

**"God's Mission to Russia:  
A History of the First Five Years of the WELS in Russia"**

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## **I. Introduction**

For decades Christians have desired to find some way to bring the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to the millions of people living in Russia. The words of Paul could very easily be applied to the spiritual situation in Russia. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Ro 10:14 NIV). Ever since Lenin's rise to power in 1917 the citizens of Russia have had precious little contact with the gospel. The communist governments of Lenin and Stalin vehemently attacked religion with the goal of wiping out Christianity altogether from within the borders of Russia. With the doors closed tight to outside missionaries by atheist leaders, one can say that Russians in general have experienced a drought; not a drought caused by a lack of water or food, but a drought caused by a shortage of the Living Water and the Bread of Life.

The events of November 1989 were to communist block countries a small rain cloud on the horizon. One of the most covered news events of the eighties happened in Germany--an event which God has used to open the floodgates of the Word to the people of Russia and so end the seventy year drought. When the Berlin Wall came down it sent out a shock wave that rattled every communist block country in eastern Europe, including the largest of them all, Russia. A cry for reform, both politically and religiously, rang out from within these countries as the spirit of glosnost and perestroika caught on. These two terms stood for "openness" and "change" respectively, and became a war-cry of sorts for people wishing to free themselves of communist repression. Nobody knew what the end result would be for these countries, but one thing was sure, with the Iron Curtain lifted in Russia missionaries from the West had a window of opportunity to bring the gospel to a people who had to go without it for seventy years. When one considers how the leaders of Russia have tried so hard to stamp out Christianity over the past

seventy years it would be only appropriate to describe them as being in league with Satan. Yet even in Russia we have now seen the words of our Savior ring true concerning his church: "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18 NIV). God has made it possible for the WELS to fulfill his Great Commission in a land that for so long has seemed in the minds of American Christians impenetrable. This paper is a history of the first five years of mission activity by the WELS in Russia.

## **II. If and How? June 1990 through April 1991**

Even before the Berlin Wall fell members of our synod's Japan, Europe, Asia - Executive Committee (JEA-EC) had been considering ways to bring the gospel to the people of Russia. The crumbling of the communist governments in eastern Europe was simply the opening they had been praying for. Up until 1990 the only means available to us was short-wave radio. In fact, we had been broadcasting a program called "Dies Ist Der Tag" to German Lutherans in central Russia near China since 1983 when the program was started to commemorate Martin Luther's 500th birthday. This broadcast, however, could not reach the entire nation of Russia (Phone interview with Pastor Essmann, May 1, 1996).

It was only natural that this method was considered as our first means of operation in Russia. After a meeting in Chatham, NJ, on May 29, 1990, concerning radio work in Russia, the JEA-EC recommended that a radio broadcast into Russia might be our best option to start with. Several of the reasons given in the JEA-EC's June 7, 1990, report were: 1) A broadcast from St. Petersburg would cover all eleven of Russia's time zones. 2) Almost every Russian home had a short-wave receiver so a radio broadcast had the potential of reaching every class of people in Russia. 3) Trans World Radio, a religious broadcasting organization, gave us an opportunity to begin work as soon as possible at that time ("Outreach into Russia," BWM Russia Outreach File, p.1).

The Board for World Missions wasted no time. An exploratory trip into Moscow and St. Petersburg was conducted from January 12-20, 1991. The team comprised of Administrator

Duane Tomhave, Pastor Harold Essmann (Secretary of the Committee for Mission Expansion) and Pastor Ronald Freier (Chairman of the JEA-EC). They wanted to find out if they could receive permission to do gospel outreach in Russia by establishing Christian Information Centers (CIC's) and/or enacting a lay taught program such as "Communicating Christ." A CIC is a place where people can come to find out more about Christianity and the Lutheran church. It is a valuable tool in making our presence known in a community. Located in a vacant store or something along that line our missionaries and volunteers can meet many people curious about Christianity and invite them to Bible information classes, make gospel presentations and even conduct worship services. Finally, they wanted to see if we could place a team "on the ground" to initiate this work. They recommended that a program of radio/TV broadcasts was the best way to go. However, at that time living conditions were so poor that they advised living in Frankfurt, Germany, or Helsinki, Finland, and commute when necessary. ("Preliminary Report and Recommendations/Exploration of the Soviet Union," BWM USSR - Strategies File, p.1).

