 1990-s, Russian Baptists have emphasized the need for evangelism. A slogan "every Baptist is a missionary," by a German revivalist Johannes Onken (1800–1884) can be often heard in Russian Baptist churches.[41] Although the emphasis is highly commendable, the implied definition of a mission-

[39] Personal interview on October 15, 2013. I changed the missionary's name here.

[40] http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Российский-_союз_евангельских_христиан-баптистов

[41] In fact, the official web-site of the RBU quotes this slogan at least five times in different articles. Source: http://www.baptist.org.ru/

ary here is something like "someone who actively shares the gospel within their circle of family, school, or job," and not someone "who leaves home in order to proclaim the gospel, usually in another culture."[42] So what this slogan means in reality is "every Baptist is a witness." While this idea is valuable, its flip side becomes an underestimation of missionary ministry as a distinctive gift and calling in its own right.[43]

In addition to the historical reasons for such a view, outlined earlier, the impression is that this understanding reflects low practical awareness on the part of some key leaders in the union of how multi-cultural the country of Russia actually is. In the responses that the senior presbyters of the union gave to my questionnaire (see appendix 2), 100 percent said that every region of Russia needs gospel workers in equal measure, and only three added a comment that special attention should be paid to predominantly Muslim, Buddhist, and animistic regions of the country. Perhaps, this lack of awareness goes back to the Soviet times when the government aimed at downplaying and, in some cases, uprooting ethnic and cultural differences in an attempt to create the *homo soveticus*. Yet over the last twenty years there have been many strong movements for rediscovering historical and religious identities, which seem to have remained unnoticed by some leaders immersed in everyday pastoral concerns inside their local communities.

Another reason appears to be a general perception by Russian Baptists of the society around them. In traditional preaching there has been a sharp contrast between the church and those outside Baptist circles. Even other Christians who were not Baptists, were hardly perceived as believers in any biblical sense of this word, including Pentecostal and charismatic churches (the latter appeared in Russia in the late 1980s, early 1990s). Russian Orthodox renewal has been looked upon with great suspicion, which has been often confirmed by aggressive attacks by some Orthodox clergy against "sects." As a result, the Baptists tend to see themselves as a tiny, and in many cases almost the only, community of believers among the "unbelieving world." From this perspective, any place where the church is located is an unreached mission field, so the idea of sending missionaries beyond "Jerusalem" is often perceived as irrelevant.

Finally, the experience of partnerships with foreign mission agencies in the 1990s has played its role as well. Admittedly, it has not always been successful; in fact, the very word "partnership" is often inappropriate to describe what took place in many cases. As mentioned earlier, most agencies that were quick to unfold their work in the former Soviet Union were parachurch organizations. Having encountered the Baptist church with its "strange" set of traditions, Western missionaries often jumped to the conclusion that Russians are backward and not interested in missions. As a result, few attempts have been made to develop full-blown partnerships, let alone ac-

[42] James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures. Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 13. Cf. Tennent's definition of mmissionary as "someone who crosses a cultural barrier to communicate the gospel" in Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*. Kindle Locations 3441.

[43] Ott and Strauss, *Theology of Mission*, 223-24.

countability. At the same time, to achieve the purposes of their organizations they needed local workers, whom they attracted from the existing churches, usually offering them a relatively high salary.[44] These young and promising leaders were then often lost by their home churches. In many cases, they quite soon picked up on the criticism of the traditional churches and their backward leaders.

All of that somewhat discredited the concept of a "missionary" in Russian Baptist circles. This is not surprising, however, if we take into account that relationships between the structures of modality and sodality in Christian history have not always been smooth in the West either. Ralph Winter notes that even today among American Protestants "there continues to be deep confusion about the legitimacy and proper relationship of the two structures."[45] If this is so after more than two centuries of their co-existence in West, one can hardly expect anything more from a church that has had only a little experience in dealing with parachurch organizations.

