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# Adventist Perestroika

## An Interview with Church Leaders from the Soviet Union

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Recent events in the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe have deservedly attracted international attention. These seismic changes caused by a surge towards freedom and democracy have kindled the hopes of millions. Under the twin rubrics of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), the Soviet Union itself is undergoing a dramatic transformation. The expression of religious faith, which for decades was repressed or barely tolerated, has now become an encouraging reality.

The Seventh-day Adventist movement began in the Soviet Union during the 1880s, with the first church organized by Louis Conradi in 1886. For over a century, as the number of Adventist believers grew in most of the Soviet republics, they learned to live and worship under difficult circumstances. Recently, however, the government has allowed them to practice their faith with increasing openness.

In October 1989 four Soviet Adventist leaders traveled to the United States to participate in the church's Annual Council and to plan for the formal organization of the Soviet Division of Seventh-day Adventists. During their visit two Adventist graduate students—Gerard Latchman and Sylvia Rasi—interviewed Pastors Gregory Kochmar (president of the Moldavian Union), Michael Kulakov (president of the Russian Union), Valdis Zilgaivis (president of the Baltic Union), and Nicoli Zhukaluk (president of the Ukrainian Union). Here is a summary of their broad-ranging dialogue.

**W**hat are the major changes that have taken place in the life of our church in the Soviet Union during the last few years?

There have been so many, in fact, that it is difficult to know where to start. We shall mention three. First, our church has had the opportunity to become better organized. Our local congregations are now connected at the conference and union levels all over the country. It is our plan to structure ourselves as a division in the near future. Second, we have begun to expand the number of publications available for our members and for general distribution, importing some of them and printing others in the state presses. Third, we have been able to build a seminary and start a ministerial training program for the first time in our history. Twenty young men are now attending, and even more are studying by correspondence. In addition, Dr. Jacob Mittleider helped us to start our own Agricultural Department at the seminary. His method of growing vegetables was so successful that it attracted the attention of neighbors, specialists and the mass media. National newspapers such as *Izvestia* and *Pravda* as well as

television programs have reported on the outstanding yields of our farm.

**Is our church membership growing?**

At present there are 35,000 Seventh-day Adventists in a country of 285 million inhabitants. If we add our children and regular visitors to this number, the total may reach 45,000. We are experiencing a certain amount of growth, but it is not as rapid nor as evenly distributed across the nation as we would like it to be.

**Why is that so?**

One could mention several factors. There is a generally cautious attitude of people toward religion,

a desire not to be identified with any particular religious creed. Our church, although officially recognized, is not too well known. There has been some misinformation regarding our activities. We have had few occasions to provide accurate information about our beliefs and objectives. In addition, for lack of opportunity in the past, we do not seem ready to become engaged in active missionary work yet. As a church, we should be able to offer something positive and tangible to society. Fortunately, things are beginning to change. Many are showing curiosity and even interest in Christianity. This year we expect to double the number of baptisms our church reached in 1988.

**What kinds of publications do you use?**

As you know, we were able to import 50,000 copies of a special magazine about the family in Russian. Lately our brethren in Finland have helped us produce 25,000 copies of another publication in Russian. We publish our Sabbath School quarterlies regularly as well as the Morning Watch and the book *Steps to Christ* for our members. In addition we have published 20,000 songbooks, with and without music. We are

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message and  
mission.*

also publishing in Latvia, Estonia, Moldavia, and the Ukraine. But we are limited by the diversity of languages in the Soviet Union and by the fact that there are paper quotas for printing in state-owned presses. We are now ready to publish *The Desire of Ages* and if we can get paper we hope to print 50,000 copies. However, the need for Bibles and church publications continues to be a major concern.

**Have there been developments in the medical field?**

You probably know that until last year churches were restricted by law to spiritual activities conducted in church buildings. Now we are allowed to become involved in welfare activities for the benefit of society at large. Our members are serving as volunteers in hospitals and caring for the sick. We have also been invited to bring hope and practical assistance to the thousands of people found in jail. Non-Adventist Soviet physicians have spent some time at the Loma Linda Medical Center and negotiations are under way to bring a Loma Linda heart team to perform transplant surgeries in our country. There have also been contacts between a rehabilitation clinic in Moscow and the Adventist Rehabilitation Center in Read-

ing, Pennsylvania. It is our hope that we may establish a rehabilitation clinic in Moscow.

**Tell us about the role of young people in the Soviet churches.**

Although the average age of our members is about 40, in certain areas of the country we find larger concentrations of youth. Most of the children of Adventist families remain in the church. In addition some non-Adventist young men befriend girls from our congregations. They study, become members, and frequently marry them.

In most of the cities in the Ukraine there is currently an ongoing dialogue between students in state universities and our youth. Some of these non-Adventist students are curious about religion and the Bible; others are convinced that in order to be truly educated persons they must learn something about Christianity. A few of our young people have been able to complete advanced studies and are helping the church with their special training. Some serve as ministers; others, as teachers in the seminary. We have also a certain number of Adventist professionals who can reach out to highly educated people in our society.

**Do we have a presence among non-European minorities in the**

**Soviet Union?**

Yes. For example there are Adventists in the Asiatic republics, but not too many come from the native population, which is mostly Moslem. Fortunately these Moslems are more accessible to Christianity than their counterparts in other countries. Our challenge is to find ways of reaching them in their own language.

