

Table of Contents

- Christian Forum in Kenya
- Visit in Belgorod
- Visit to German Baptists
- National Prayer Breakfast
- Visit from Hungary
- Days of Brotherhood
- Visit to Korea
- BWA in Moscow
- Statement on Georgia

Department for External Church Relations Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the West!

As many of you know, in Fall 2006 the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) awakened its Department for External Church Relations to new life. Our new department is striving to represent Union interests to the government and to promote the creation and strengthening of interconfessional contacts in Russia and beyond.

Our heartmost desire is to not only to portray the fact that the RUECB is a serious and contemporary-minded religious organisation, but also to convince the general Russian public that this is indeed so! There are political interest groups in Russia who attempt to portray us as a foreign and even subversive entity.

Please allow us to give testimony of what our department has been involved in over the past 12 months by bringing you segments of our recent press releases:

„Non-traditional churches“ gain new recognition in Kenya

It appears that the world's tried-and-proven, historic Christian churches have opened themselves to dialogue with non-traditional churches. That was emphasized by the delegates from 72 countries who gathered in Limuru near Nairobi/Kenya from 6 - 9 November 2007 for the first large „Global Christian Forum“. The Forum's list of delegates reflected the shift of major Christian life from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere. Of the Forum's mostly high-ranking 245 delegates, over 40 belonged to a Pentecostal or Charismatic denomination.

Approximately 15 Baptists were along in Kenya. The delegation included Moscow pastor Vitaly Vlasenko, the RUECB's Director for External Church Relations. Vlasenko was one of numerous delegates who expressed reservations regarding the term "ecumenical". In Moscow he stated: "We weren't talking about ecumenism there. The WCC never did look like this Forum. It was a meeting at which we discussed how we could accept each other as Christians. Of course there are big theological and cultural differences. But we also call ourselves Christians and we want peace. We dare not disqualify any and all inter-confessional gatherings as 'ecumenism'."

In Russia itself, the Russian Orthodox Church is attempting to force out precisely those who were celebrated in Kenya: the world's up-and-coming, non-traditional churches. The Russian Orthodox

nevertheless sent three delegates to the Forum. Pastor Vlasenko reported: "Each evening the delegates met according to region. We discussed our differences and had very, very good discussions."

Delegation visits Belgorod, one of Russia's most Orthodox regions

Ioann, the youthful Archbishop of Belgorod and Stary Oskol, graciously received a Baptist delegation in his residence on 16 November 2007. The city administration also granted the Moscow-headed delegation a meeting. This is remarkable in view of the fact that the Belgorod region has in recent years gained a reputation for militant Orthodoxy. Belgorod is one of the Russian regions that has gone farthest in promoting the Foundations of Orthodox Culture subject, an initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church. Six years ago, Belgorod City Duma adopted a law prohibiting any public religious gatherings of the non-Orthodox where minors were present.



Delegation leader Vitaly Vlasenko reported that local Baptist relations with both the Orthodox church and the city administration have been virtually non-existent for five years. "We ourselves are therefore partly at fault for the poor state of Protestant-Orthodox relations in Belgorod. We must actively seek contacts and become personally acquainted with church and city officials. We must learn to host and be hosted by others."

Vlasenko pointed out that no interdenominational work - with or without the Orthodox - has been developed there. The crass social needs prevalent within society as well as the Islamist challenge demand much closer co-operation between all Christian denominations.

Russian RUECB visits the German BEFG

In a meeting between the RUECB and Germany's „Federation of Evangelical Free Churches“ (BEFG) in Elstal near Berlin on 3 December 2007 an obvious truth was repeated: Germans and Russians have differing strengths. Russians think in the shorter term: They welcome spontaneity, improvisation and creativity. That clashes with the German requirements for planning, agreement and structure.



The discussion on structures was particularly helpful. The BEFG possesses an encompassing overview: Most Federation activities are part of an overall, general budget. A department's financial plan for youth or missions is part of the general budget and requires the blessings of the entire Union. This permits a clear setting of priorities. This would mean in Russia that a department would not be dependent strictly upon the income which it could collect by itself. A department's size could not be determined by financial powers outside of the Union. Vital but financially weak departments would receive funds from central Union offices.