What is surprising, though, is that 70 percent of senior presbyters who answered my questionnaire believe that local churches alone will not be able to successfully accomplish the task of church planting in unreached areas. In other words, there is a felt need for sodality structures. The question is whether a compelling model of such structures will be presented, and whether the pastors will be willing to *commit* their support and participation in its work.

Social and Political Considerations

Arguably, the most serious obstacles to the creation of voluntary missionary societies today stem from the current political and social situation in Russia. Politically, there is a strong control of non-governmental organizations all over Russia, and especially in Muslim regions, such as North Caucasus. The policies against NGOs in Russia are based on a widespread conviction that they serve as instruments of advancing foreign political agendas. After the notorious "foreign agent law" passed on July 13, 2012, many religious organizations had to cancel their currency accounts, and even change their constitutions. Today, basically any NGO that has the potential to influence public opinion can be accused of political interference.[46] There are also serious legal limitations to receive and move funds even inside the country.

Socially, there is a strong pressure to conform to the majority of the population. The ideological vacuum that was left after the collapse of Communism is being gradually filled with a new vision for a unified Russian society. Both the Russian Orthodox Church and the dominant political party (not accidentally called "The United Russia") has been able to successively employ old stereotypes and fears to promote an image of the cultural and political enemy that is identified with the West (and primarily, with the USA).[47] It is believed that the USA's political agenda is to divide

[44] A monthly salary of $150 in the 1990s was about four times as high as an average salary in nationwide.

[45] Winter, "Two Structures," in *Perspectives*, 228.

[46] For some examples, see http://www.rferl.org/section/crackdown-on-ngos-in-russia/3272.html

[47] A PSU professor Catherine Wanner, a long standing researcher of religious communities in the former Soviet Union, observes that "the re-

Russia into smaller and weaker states, and "foreign religions" are often seen as its fifth column. Much of these fears motivated the 1997 bill on the Traditional Religions that established two categories of religious institutions with different legal statuses and opportunities.[48] Among Christian denominations, only the Orthodox Church was given the status of a traditional religion whereas Catholic, Protestant, and even breakaway Orthodox movements are considered "non-traditional religious groups" and often referred to as "sects."

As a result, it becomes virtually impossible to register an NGO that would have the word "missionary" as part of its name, or openly state mission work among its goals. These considerations raise a question as to whether the form of a voluntary society (registered as an NGO) could really become an effective means for sending missionaries within contemporary Russia. Perhaps, a more efficient way might be the creation of denominational structures that have no separate legal existence apart from local churches or larger associations of churches. I will return to this question later in the paper.

Economic Considerations

Russia is regularly listed among rich countries largely because of its considerable abundance of natural resources and a high number of billionaires. Yet neither of these two factors reflects the average life standards in the country. In fact, according to the Global Wealth Report 2013, "Russia has the highest level of wealth inequality in the world, apart from small Caribbean nations with resident billionaires. Worldwide, there is one billionaire for every USD 170 billion in household wealth; Russia has one for every USD 11 billion. Worldwide, billionaires collectively account for 1%–2% of total household wealth; in Russia today 110 billionaires own 35% of all wealth."[49] At the turbulent time of transition from socialist to market economy, there were "hopes that Russia would convert to a high skilled, high income economy with strong social protection programs inherited from Soviet Union days. This is almost a parody of what happened in practice."[50]

This time of transition proved to be extremely hard for average people in Russia, not excluding Baptists who traditionally had larger families and little access to high educational and employment opportunities. In addition to the persecutions experienced under the Soviet powers, these reasons account for the sweeping immigration of the 1990s. At that difficult time, Western churches and parachurch organizations went alongside the Russian church and helped it to support multiple ministries in the country. It is hardly possible to evaluate exact numbers, but it won't be an overestimation to say that over the last 20 years, millions of U.S. dollars were invested in supporting pastors, church-planting, biblical education, translation and publishing of Christian literature, etc.

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ligious landscape after 1989 developed very differently in Ukraine than it did in Russia, largely because of the different trajectories Orthodoxy took." (*Communities of the Converted,* 131).

