

Journal of the General Assembly
206th General Assembly (1994)
Extracts from pages 70, 74, 244, 245, & 246 (reordered/edited for flow and readability)

Assembly Committee on Global Witness and Mission Personnel

Former Soviet Union

Background

Mission always happens in a particular context. That context in the nations of the former Soviet Union has been undergoing rapid change. The end of the old regime and the opening of access to normal international relationships have brought new possibilities for Christian witness in that region. At the same time, the return of nationalism and ethnic strife and the emergence of new forms of totalitarianism have brought untold new dangers and obstacles for Christian witness.

In a changing context, Christians are called to give a clear and loving witness to God's transforming love in Jesus Christ.

However, mission in the former Soviet Union does not happen in a Christian vacuum. As European, Asian, and North American Christians have entered the former Soviet Union, they have encountered vital indigenous churches already seeking energetically to witness to God's love in Jesus Christ.

One of these churches, the non-Chalcedonian Armenian Orthodox Church traces its roots to mission work by Saint Thaddeus and Saint Bartholomew in the first century AD. The Orthodox Church came to Russia in the tenth century. Lutheran churches in the Baltic states and Russia and Reformed or Presbyterian Churches in the Carpath Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania date their history to the Reformation of the 1500's. Baptist churches were founded in most of the nations of the former Soviet Union by German immigrants during the reign of Catherine the Great. Presbyterian congregations led by pastors of Korean origin predate the end of the Cold War in many of the nations of the former Soviet Union.

Despite their differences in doctrine and liturgy, these churches all experienced the same repression during the communist era. Many of their leaders were imprisoned or martyred. Any efforts at formal Christian education and Bible distribution were prohibited. Now these churches are all aggressively taking steps to renew their spiritual life and begin again in the task of Christian witness.

Our support of Christian witness in the nations of the former Soviet Union can be a powerful sign of our oneness in Jesus Christ. However, if done in a spirit of isolation and separation from Christians who already have been long present in the former Soviet Union, our witness can become a cause for division rather than unity. It is out of Christian concern for mission and unity that this statement has been prepared.

Recommendation

The General Assembly Council, upon the recommendation of the Worldwide Ministries Division, recommends that the 206th General Assembly (1994) commend to the churches for study and implementation the following principles for Mission and Unity in the nations of the former Soviet Union.

Principles for Mission and Unity in the newly Independent states of the former Soviet Union

Principle 1: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) understands itself as a part of the whole church of Jesus Christ and accordingly subject to the mandate of Scripture to bring the Gospel to the whole world. Therefore, it understands itself and its members to be called to share with other Christians in witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the newly independent states that used to make up the Soviet Union:

1. The PC(USA) rejoices to recognize that, as a special grace to the peoples of these countries, God has raised up churches whose faithfulness has been tested and strengthened through decades of costly witness. These churches are primarily Orthodox and Baptist, but in particular places also include Roman Catholic, eastern-rite Catholic, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Reformed and Presbyterian, and historic non-Chalcedonian Orthodox churches. Presbyterians can learn much from the rich spiritual and liturgical life of these churches.
2. Among these churches, the PC(USA) rejoices to recognize and work together with sister Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the Carpath-Ukraine, Lithuania, Estonia, and Belarus.
3. The PC(USA) also rejoices to recognize and share in the work of the Gospel of fellow Presbyterians of Korean ancestry, many of whose forebearers were forcibly relocated by Stalin to Central Asia and elsewhere. Such is the wonderful grace of God, that many of the members of these churches confess they have come to the nations of the former Soviet Union by the providence of God so that they might give their witness to Jesus Christ.
4. The PC(USA) affirms, as a basis principle of its faith, that in whatever forms of ministry its members may be engaged, at the heart of that ministry is always an invitation to personal faith in Jesus Christ and to membership in Christ's church.
5. The Worldwide Ministries Division of the PC(USA) will seek and respond to invitations from partner churches in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union to support in the training and equipping for evangelism and witness of persons identified by those churches.

6. While affirming the right of all believers to propagate their faith and persuade others to accept it, the PC(USA) calls on all churches and Christian organizations to refrain from those forms of proselytism that seek to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of other churches and the poor in order to recruit new members for one's own church.

Principle 2: As part of its being as a church of God and as part of its biblical mandate, the PC(USA) will seek to encourage the unity of the church in its mission:

1. The PC(USA) reaffirms its witness in the nations of the former Soviet Union will have its greatest integrity when offered in partnership with already existing churches, including Orthodox, Baptist, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches.
2. In seeking to share in mission and witness in those nations, the PC(USA) reaffirms its commitment to the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches that provide a ready context for cooperation and shared mission with churches from other theological traditions.
3. The PC(USA) will support relief in Russia, Armenia, and elsewhere in the region, working principally in conjunction with the World Council of Churches and Church World Service and Witness of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., as well as with local organizations and bodies with an ecumenical composition.
4. Where possible, the PC(USA) will encourage Presbyterian congregations to cooperate with evangelical federations in their particular country or republic.
5. The PC(USA) affirms the efforts of some members of Yukon Presbytery and members of other churches in the State of Alaska who are witnessing to the Gospel in the Chukotka peninsula to relate their work to either Baptist or Orthodox churches.
6. The PC(USA) will participate in coalitions of international mission organizations that share its commitment to working in partnership with established churches and to encouraging Christian unity across confessional lines.
7. The PC(USA) will attempt to do its mission in a way that enhances relationships between churches in the nations of the former Soviet Union.

Principle 3: The PC(USA) will seek to enhance mutual understanding of Christians and peoples of other faiths in the nations of the former Soviet Union:

1. As the PC(USA) reaffirms it is called by Christ to share the Gospel with all people, including people of other faiths and people who profess no religion, it

recognizes that an important concomitant of Christian witness is to be consistently respectful of people of other faiths and willing to listen to their suggestions for improving the life of all people. Specifically, the PC(USA) is open to exchanging concepts and experiences of faith with people of other faiths and affirms that such sharing is a form of Christian witness.

2. Since Muslims are the majority religious community in several parts of the former Soviet Union, the PC(USA) will seek to support shared work by Muslims and Christians on behalf of the common good of society, including equitable representation in public life and equal freedom under law for all people, including equal rights to free exercise of religion, regardless of belief or affiliation.

Principle 4: The PC(USA) recognizes it has a special responsibility to lead and inform its own congregations, its presbyteries, and its synods as they respond to opportunities to do mission in the nations of the former Soviet Union:

1. The General Assembly Council of the PC(USA) recommits itself to work with congregations that share its commitment to the vision of mission and evangelism in the nations of the former Soviet Union described here.
2. As part of the General Assembly Council's new initiative for Volunteers in Shared Mission, the Worldwide Ministries Division of the PC(USA) will renew its efforts to seek invitations from partner churches for members of its congregations to serve as volunteers in placements that support the witness and life of partner churches, including Orthodox and Protestant churches.
3. The Worldwide Ministries Division of the PC(USA) will give priority in its planning to projects and programs in the region that are endorsed by our partner churches. This would include twinning congregations, work camps and travel-study seminars, shared women's work, and relief and refugee work.
4. The Worldwide Ministries Division of the PC(USA) rejoices in the special qualities and gifts of its mission personnel in the region and will offer them opportunities to do special study as appropriate in Orthodoxy, ecumenics, Islam, and interfaith relations.

gdp/18Mar2008