After this first exploratory mission a people profile was put together by Pastor Essmann for the JEA-EC. The statistics were alarming. It was discovered that there were only a few thousand priests and pastors in Russia to serve the nearly 300 million people. That means even if there were 10,000 pastors the ratio would still be one pastor for every 30,000 citizens. It was also discovered that the once powerful Russian Orthodox Church had declined in size from 57,000 priests under the Czars to only a few thousand in 1991. Membership in the Russian Orthodox Church was estimated at 40-50 million, but most were nominal at best. The next largest religion was Moslem <sup>Islam</sup> which had from 25-30 million members. Interestingly, the Baptist Union (which was union of Reformed church bodies of which many Pentecostals have since left) <sup>From</sup> had been active in Russia for years and had from 300-500,000 members. The only Lutherans present were Finnish and German who did little to no outreach to Russians. They mainly served their own ethnic group. The JEA-EC determined that we could gain entry into Russia and that radio/TV was still the best way to start ("Field Investigation and People Profile, February 14, 1991," BWM Stockholm/Russia Visitation File, p.1)

By April 1, 1991, the JEA-EC had devised an initial strategy. This initial strategy called for radio and/or TV to be the primary media. We would also give away Bibles at any Christian Information Centers that were opened. The target audience would be the 10-19 year old age group. Pastor Essman gave two reasons for focusing on the teenagers. "1) They were especially curious about Christianity. 2) They would be the future of the church in Russia both economically and educationally. They would be the leaders of the church. Of course, the other age groups would not be excluded from outreach" (Phone interview, May 1, 1996). The primary means of instruction would be "Communicating Christ" videos and manuals which would have to be translated into Russian. To carry out this work a Mission Coordinator would be called. God willing two more men would then be added to the field later. One would have to be theologically trained while the other could be hired to help with translating materials ("Field Strategy for Gospel Work in Russia, April 1, 1991," BWM USSR - Strategies File, p.2). The first Mission Coordinator for Eastern Europe and Russia was Pastor Kirby Spevacek. Pastor Spevacek served faithfully as our Mission Coordinator from August 7, 1991, until January of 1994. After visiting countries that once lay behind the Iron Curtain, Pastor Spevacek wrote this,

It is not an exaggeration to say that opportunities to share the Gospel in this vast region...are almost limitless...By God's grace alone, unlike most Christian groups we of (the) WELS still enjoy that Water of Life without dilution or pollution by the poison of false teaching. Now, just what are we going to do with that priceless gift? The "love of Christ constrains" us not to selfishly save it for ourselves. There are masses of people just like you "out there" - except they are lost and on the way to Hell - on every continent but also in the countries of Bulgaria and Russia. Like the man from Macedonia, some are asking us for help...While WE enjoy freedom, let's redouble our efforts to get that precious Good News out to as many as possible. The privilege to share our Savior is grace from God. ("My Word Will Accomplish What I Desire," BWM Reports - CIS File, p.2).

He and his family are still serving in our Lord's mission fields in Eastern Europe.

### **III. Where and How? February 1992 - January 1993**

The plans to conduct mission work in Russia were now set in motion. The next step was to figure out where to begin and how to carry out this work. An exploratory mission tour was made from February 9-21, 1992, to search out target areas and come up with the proper methods to communicate the gospel to these areas. (See Appendix 1 for a map of the two exploratory mission tours.) Those making the journey were Pastor Kirby Spevacek, Mr. Gary Miller (who had knowledge of the Russian language), Pastor Harold Essmann and his wife. They visited the cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg and Riga compiling a large amount of helpful information. ("First Tour into Russia, Feb.22, 1992, BWM USSR Visitation - 1992 File p.1). In speaking with Pastor Essmann on May 1, he said that altogether they travelled 10,000 miles inside Russia by way of train and plane on that trip.

Most of their specific objectives were met during this trip. They made numerous personal contacts in these cities gathering vital information on things such as living conditions, travel accommodations, Christian literature in Russia, church registration requirements and more (op.cit. p.1). Some of the potential problems that needed to be addressed were how to acquire registration and also how to gain access into Russia with the help of present churches without compromising fellowship principles (op.cit. p.2). These problems were concerns, but by the grace of God they would not prevent us from bringing the gospel into this mission field.

One of the foremost needs the visiting team discovered in Russia was the need for confessional, Lutheran literature. The team found that there was no such material in Russia. One of the personal contacts made was with Dr. Abramov, the former vice-minister of education, who headed a research laboratory in charge of developing a new curriculum for Russian schools. The curriculum for the past seventy years had been saturated with communist propaganda and "all religious references had been expunged," as Pastor Essmann put it (Phone interview, May 1, 1996). This meeting with Dr. Abramov could prove to be significant down the road. His laboratory is looking for ways to get moral, ethical and religious values back into Russia's school curriculum. He asked our team to send him any material that might help him to achieve this goal. Pastor Essmann made this comment in his report, "Think of the impact on Russian society the

WELS could have if they could and would use some of our WELS curriculum materials" ("First Tour into Russia, Feb.22, 1992, BWM USSR Visitation - 1992 File, p.4). Imagine the irony. Confessional Lutheran materials could be used to help teach almost 50 million children in a country that once repressed Christianity while in America, where there has been religious freedom, religion is banned in public classrooms. I am not in favor of prayer in public schools or anything of that nature. But I believe there is some irony to be found in all this. Could the use of WELS teaching materials in Russian public schools be one more way that our Lord will use to draw people to himself? Only time will tell since a large amount of WELS religious curriculum materials were provided to Dr. Abramov (Phone interview with Pastor Essmann, May 1, 1996).