In Elstal, Vitaly Vlasenko also explained: „We must make clearer to our pastors and congregations the necessity of a national union.“ Regina Claas, the German Federation's General-Secretary, answered: "We do that which the local congregation is incapable of doing." These include a centralised educational programme as well as international, government and inter-church relations.

On 4 December, the two-man delegation visited the Evangelical Church in Germany's (EKD) foreign office in Hanover. They were hosted by the Russian-speaking Michael Hübner, their foreign office's Secretary for Central and Eastern Europe. This union of 23 Lutheran, United and Reformed churches has been in continuous contact with the Moscow Patriarchy since 1952. The two dialogue on issues such as theology,

society, reconciliation and diaconia (social care). Russian Baptists are interested in a fruitful exchange with Russian Orthodoxy and conversations with the EKD could be a significant help for Baptists.

Eighth National Prayer Breakfast held in Moscow

Russia's National Prayer Breakfast, held in Moscow on 18 March 2008, is bigger than ever. New records were set with over 350 businessmen, pastors and middle- to upper-level politicians in attendance. Even the nationally-respected paediatrician Leonid Roshal (Moscow), whom terrorists had allowed to treat hostages in Beslan as well as in Moscow's Nord-Ost-Theatre, was present.

"A lot of non-Protestants came to listen to us," noted Baptist Pastor Vitaly Vlasenko, Board Chairman of the National Prayer Breakfast Foundation. "Our leaders are respected, they are becoming accepted by Russian society. With this event we can testify that Protestants are an active, healthy and integral part of Russian civil society. We want to tell the nation about our work, our spiritual and moral aspirations."

Father Alexander Vasyutin (Moscow) from Russian Orthodoxy's Department for External Relations was quick to note common grounds on the issue of the family. "It is remarkable and pleasant that Christian churches can together bear witness to family values. On matters of the family and Christian values, it is imperative that we find a common language and cooperate." Senator Alexander Torshin, Vice-President of Russia's Federation Council, noted that his country's demographic crises cannot be solved and families strengthened without the cooperation of the churches."

This was the eighth Russian National Prayer Breakfast since 1995; the event has been annual since 2002.

First official Hungarian Baptist visit to Russia in 20 years

"We were very moved, the ice has been broken." That was the conclusion of Ákos Bukovszky (Szombathely), Assistant for External Affairs at the Baptist Union of Hungary, following an impromptu meeting in the Moscow seminary of the RUECB on 17 March. During that meeting, RUECB-President Yuri Sipko had fully unexpectedly requested forgiveness from Hungarian Baptists for the Soviet military intervention in Hungary.

At the request of the two guests, the scene was repeated the following day to allow it to be filmed for Hungarian state television. In the replay, Sipko stated in part: "I recall in 1956 when Russian tanks entered Budapest and the national longing for freedom was quashed by force. You suffered for 50 years under the pressures of a totalitarian regime. I on behalf of the Russian Baptists sincerely ask the Hungarian brothers and Baptists for forgiveness. Before God we can testify of our love for each other."



Kálmán Mészáros (Budapest), President of the Baptist Union of Hungary, stated at the seminary meeting on the 17th that official Russian-Hungarian relations had been "too tight for comfort" during the Soviet era. That was followed by 20 years of silence – the last official visit of Hungarian Baptists to Russia taking place in 1988. Dr. Mészáros stated in closing: "We are going home with a completely new vision. We thought Russia was far behind us. But now we see that in a number of things they are indeed ahead of us."

Days of Brotherhood in Bryansk, Belgorod, Tver and Kaluga

Rather than putting major resources into PR, the Baptists of Russia should concentrate their efforts on "mutually strengthening the relations between their congregations". They should also "plant many new congregations and improve the size and quality of their existing ones". Those are the views of one high Russian government official quoted by Pastor Vitaly Vlasenko at a pastors' conference in Bryansk on 12

April. The official had added in conclusion: If your brotherhood “would work together like the strings of a well-tuned piano and carefully organise and synchronise all of its activities, then you could become within five to ten years the kind of genuine force from which the government would be happy to hear.”

The desire for closer Baptist cooperation was also evident at this year’s sessions of the “Euro-Asiatic Federation of Unions of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” in Kiev on 9 to 11 April. Pastor Vlasenko, who had been present in Kiev, reported in his Bryansk lecture: “It is apparent to me that we Russians will soon be able to better support the church in the Central Asian countries and elsewhere.” The Protestants of Central Asia are all subject to increasing government pressure.