**What are your dreams for the Adventist Church in the various areas of the Soviet Union that you represent?**

In sunny Moldavia, our 4,400 members hope that our youth will have access to Christian education and that we will be able to print sufficient publications for our members and for outreach.

In the progressive Baltic republics, our 4,000 members need to find adequate space to accommodate our growing membership.

In the fertile Ukraine our 15,000 members dream of a true revival of the faith so that the hope of the soon coming of Christ may be broadly known.

In the Republic of Russia our 7,000 members have three desires. We need to replace the century-old version of the Bible with a new translation that will speak to modern people. We also dream of being able to share our faith with all the Russian speaking people living in areas that span eleven time zones. Our greatest desire is that this mission be accomplished by a Spirit-filled church whose members truly reflect the character of Jesus.

**How can Adventists in other parts of the world help their fellow believers in the Soviet Union?**

We ask for your prayers in behalf of our people and our nation. We invite you to visit us to bring courage and friendship. We may not be able to offer you luxurious accommodations, but there will be a warm place for you in our houses and in our hearts. We need more Bibles and publications. People come to our churches looking for Bibles and other Christian materials, but most of the time we



From left: N. Zhukaluk (Ukraine), G. Kochmar (Moldavia), M. Kulakov (Russia), and V. Zilgavis (Baltic area), with S. Rasi and G. Latchman.



The new Adventist Seminary in Zaokski, 100 miles south of Moscow.

can't satisfy their requests. We must also find ways of developing publications to reach the non-European minorities in our country.

Our young people would very much like to establish correspondence with Adventist youth who can write to them in either Russian or English.\*

**Is it fair to say that we are experiencing an Adventist perestroika?**

Indeed. There is restructuring at the organizational level of our church in the Soviet Union. There are also plans under way to build up our institutional base. But we especially need to reconstruct our own understanding of the Adven-

tist message we have been called to proclaim. We will thus be prepared to see, from God's perspective, the immense work still lying ahead of us in our country.

*(\*) Readers wishing to exchange correspondence in either Russian or English with Seventh-day Adventist young men and women in the Soviet Union may send their names and addresses to Harold and Rose Otis, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, U.S.A. They will, in turn, make them available to Soviet Adventist youth.*

*Gérard Latchman, born in Mauritius, is a doctoral candidate in Ancient History at the Université Laval, in Quebec City, Canada.*

*Sylvia Rasi is a graduate student in Applied Linguistics at Georgetown University, in Washington D.C.*

## Letters

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materialism, ethics, etc. The approach must not be simplistic, but practical and authentic. I'm looking forward to what DIALOGUE will bring in the future.

**Ron Pickell**, Chaplain,  
Terrace House Adventist Student Center,  
Univ. of Tennessee  
Knoxville, Tennessee, U.S.A.

## Facilitate Connections

A publication such as DIALOGUE was a real need that should have been fulfilled much earlier, for the benefit of Adventist students all over the world. Please find ways of helping us establish connections and friendships with our counterparts through correspondence, student exchanges, international meetings, and other activities.

**Eduard Stan**, Hochschule fur Musik und Theater  
Hannover, FED. REP. OF GERMANY

## Relieved and Encouraged

I have been following the Chamberlain case since 1980 and wondering why God had allowed this Adventist family to suffer such bitter blows. Although some questions still remain, I was relieved and encouraged to get such detailed report about their tragedy and vindication in DIALOGUE 2-1989 ("The Chamberlain Story"). We appreciate this magazine. Keep it coming!

**Mrs. C. N. Tyandela**, Medical Univ. of Southern Africa  
Medunsa, REP. OF SOUTH AFRICA

## Three Specific Suggestions

I appreciate the fact that the Adventist leadership has recognized the challenges that Adventist studying and teaching in non Adventist campuses bring to the church—both in how best to minister to them and in how they may contribute to the life of the church in the coming years.

DIALOGUE is a smart looking journal that immediately conveys the idea that care, attention, and even considerable expense have been devoted to this sector of our membership. As I read it, three ideas came to mind.

Our effort to get them on-board with the church will be more effective if we have them on-board for the effort. AMiCUS and DIALOGUE could be strengthened if the insights, contributions and energies of these students and faculty members would be effectively incorporated. They need a voice and a chance to be heard, and they want to hear from each other.

We tend to fill our committees and magazines with the voices of men. Women students and those who are now working as professional women find themselves accepted everywhere else, but feel silenced and marginalized in the church. Keep this in mind as you appoint new committee members and seek authors for future issues of DIALOGUE.

We rely almost exclusively on church employees and neglect the tremendously rich resources of our laity. Adventist professors working on non Adventist campuses understand the situation of today's students better than anybody else in the church. Admit to your circle of planners and contributors people who come with first-hand knowledge of life on the many campuses across the country—campuses that may truly be our last "dark counties" and "unentered territories."

**Iris M. Yob**  
Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A.

## Letters

DIALOGUE welcomes letters from its readers. Please limit your comments to 200 words and address them to: DIALOGUE Letters, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, U.S.A. If selected for this section, your letter may be edited for purposes of clarity or space.