Pastor Essmann's concluding remarks in his report on the first exploratory mission tour reflect the feelings of this team after witnessing a strong need and desire for the gospel.

There is definitely a spiritual hunger among this nation and these people. Our hesitancy to enter this field with both feet on the ground and running may cost us to lose out on many opportunities to proclaim the gospel that exist today. We may already be too late with too little. The time to work is NOW before the night comes when no one can work. May the Lord grant us strength and wisdom to march forward with vigor to lift high the cross and thus meet the spiritual needs of these desperate people. (op. cit. p.7)

With many of the preliminary questions addressed the team set out on a second exploratory tour from February 26-March 13, 1992, with the goal of finding other possible target areas. This tour took them into the cities of Rostov-on-the Don, Volgograd, Ekatrinnburg and Novosibirsk. Rostov was known as the gateway to the Caucasus and was a large industrial city with a population of 1 million. Of Rostov Pastor Essmann wrote, "Tracts were readily received...Large apartment complexes...cry out for spiritual work. A couple of empty stores in the main shopping area with hundreds of people passing by in minutes would make fine Christian Information Centers" ("Second Tour into Russia, March 14, 1992," BWM USSR Visitation - 1992 File, p.4).

The next city visited was Volgograd. Comparable to Rostov in size the prospects for mission here were as follows, "Tracts were not only well received, but people crowded around seeking them. The large population and long city provides ample opportunity to work here. Radio can be used" (op.cit. p.5).

Ekatrinburg was larger than Rostov and Volgograd by a half million people. However, it was very compact measuring only 15 miles long by 10 miles wide. Pastor Essmann's assessment of this city sounded slightly more favorable than the other areas. He wrote, "These are a friendly people eager to learn about the gospel as evidenced when we were swarmed for literature and questions were asked as we were passing out tracts. Seemingly other churches have not reached out to this city as they have in other parts of Russia. There is a large student population at the polytechnic institute where work among young men and women could be carried out" (op.cit. p.6).

An important feature to note is that very little mission work was being carried out in Ekaterinburg as compared to the other cities visited. Obviously, the larger more well known cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg were prime targets for foreign missions and humanitarian groups. In fact, there had been estimated to be as many as 200 western missionary organizations active in Russia at that time. Included were the Baptists, Slavic Gospel Association, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses, Methodists, Moonies, Robert Schuler and many more ("Intensive Investigation of Russia, March 30, 1992," BWM Russia Strategies File, p.33) Sadly, despite more than 200 organizations what was still lacking in the country was a sound, confessional message of justification by faith alone. In choosing a target area there was a desire on our part to start work where there was no other Lutheran presence and build from there (op.cit. p.57).

Finally, Novosibirsk was visited. This city of one and one half million people was located at the middle of Russia in Siberia. Contrary to the misconceptions of Americans, Siberia was not all a frozen wasteland devoid of life with the exception of a concentration camp here and there. Twelve miles from Novosibirsk was the city of Akademgorodok which had a population of 57,000. Akademgorodok had an academic center with 20 institutes. In the 1950's this scientific



center was founded by the government in order to develop Siberia and has since become internationally recognized (op.cit. p.6).

The team came out of Novosibirsk with encouraging prospects for mission work. They met with the Christian director of the local television studio and showed him the "Communicating Christ" video instruction tapes. He was so excited about the video that he offered to air it free of charge! (op.cit. p.6). But there is more. The studio at the university in Akademgorodok also offered to televise the videos free of charge. Also, while at the university, the team came into contact with KASSI International. This was an organization connected to the university which gave language instruction. They were interested in possible teacher and student exchanges as was the head of the foreign language department at the university (op.cit. p.7). All of these contacts could prove helpful for gaining access into the country. Pastor Essmann's comments regarding Novosibirsk were just as promising as in Ekatrinnburg if not more so, "There is seemingly less activity of mission agencies from the United States in this area. Television and possibly radio programs can be offered to the area free of charge to us. We would have access to work among the students of a prestigious university. The academic community offers an unusual and exciting prospect for missions" (op.cit. p.7).

By March 30, 1992, the visiting committee was ready with its recommendations to synod. They recommended that work begin in Moscow with consideration for future activity in Rostov and Novosibirsk. These were the reasons listed in their thorough report:

It is necessary to begin in Moscow first because plane flights go through Moscow, information is available there, supplies are available, government offices are headquartered there and it provides easy access to other parts of the country.

We wish to begin work in Rostov because it is a major city in southern Russia, gateway to the Caucasus, an educational center with many foreign students, and has many large cities near to it.