This initial “Day of Brotherhood” in Bryansk fulfilled a promise made by Union leadership in January to leave Moscow offices and visit pastors on-location throughout the vast regions of Russia. The response of the 120 pastors in this region southwest of Moscow was overwhelming and gratifying. Pastor Vlasenko reports that such sessions, which promise to be an exhausting exercise for Moscow staff, are to be held monthly in hopes of covering all of Russia’s 50+ Baptist regions within a five-year period. He projects: “In the end, local pastors will know us not only from our letters, but also by our faces.”

Belgorod

After an official visit in the city of Belgorod on 24 and 25 May, Vitaly Vlasenko reported that “spirits among Baptists were high and the feeling that much good could still be accomplished” was prevalent. The ice had been broken on 16 November of last year when an RUECB-delegation visited government and Orthodox representatives in Belgorod following a break of roughly five years. Vlasenko is delighted that Baptists from this city bordering on Ukraine have met since then with these government and Orthodox representatives on their own initiative. The atmosphere at those meetings was reported to be highly constructive. Vlasenko added: “This proves once again the importance of obtaining and maintaining contacts with local city and Orthodox officials.”

This visit by Moscow headquarters in an area of European Russia where Baptists are weakest was the second in a new, monthly series of “Days of Brotherhood”. After lecturing to a group of nearly 50 youth leaders during the day on 24 May, Vlasenko spent the evening with Baptist pastors from throughout the region. In his talk with them he stressed three strong reasons for the existence of national Baptist structures. Firstly, economics demand that educational and other projects be coordinated with central offices. Only in this fashion can unnecessarily repetitive work and expenditures be avoided. Church-building projects demand consultation with specialists. Secondly, checking local theological developments with the views held by experienced and trained theologians and pastors at headquarters can spare congregations unnecessary pain and division. Lastly, the Russian government can only take Baptists and other Protestants seriously if they do indeed act in unison.

Days of Brotherhood have been held since then in Tver and Kaluga; both cities are located within 200 kilometres of Moscow.

National Prayer Breakfast Board Chairman visits Korea

Future participants at Moscow’s National Prayer Breakfast will need to be ready for Moscow’s most drawn-out breakfast. That was one upshot of Pastor Vitaly Vlasenko’s attendance at Korea’s 40th National Prayer Breakfast in the South Korean capital on 15 May. The Board Chairman of Russia’s National Prayer Breakfast Foundation adds: “A few hours on a midweek morning will no longer suffice. We want to invite many more representatives of church and government to Moscow and offer them the opportunity to hold extensive conversations.”

The Baptist pastor is especially attracted to the Prayer Breakfast movement’s wholistic, international and interdisciplinary approach. He stated: “In a globalised world, all sectors of society are related to each other. The Koreans show us how vital it is that people of good will from the political, business, cultural and church realms get together informally without the rigours of protocol to do some serious talking.” This approach is also essential for the citizens of Russia, where struggle for the common good is still foreign to most. The

pastor states: "Still far too few Protestants are involved in the political affairs of this country. It no longer suffices to simply secure the welfare of one's own local congregation. Gifted young people with an eye on public affairs need to be sought out and supported in their development."

Baptist World Alliance General-Secretary Callam visits Russia

An exuberant reception by three government offices marked the first visit to Russia from 16 to 18 June of the Baptist World Alliance's new General-Secretary, the Jamaican Neville Callam. Sergey Popov, the member of the Duma (Russia's Lower House) responsible for its "Committee for Relations with Public and Religious Organisations" announced for ex. the end of any need for believers "to struggle against government power. Cooperation is the order of the day. We no longer want to prohibit your activities – we want to encourage them." A meeting with Alexander Torshin, Vice-Chairman of the Council of the Russian Federation (Upper House), ended with Pastor Callam holding a prayer mentioning "our brother Alexander". Alexander Kudryavtsev, who represents the "Administration of the President of the Russian Federation" and is Dmitry Medvedev's emissary, described Baptists in his 20 years of relating to them as "always willing to help and to answer all questions" and recommended a new "social partnership" in the struggle against substance abuse.