[48] See http://www.religioustolerance.org/rt_russi1.htm for more information on the law.

[49] http://www.worldwealthreport.com/

[50] Ibid.

In general, however, Baptists have been able to better adjust to the new economic opportunities because many of them, especially in smaller cities, work in non-state sectors and are self-employed, or work together in construction or other small businesses. This is making Baptist churches in Russia today stronger and more independent. In fact, according to my survey, 66 percent of the senior presbyters believe that Russian churches today are able to support missions in their country without outside help.[51] So it is not the question of lack of resources; it is the question of our *priorities*. Unfortunately, two decades of Western financial support created a certain degree of dependency in many local workers. Furthermore, the outside help for mission work did not encourage ownership by Baptists in Russia. In order to invest their funds into missions, the local churches have to see both their responsibility and their resources. In addition to that, they will often need to bring their resources together, which leads me to the last of Walls' factors, namely, ecclesiastical.

Ecclesiastical Considerations

According to Walls, voluntary societies flourish "through atomization of the church, the decentralization and dispersal of its organization."[52] As was shown earlier, Russian Baptists began their existence as a highly decentralized association of churches. Later, however, the Soviet powers restructured the union into a multilayer hierarchical denomination. Today it may seem that the pendulum is shifting to the opposite extreme as the leadership of the union is regularly emphasizing the fact that the three levels of authority fulfill merely a coordinating role. However, for all practical purposes, the union remains largely centralized and hierarchical. The leaders exercise significant authority among church members, and almost no new (or well forgotten) initiative from the pews can develop unless it is supported and actively promoted by the leadership.

At first, the union's centralization may seem to be a serious hindrance to the creation of mission societies. However, Walls' point applies specifically to *voluntary* societies, and should be taken in combination with his other factors, particularly, social and political freedoms. If my analysis of the current situation in Russia is correct, a voluntary society remains the best, though pragmatically not a realistic ideal. Indeed, in these circumstances, a denominational missional agency might be a better and more feasible option.[53]

A final relevant ecclesiastical factor that needs to be taken into account is the fact that more than 50 percent of the senior presbyters are not ready to cooperate in missions with other denominations.[54] This is especially true if Pentecostal or charismatic

[51] See appendix 2.

[52] Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 255.

[53] A similar tension between the autonomy and the need for cooperation has been a problem for Baptists in the West as well. As C. Delane Tew observes, the "local autonomy served the churches well... however, [it] proved to be a handicap when it came to missions endeavors." In the United States, Baptist mission work "expanded rapidly only after autonomous churches agreed to an uneasy truce with a centralized organizational structure." See C. Delane Tew, "Baptist Missionary Funding: From Societies to Centralization," in *Baptist History and Heritage* 41, no 2 (Spr 2006), 55.

[54] See appendix 2.

churches are in view. The practices that most ministers of the Baptist union reject include a prosperity gospel, the "second blessing" of the spiritual baptism, speaking in tongues, emphases on miracles and signs, and overly contemporary forms of worship. This fact makes Baptist participation in interdenominational societies hardly possible at the present stage, and thus aligns well with the point made earlier that denominational structures may be the best way to move forward in missions at this stage.

Looking to the Future: A Constructive Proposal

If there is anything the above pages demonstrate, it is the fact that the four essential factors so crucial for the emergence and success of missionary societies in the West, have rarely converged in the history of Russian evangelicals. By virtue of various historical forces, Russian Baptists have been thrown back and are, in a sense, finding themselves again in the situation of the Western church before William Carey. Is there any hope for flourishing mission agencies in Russia? I believe there is, but Russian experience does not necessarily have to repeat that of the Western Protestant sending structures. In what follows, I will try to suggest a model of a missionary society that may serve the churches of the union best at this stage of their existence. The model will be presented descriptively through its ten main characteristics:

1. The most effective way to intentionally send missionaries today seems to be through the creation of *denominational* mission agencies, or boards. Legally, the boards will not constitute separate organizations, but will work under the existing structures of the Baptist Union.
2. Given the extensive geographical size of Russia, the emphasis should be placed on the creation of *regional* sending structures rather than on a single board in the federal union. If mission boards are created in each of the seven territorial unions, this can produce an optimal balance of both centralization and mobility. Moreover, ministers within each of the regional unions already know each other personally, share a common mission field, and have built informal fellowship and ministry networks.
3. Each of the boards will be focused on mission work in its region, yet *partnerships* and exchange of experiences will be strongly encouraged. This should become the main task of the existing mission department of the union.
4. The board's main tasks will be the promotion of missionary *vision* and mission focused prayer in local churches; research and development of contextualized mission strategies, need assessment and mobilization of candidates for short-term missions, selection and preparation (formal and informal) of candidates for long-term missions, and distribution of financial support. It will also encourage eventual creation of mission committees in every local church.
5. At the first stage, the efforts can be directed at the creation of one missionary structure in a *single* region ("a proof ground"), which then could become a precedent for other regions.

6. The boards will be directly accountable to the senior presbyters of the territorial unions, or their assistants in missions. They constitute its governing structure (the mission boards proper). The main burden of the work, however, will be accomplished by a *team of qualified, fulltime workers* (the executive committee).
7. The churches of regional associations will commit a predetermined *percentage* of their collections to support the boards and their operations.
8. In choosing missionary candidates, the preference at this stage should be given to "*tentmakers*," although in certain cases missionaries should be offered full or partial support.
9. At the same time, the boards will take on responsibility for *spiritual* care and building missionary networks, as well as for *financial* help in cases of urgent personal, family, or ministerial needs.
10. In general, the boards will serve as *bridges* between local churches, mission training schools, missionaries in the field, and local and foreign partners interested in supporting the mission work in the regions.

A similar model has already been working in another post-Soviet country, Moldova, and it has proved its effectiveness. A mission mobilization committee (three full-time people) was created four years ago under the auspice of the Baptist Union in Moldova. The members of the committee have traveled extensively visiting most of the 497 churches and groups of the union. About 40,000 prayer calendars were mailed to the churches, helping to mobilize and focus prayer commitment for worldwide mission. Every year, around 1,600 short-term missionaries are sent beyond Moldova's borders (even to Indonesia). Over this period, local churches have been able to raise almost $160,000 for these mission trips.[55] About 150 long-term missionaries from this tiny country serve now in several countries. Among them, 12 are fully supported by the churches of the union (the rest are either tentmakers or connected to foreign mission agencies).[56]

Certainly, there are significant differences between the situations the two unions find themselves in. First, the political and social situation in Moldova is much more conducive to the Baptists' presence and mission. There is less interference from the government, no domineering church, and more practical freedom rather than declared freedom of religion.[57] Second, the percentage of evangelicals in the country is twice as high as in Russia, and due to a comparatively small size of the country, they have developed close partnerships. Further, the committee was able to receive a major donation from a U.S. foundation for the first several years of its work. Finally, their strategy has been limited by the first step, or mobilization.[58] Despite these differences, however, there are many parallels between the circumstances of the churches in

[55] Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. http://www.economist.com/node/15825734

[56] Based on personal interview with Igor Mordvinov, the coordinator of Missionary Committee at the MBU, on November 2, 2013.

[57] See http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148963.htm

[58] See appendix 1.

the two countries. The very fact that Moldovan Baptists have been able to achieve truly amazing results in a relatively short time, suggests that their experience, even if modified, is worthy of being reproduced at least in one region in Russia.

But for this to happen, the *crux of the matter* must be addressed, and this is the theological and ecclesiastical factors described earlier. For a denominational agency to flourish, the leadership of the regional unions has to *have a shared vision of mission work,* and *be willing to commit their time, finances, efforts, and talented people* from their churches to the development of this ministry. Unfortunately, as the historical survey above, coupled with the present reality (including the questionnaire in appendix 2) demonstrates, there is little *shared* vision and commitment at the present. While evangelism of the E-1 type is highly esteemed, pastors are often overwhelmed with local concerns and do not see much value in establishing additional structures for intentional sending of missionaries. Will this change in the near future?