We wish to begin work in Novosibirsk because it is the third largest city in Russia, the gateway to Siberia, home of a prestigious

university and academic center and the geographical center of Russia.

We wish to begin work in Rostov and Novosibirsk because, unlike Moscow and St. Petersburg, there are few other denominations working in these cities. ("Intensive Investigation of Russia, March 30, 1992," BWM Russia Strategies File, p.57).

Another element of strategy recommended by the visitation team in addition to local radio/TV broadcasts and CIC's was the use of volunteers. As mission activity would unfold in Russia over the next couple years, volunteers would play roles in gospel outreach and are being used quite extensively to this day. During their exploratory tours the visiting team found out that other missions used large numbers of volunteers. One volunteer family that the visitation team encountered actually sold their home in the U.S. and was using the interest money to support themselves while working in Russia (Letter from Pastor Essmann to Kingdom Workers, July 19, 1992, p.1). We, too, saw the benefits of seeking volunteer help. We hoped volunteers could staff the CIC's and keep the missionary staffing at a minimum in addition to allowing lay participation in the mission fields (op.cit. p.58). Kingdom Workers <sup>has</sup> been a great help to us in regard to locating volunteers. In a country of 300 million people there is only so much a couple missionaries can achieve by themselves. The use of volunteers could easily double the manpower in sowing the seed of God's Word in this vast mission field.

There now remained one final hurdle to climb before gospel outreach could officially begin in Russia through the WELS. We would have to register our church body with the government. The visiting committee listed three options that we could pursue. We could register 1) as a foreign body (WELS) working in Russia, 2) as a mission agency or society in Russia, or 3) as a group working in an individual city (op.cit. p.7). The first and the third options were deemed impractical. Option 1 is said to be almost impossible to achieve and option 3 would limit our field of work to one city. The process to register via option 2 is not too difficult. This is a three step process. 1) We needed 10 or 11 people in Russia to sign a petition requesting our entry as a mission church. 2) We needed to provide a constitution with a statement of faith, by-laws, etc. 3)

We needed to have a letter of invitation from a group inside Russia (op.cit. p.7). The exploratory team made many personal contacts throughout the two tours. It was in the area of registration where these contacts would be especially important. Our team could gather all the information in world concerning living conditions and mission prospects in Russia, but without someone giving us a letter of invitation into the country that information would be of little value.

The synod now had a detailed strategy laid out with Moscow as the primary target area. But God had a different target area in mind as things turned out. We would not begin gospel outreach in Moscow, rather God directed us to the mission fields of Novosibirsk. While the JEA-EC was busy preparing strategies an interesting turn of events took place in Michigan which God used to open the door to Novosibirsk for our synod. During the initial exploratory phases of work in 1991 a Mr. Northrup from a WELS congregation in Michigan called Pastor Freier asking him for two Russian Bibles. Mr. Northrup was in the hospital supply business and came into contact with a Dr. Maria Chernyck who was completing her internship at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, Michigan. Dr. Chernyck was from Russia, and her mother, Dr. Nina Chernyck, was visiting her from Russia. As it turned out Dr. Nina Chernyck was an influential member of the faculty at the university in Akademgorodok near Novosibirsk. Pastor Freier helped Mr. Northrup as best he could, but it didn't take too long for Pastor Freier to, as he phrased it, "put two and two together." He realized that this could be the break we were looking for. Dr. Nina Chernyck had gone back to Russia before Pastor Freier could get in touch with her. But he was able to reach Maria in Lansing and establish contact with Dr. Chernyck in Russia through Maria (Phone interview with Pastor Freier, April 20, 1996).

Dr. Nina Chernyck was for us the "man from Macedonia" that Pastor Spevacek spoke about earlier. This was the Lord's way of pointing us in the right direction. The timing was too perfect for this to be labelled a chance meeting or a stroke of luck. Looking back we can see the hand of God in all this as he used Dr. Chernyck to assist us in gaining entry into Russia. Dr. Chernyck spear-headed the task of inviting us and getting us registered to carry out gospel outreach and humanitarian aid in Russia. Meeting all of the legal requirements was not a quick or

easy process by any stretch of the imagination. But with Dr. Chernyck's assistance and with the help of KASSI we were able to put a missionary in Novosibirsk in February of 1993. Missionaries and volunteers could now work in Russia on a language study visa through KASSI and after three months the visa could be renewed yearly allowing us to remain in the country indefinitely (Phone interview with Mission Coordinator John Sullivan, April 26, 1996). The registration process was not fully completed until December 3, 1993. By then a constitution and by-laws had been written for our mission and a Treaty of Mutual Activity was signed between the Christian Information Confession and the WELS. The Christian Information Confession is what gives our mission a legal basis to operate in Russia ("Letter from Malchows re: Christian Info. Confession, Jan. 28, 1994," BWM Legalizing Russia Mission - CIS File, p.1). This was not the name for the church, however. The official name for the church that would eventually form under God's guiding hand was the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church.