All three government representatives proposed joint projects. Besides the fight against drugs and alcohol, these included gatherings of businessmen and small-business creation, social projects to aid the disadvantaged and the teaching of family and moral values.



Alexander Torshin, who perhaps went farthest in welcoming the Baptist delegation, invited Callam to return for an extended visit with assistance from the Russian government. He assured that relations should extend beyond protocol and transition immediately to concrete projects: "We need good preachers of the Christian faith. We essentially do not have economic problems – we only have psychological ones." He called upon the churches to help the peoples of Russia exploit their full potential. "We want a large number of Baptist congregations throughout the country," he exclaimed. "We must support religious organisations, for otherwise our efforts cannot succeed. Nothing will be accomplished without hard work – and Baptists know how to work." He assured the government now understands "that a mono-confessional country can be a very dangerous thing". Torshin even suggested that Protestants get involved in the highly-unpopular field of Russian agriculture.

A grateful BWA-General-Secretary responded to Torshin that "we do not claim to be the sole Christians anywhere. We are not here simply to satisfy our own needs – we also are here to build community. Because of restrictions, the Baptists of Russia have not been involved in community development for a long time. It has taken some time for them to develop their courage and self-confidence, for them to believe that the doors are truly open."

The reception of the delegation by Alexius II, the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia in the Danilov Monastery on 18 June was sober and cautious in nature, yet also decidedly friendly. The Patriarch outlined the parameters for a joint front with Baptists against secularism, implying that any sanctioning of homosexual lifestyles would breach that relationship. The Patriarch appealed for a continuation of the Orthodox-Baptist consultations on moral values which had last convened in February 2007.

Callam responded by expressing his hopes for friendly relations with the ROC and a joint denouncing of the "monster of secularism". He added: "We realize that we Baptists are not the founders of Christianity in Russia. We must therefore respect and build strong relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. We need to accept each other as brothers and sisters."

Statement of the RUECB on the war in Georgia



During the past 15 years, the Baptists of Russia and Georgia have grown distant from one another. After centuries of harmonious relationships between our two peoples, we grieve the fact that our friendship is dying. We Baptists are becoming strangers to one another. We Russians are now being accused of aggression, and many of our sisters and brothers in the West do not see us believers as exceptions.

We are often at a loss as far as what to do and say. What is the real “truth” regarding the conflict between Georgia and Russia? We are very wary of the information war. Propaganda has plagued our peoples for a long time, but the war with words is becoming more refined and professional. We now hear of “spin doctors”. PR-firms describe themselves as “information warriors” and “perception managers” feeding information to journalists. So we must be very slow to make broad judgments.

We believers must rise above the fray; rise above narrow, selfish political partisanship. Georgians feel invaded; Russians feel they are protecting and defending the weak and vulnerable Ossetian people. War crimes have been committed on both sides. Let us look deeper and denounce war for what it is: a satanic expression of hatred. Wars only create losers. God is against the war in Georgia – and so we must also be.

NATO expansion as well as the Russian reaction to it are dividing Europe. NATO and its rocketry are pressing forward into the once-Soviet sphere of influence. If NATO and Russia are at odds, then the expansion of NATO can only create fear and suspicion on the other side. The war in Georgia is one result of that fear.

We want to extend the hand of friendship to our sisters and brothers in Georgia. We invite them to meet with us and talk. This also holds true for the other nations and peoples who were once part of the Eastern bloc. We must talk about the past – not in general, but how we as believers became co-guilty of the sins committed by the Soviet government. We Russians are part of a troubled heritage in which we need to bring clarification.

But we must in the same breath also talk about the future. How can we who once lived in the Soviet sphere become a great force for peace? We by no means want to fall back into the ways and conditions of the Cold War. Let us together become a mighty voice for peace and understanding. Together we evangelical Christians can help reverse the present trend which is leading us down the path of a renewed Cold War.
Abbreviation of statement from 28 August 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers!



We thank God for you and ask that you remain with us in prayer for our Union and also for our department. Please let us know if you we can be of service to you. We shall always be eager to inform you about events and developments in which our department is involved and would be grateful for all suggestions and support!

You may contact us at:

Department for External Church Relations, RUECB
117105 Moscow, Varshavskoe Shosse 29 block 2
Tel./fax 007-495-954-9231
baptistrelations@yandex.ru
Rev. Vitaly Vlasenko, Department Director