Conclusion

This short research focuses on the past, present, and possible future of the missionary sending structures in the Baptist Union in Russia. It has not been my intention to downgrade its faithful ministers or suggest that the Baptists have not been active in evangelism. In fact, a huge amount of work has been done over the last twenty plus years, and is being done today by committed believers in many parts of the country. There are always a number of Christians who are moving to unreached regions of Russia on their own, as it were, in the "Pietist" way, despite the lack of support from any mission agency. In the Apostle Paul's words, "God does not leave himself without a witness."[59] Yet their enthusiasm could be multiplied if truly indigenous sending structures are created. Without them, many parts of Russia, especially those populated predominantly by a non-Slavic population, have been and will remain without substantial presence and witness of evangelical communities.

In his now classic work on theology of missions, David Bosch observed that the bearer of mission is the whole church, not a small, revived community inside the church, the "*ecclesiola in ecclesiae.*"[60] The same idea has been at the heart of the Lausanne Movement: "the whole church takes the whole gospel to the whole world."[61] As we all know, no war can be won only by soldiers in trenches; the whole country and its economy must work to secure victory. It is the same in missions: unless Russian church as a whole is involved in missions efforts in its diverse task and callings, there is little hope we can put an end to the shrinking of our numbers, let alone multiply disciples and church communities.

It is here that, I believe, seminaries can be of a special help: with due patience and humility, they can build and use the relationships of trust to gradually widen the horizons of missionary vision for Baptist ministers. In addition to teaching missiology

[59] David M. Howard, "Student Power in World Missions," in Winter and Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, 285.

[60] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 253.

[61] http://www.lausanne.org/content/twg-three-wholes

proper, they could use *Mission of God* as the integrative theme for classes in biblical, theological, social, and practical studies. Furthermore, we need both formal and informal seminars, scholarly and pastoral conferences to discuss and popularize important missiological topics such as *Missio Dei* as the overall plan of the triune God for the world, the missional nature of the church, God's heart for the nations, the role of missionary gifts and calling as a distinctive ministry, history of mission, Russian Baptist history told from a missiological perspective, ethics of social involvement in the changing society, the issues of intercultural communication and contextualization, strategic aspects of missions, etc.[62]

Finally, let me emphasize that I do not assume that the suggested form of a mission structure is the only, or even the best one for all the variety of contexts and churches in the RBU. In the final analysis, it is up to local leaders to decide what forms these structures should take in each specific situation. My point is that the time has come to begin *intentional* and *coordinated* efforts in developing our *own* mission work in the country. To conclude, I believe a quote from Ralph Winter will be relevant here. Although he spoke primarily about churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, I believe his point is applicable to Russian churches:

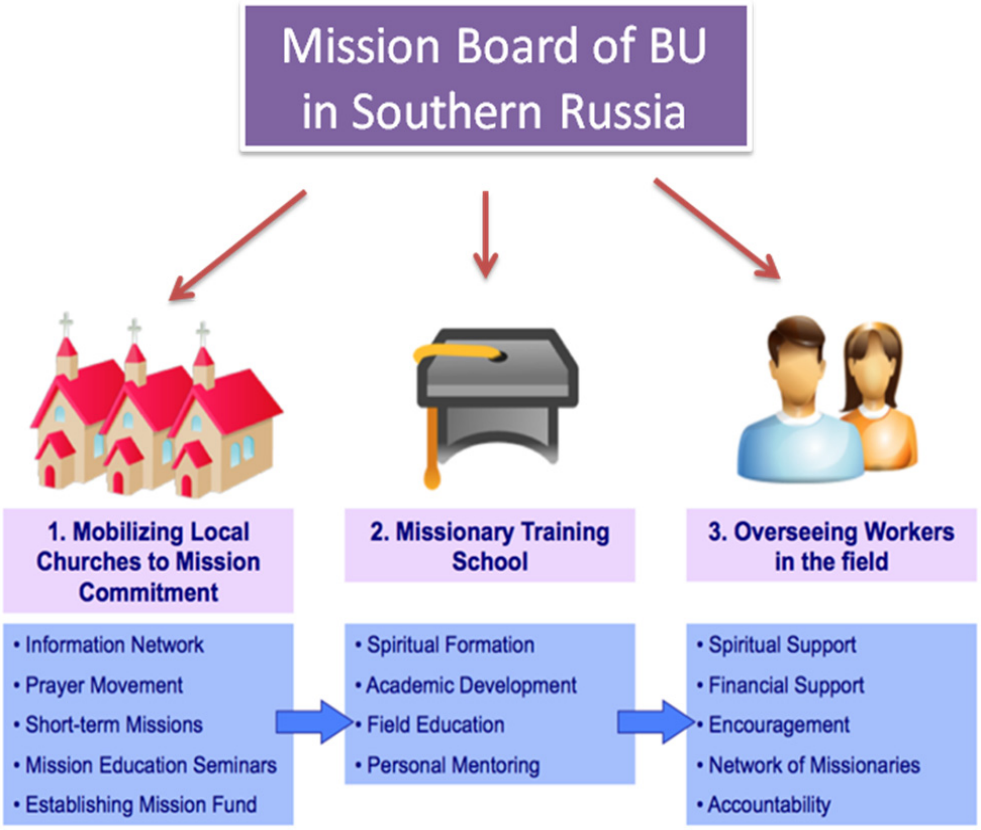
The question we must ask is how long it will be before the younger churches of the so-called mission territories of the non-Western world come to that epochal conclusion... that there need to be sodality structures, such as William Carey's 'use of means,' in order for church people to reach out in vital initiatives in mission, especially cross-cultural mission. There are already some hopeful signs that this tragic delay will not continue.[63]

[62] Sources such as "The Perspectives on the World Missionary Movement," adapted and enriched by the local insights, and the documents of the Lausanne movement, are valuable sources for this work.

[63] Winter, "Two Structures," in Winter and Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, 229.

APPENDIX 1

A Possible Strategy for a Regional Missionary Sending Structure



APPENDIX 2

The Questionnaire for the Senior Presbyters of the Russian Baptist Union. Responses are bracketed

(Conducted online by the author in October 2013)

1. Each of the purposes for the church's existence below is biblical. However, which one is more important, in your opinion?

a. To be the custodian and protector of truth (10%)
b. To share the gospel with as many people as possible (70%)
c. To be holy and protect herself from the world (10%)
d. To worship God (10%)
e. Other: ___*all of that together* _____ (1 person)

2. Are there any regions within Russia that need the workers of the gospel more than other regions?

a. Yes, these are predominantly Muslim, Buddhist, and animist regions (three pastors)
b. No, all regions need them equally (100%)

3. Are local churches sufficient to plant new churches in those regions, or we need additional missionary structures?

a. Local churches are enough (25%)
b. Additional structures needed (75%)

4. How should these structures be related to local churches?

a. Should be accountable to a local church (33%)
b. Should be accountable to regional associations (67%)

5. Are our churches capable of fully supporting mission work in Russia without outside help?

a. Yes, they are (60%)
b. No, they are not (40%)

6. Is there a need in full time or part time missionaries to accomplish this task?

a. Yes, there is (85%)
b. No, there is not (15%)

7. Does the current political situation allow for such work?

a. Yes, it does (90%)
b. No, it does not (10%)

8. Can we partner with other denominations in mission work?

a. Yes, we can (50%)
b. No, we cannot (50%)

9. Which one below is a more correct application of Acts 1:8 to our situation?

a. First, we need to make sure everybody in "Jerusalem" heard the gospel (10%)
b. We should preach the gospel both to those near, and those far away (90%)

10. When new people join the church without any previous Christian background, we should expect that:

a. They will assimilate by fully accepting the church culture (10%)
b. Unfortunately, the church will change to some degree as well (20%)
c. The church will change, but these changes can be both positive or negative (70%)

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