#### **IV. God's Mission in Novosibirsk**

Two missionaries were called to begin laying the groundwork for gospel outreach in Novosibirsk. Pastor Philip Malchow and his wife and Pastor Joel Rakos, his wife and their recently adopted infant child were the first missionaries called to serve in Novosibirsk. Pastor Malchow and Sarah arrived first in February of 1993. The Rakos' arrived in late April. Pastor Malchow described their job as "digging the hole for the foundation" (Interview with the Malchow's, April 12, 1996). Their experience finding lodging and establishing a base of operations could be described as nothing less than an adventure. In the repressed economy of Russia even what we would consider as essentials of life were hard to come by at that time. While conditions have greatly improved, the missionaries and volunteers at that time had to ship over to Russia everything they might need for the next two years. Things like aspirin, prescription medicines and even toothpaste were next to impossible to find in Russia. Several of the people whom I interviewed told me that you just have to expect everything to take about seven times longer in Russia. This could try one's patience and it did for the missionaries. Their shipment of

supplies did not arrive until May 20! That meant they all had to make do with what they brought in their suitcases for up to three months. This took its toll on the missionary team for the Rakos' infant child needed prescription medicine, most of which was in the shipment. They wisely brought a supply with them in their luggage, but that supply ran out just prior to the arrival of the shipment. Without knowing when the shipment might get there, the Rakos' were forced to return to America out of concern for the health of their child (op. cit.).

The Malchow's decided to remain in Russia in order to continue laying the groundwork. They were able to locate in Akademgorodok a three room flat to live which is the standard living quarter in Russia. Under communism everyone had to have the same so choice of living accommodations was limited to two, three or four room flats in large apartment buildings (the bathroom and kitchen are not counted as a room in Russia). They spent most of their time in this initial stage of the work completing the legalization processes, searching out living quarters for future workers, finding a place to establish a CIC and basically adapting to life in Russia (op.cit.).

In September of 1993 the first volunteers arrived to assist the Malchows. Pastor Robert Voss, retired president of NWC, and his wife Carol, along with Mr. Robert Grebe, a retired businessman from Parrish, FL, and his wife Rhoda spent almost one year in Russia. With the help of these volunteers an excellent cite was located for the CIC by Thanksgiving. Three rooms were rented in a polyclinic including a 200 seat auditorium where worship services could be held. The Voss' and the Grebe's helped hand out fliers which invited people to learn about Jesus and also offered a free Bible (Phone interview with Pastor Voss, April 15, 1996). In Russia it was legal to place fliers directly into mailboxes. A whole apartment building housing thousands of people could be canvassed in a matter of hours by only one couple (which is not to make it sound as if this work wasn't taxing). Soon the CIC was conducting 29 classes a week using the "Communicating Christ" course (op.cit.). Robert Grebe's favorite passage in the Bible is John 20:21, "As my Father has sent me, I am sending you" (NIV). For him it was a joy to see people literally standing in line to be instructed about their Savior ("Gospel Springtime in Russia" video, April 1994). Pastor Voss described their experience in Russia in this way, "The work here is

delightful...There are people here who are hungry, and we have the Bread of Life" (op.cit.). In January of 1994 the first worship services were held in the CIC. The Lord was truly blessing this fledgling mission.

The main means for conveying the gospel remained the CIC. The initial hopes of using radio and/or TV had fallen through. The director of the television studio in Novosibirsk had moved to Canada so our initial contact there was lost and the studio in Akademgorodok closed (Interview with Pastor Essmann, April 14, 1996). Steps were taken to be ready should another opportunity arise. Pastor Voss helped edit the "Communicating Christ" video series so that it could be shown on television if need be. The original Russian copy was made in America and the scenes, especially pictures of houses instead of flats, was inconsistent with life in Russia (Interview with Pastor Voss). Our mission proceeded cautiously in the area of radio and television work. In the visiting team's thorough report of March 30, 1992 they warned that radio work must be carefully planned because of the possibility of an overwhelming response. They wrote:

To offer specific literature on a national radio broadcast may swamp us. We need to think this through carefully. One nationwide broadcast offer resulted in such a response that they had train carloads of mail. The government asked the mission agency to sort the mail and give the government that which was directed to the citizens of the city. The agency has not as yet answered mail received in 1989, three years ago. Needless to say, we will have to confine ourselves to local broadcasting in places where we are working or offer a generic response to anyone who writes in if it is a national broadcast ("Intensive Investigation," BWM Russia Strategies File, p.8).

So until the opportunity afforded us to conduct radio broadcasts properly and with the right manpower on hand to process responses, the mission resorted to the use of CIC's almost exclusively.

In January of 1994 Pastor John and Maria Sullivan arrived in Akademgorodok. Pastor Sullivan replaced Pastor Spevacek as the full-time Mission Coordinator for Russia. In February

Nurse Linda Phillips arrived for two months as a volunteer to explore the need and possibilities for humanitarian aid. In Russia the medical profession was at least fifteen years behind America, and Aids had quickly become an epidemic because doctors frequently re-used needles.

Among the missionaries the Lord was richly blessing their efforts in the Novosibirsk area. On July 4, 1994, congregation life officially began with the confirmations and baptisms of 13 members who had completed their instruction courses. This must have been a truly joyous occasion for all those who had labored so hard. For Russians to make this kind of a commitment was a huge leap of faith worked by the Holy Spirit. Most Russians claimed membership in the Russian Orthodox Church. Even if they were members only nominally and were basically unshepherded, it was still taboo to leave the Russian Orthodox Church. It had become a matter of nationalistic pride. Many people took the time to come to the CIC for their free Bible and even sat through classes, but most still chose to remain Russian Orthodox in name (Interview with Malchow's). Thus, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church made its beginning with 13 communicant members, though the name was not officially adopted until an October voter's meeting (E-mail correspondence with Pastor Oblender, April 26, 1996).

In August of 1994, <sup>Pastor + Mrs.</sup> the Voss<sup>r</sup> returned to America and the Grebe's followed in November. During the month of August a changing of the guard took place. Pastor Malchow received and accepted a call to Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. The Lord richly blessed their one and a half years of service in this difficult environment and no doubt will continue to do so as they serve him in the States. The Malchow's stayed long enough to help their replacements get settled in. On August 12, 1994, Pastor Wayne and Betsy Oblender along with Pastor Darren and Naomi Green arrived as missionaries. Accompanying them on the flight over was Teacher Arlin Bornschlegel and volunteer Mickie Bryk. Mickie came to start a Christian Counseling Center for pregnant women (E-mail correspondence with Pastor Oblender, April 26, 1996, p.1). As was noted earlier, there is a great need for humanitarian aid in this country as well as spiritual nurturing. In December 1994, Bill and Martha Merten volunteered for three months of service. In April 1995, volunteers Brad Mattes and Ann Warner came to give presentations against

abortion. May the Lord continue to move caring WELS Christians to volunteer for service by applying Christian truths to meet the counselling needs of people around the world.

By September of 1994 the missionary team was making plans for expansion outside of Akademgorodok into Novosibirsk, Barnaul, Tomsk, Biisk, and Irkutsk (in that order). In order to achieve this goal two couples per summer would have to be called so that they could receive language and cultural training (op.cit. p.1) Things have not progressed quite as planned, but remember, in Russia things take seven times longer than in America.

However, things were progressing very well in the Akademgorodok congregation. They had begun offering "advanced" classes for those who already completed the "Communicating Christ" courses. Pastor Oblender taught Old Testament history. Darren Green taught a class on Paul's epistles and Pastor Sullivan taught church history and Luther's Catechism. During spring of 1994 the Bible class saw as many as 122-139 students in one week. In October of 1994 there were 32 people registered for the "Communicating Christ" course and 18 for the other classes. During the months from March to October church attendance was averaging in the high forties. The numbers typically dropped during the summer months so that people could care for their gardens which were necessary as supplements to their food supply. From October 1994 through January of 1995 the average worship service attendance remained in the high forties with 70 people taking the Bible classes. On Christmas of 1994 they had 235 in attendance! (op.cit. p.2).

In February 1995, the Lord gave them some unexpected visitors. Some deaf people began attending worship services so the church hired a signer for them. Word spread throughout the deaf community so that by 1996, 10 - 12 deaf people were attending each week. On April 7, 1996, four deaf people were confirmed along with their signer (E-mail correspondence with Pastor Ewart, April 22, 1996, p.1). In March of 1995, the church hired two Russian men named Igor and Constantine. These two young men were interested in becoming pastors so the missionaries began seminary training. They meet once a week with the pastors and teacher for instruction. Pastor Green taught Principles of Education, Teacher Bornschlegel taught Bible



History, Pastor Sullivan taught the Catechism and Pastor Oblender taught basic Greek (E-mail from Pastor Oblender, p.2).

In early summer, 1995, two more volunteers arrived to help further the spread of the gospel. Phil Hyssong helped tape a new "Communicating Christ" instruction series that was more up to date. This work was completed in August. Teacher Allan Hess came to Russia for a one year stint beginning in June. He taught a topical Bible class called "Science and the Bible." Needless to say this was a popular class in the university town of Akademgorodok. In addition to having an updated "Communicating Christ" video in August, the church held its first VBS. As many as 60 children attended along with 12 adults (op.cit. p.2). In July of that summer our synod officially accepted Russia as a mission in convention. (See Appendix 2 for a copy of the synod resolutions.)

Pastor Oblender summed up his first year in Russia like this:

The Lord has blessed this mission with gifted workers and volunteers, with two talented men who want to become pastors, with a Sunday School that has taught many children and parents the joy of God's Word, with many people who have attended the Bible classes with enthusiasm and faithfulness, with a group of deaf people...who regularly attend worship services and Bible classes, talented interpreters, and most important of all...His all-powerful Word!!! (op.cit. p.3).

In September 1995, Pastor and Jenny Ewart and Pastor Ted Wendt arrived in Akademgorodok as permanent missionaries. Pastor Robert Mueller and his wife arrived at the same time as one year volunteers. At that time Pastor Darren and Naomi Green returned to America along with Mickie Bryk. In November volunteer George Crocevera arrived to lend his services. Things ran along smoothly, at least as smoothly as one can hope for in this ever-changing environment, until the lease on their CIC ran out in January 1996. They had a hard time finding a new location and just when things started to look bleak the Lord answered their prayers. If one thing Americans had to learn while in Russia it was patience. A school called them and

offered them a vacant portion of their school building complete with more than enough room and their own entrance (E-mail with Pastor Ewart).

In mid-February 1996, they finally opened a second CIC in Novosibirsk. Teacher Bornschlegel and volunteer Pastor Mueller manned this center. Currently 31 people take classes there and the first worship services were held on April 21 with 13 in attendance. On March 25 a "satellite" center was opened in Ishkitim. They currently hold classes only once a week with about 19 people attending the classes.

All of these volunteers could tell their fair share of horror stories, challenges and difficulties that they faced while serving our Lord in the mission fields of Russia. But far outweighing the challenges are the spiritual blessings that they are seeing the Lord give to these people, many of whom are hearing the truth of the gospel for the first time in their lives. Pastor Ewart's experience with one old man helps put into perspective the harvest that our Lord is reaping in this former communist block country. Pastor Ewart wrote,

I really enjoy teaching the classes. The reaction of one man, especially, makes it all worth while. In our first lesson, we go through a basic Law/Gospel presentation. Many people don't have a visible reaction to the Good News, but one old man sure did. He listened attentively through the entire presentation, and by the end, his face was beaming, and he had a smile from ear to ear (something VERY strange for a Russian!). After the class he was shaking my hand, and thanking me over and over for sharing with him what Christ did for us. He just couldn't seem to stop smiling!...It was good to know that the Holy Spirit had reached his heart. We hope to reach many more like this man! (E-mail correspondence, April 14, 1996).

In addition to the spiritual blessings God is blessing them physically and materially as well. In January 1995, the Oblenders were blessed with the gift of a healthy baby boy, Nicholas. Greatly aiding them now that the mission field is expanding outside of Akademgorodok is the purchase of several automobiles. After hearing the Malchows relate some of their experiences on buses, I'm sure everyone presently in Russia are cherishing private transportation.

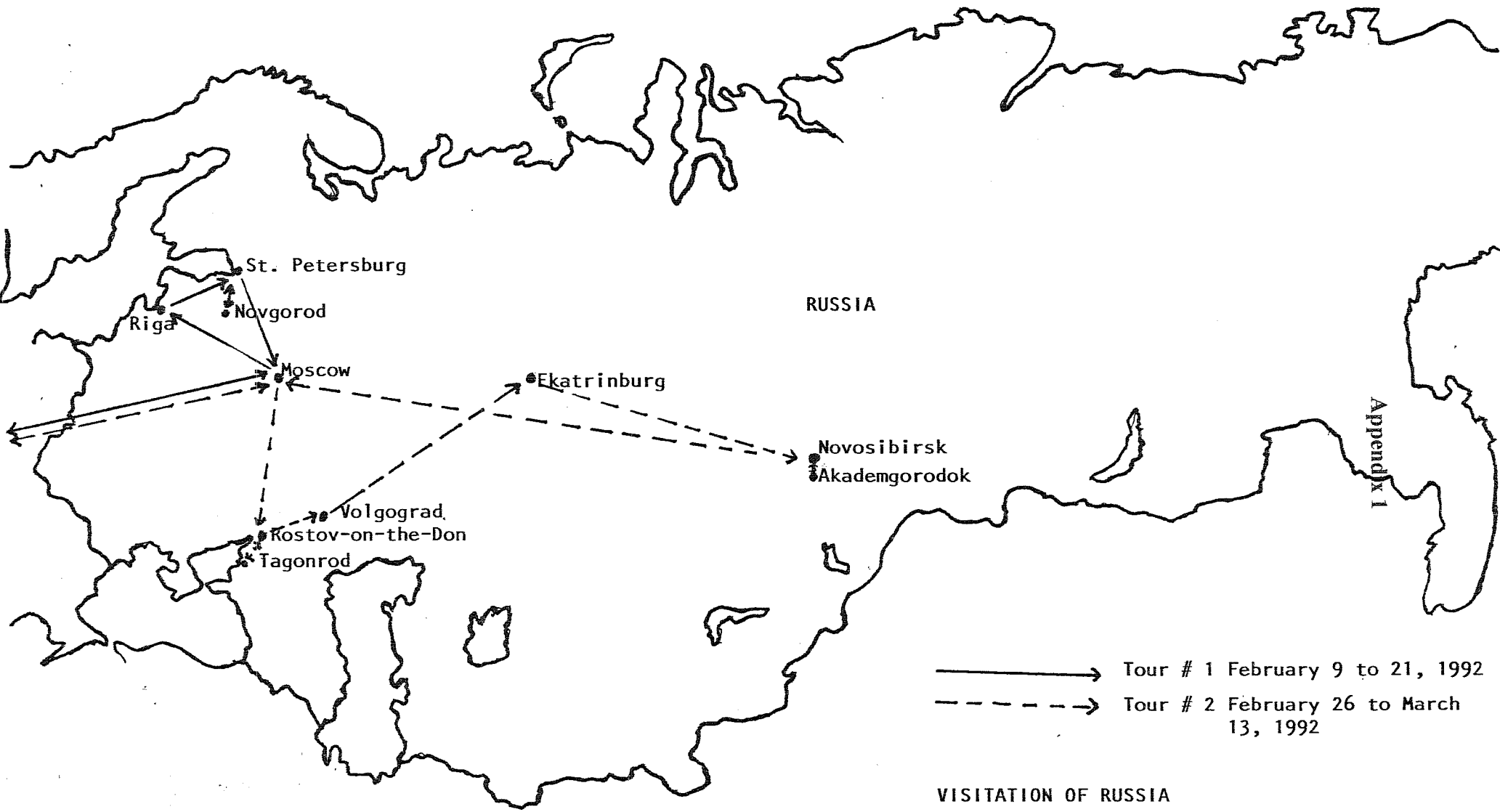
## V. Conclusion

Indeed, at present opportunities abound to reach many people with the saving message of Christ crucified, risen and living. But in Russia the political scene can change at any time. What a gracious privilege we in the WELS have been given by our Lord to be able to reach out to people who were regarded as untouchable not too long ago. There was a time in America's history that mission societies in Europe were sending pastors to America to meet our needs for pastoral care. Now the tables have turned so that we are sending ambassadors of Christ over seas to Eastern Europe and Asia to meet their needs. In January 1991, Pastor Essmann in his report, "The Condition of the Church among the Soviets" quoted these words of Administrator Tomhave after their very first visit to Moscow:

As we look out over the Soviet Union with its long history and its many monuments to the accomplishments of man, we also realize that the Lord is in control. We ask that he would give us the understanding and wisdom to know what might be possible to reach the 290 million people of the Soviet Union, some of whom are searching in a way never before possible for some spiritual truths and some eternal meaning to life. You and I, who have the answers in Christ Jesus, look beyond the works and monuments of men and we hope to bring to these hearts and souls the message that Christ died for all. In a time when politics and economics don't look so well for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, we feel that there is a window of opportunity that is open now and we don't know how long. We thank the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for the privilege of being on the scene and being your representatives to find the entrance means to this culture so that we might determine, under God, what he would have us to do to bring the message of salvation to the USSR" (p.3).

Five years have gone by since these words were written. A lot has taken place in the past five years. There is a lot more that can be accomplished in Russia under God's guidance and with his blessing. The Lord is ushering in a "Gospel Springtime" in Russia. The seventy year drought is over for the time being. Though many people are living in poverty in Russia, the perils of physical poverty pale in significance when compared to the eternal consequences of hell which millions of Russians could experience by not knowing who their Savior is. Our missionaries and

volunteers, therefore, have an incredible mission before them. They can offer these poverty-stricken people the one thing they desperately need more than anything else. They can offer them the Bread of Life and Living Water. They can say to them, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without cost...Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live" (Is 55:1,3 NIV). We have seen a great harvest already in Russia in just five years of mission work. For that we thank God and marvel at the grace he has to give to people of all races, tribes and nations through the salvation won for us by Christ Jesus. Russia is just one more place where we see these words of Isaiah coming to fulfillment: "See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor" (Is 55:4,5 NIV).



("Intensive Investigation of Russia," Russia Strategies File, p.2)

## Appendix 2

### World Missions Report of Floor Committee No. 10

Reference: BORAM--pp. 50-52

Subject: *New World Mission Fields*

Resolution No. 1

- WHEREAS 1) the Committee for Mission Expansion (CME) was created to assist the Board for World Missions (BWM) in expanding the world mission outreach of WELS; and;
- WHEREAS 2) the CME has identified 28 different areas where initial exploration has been completed, is underway, or is under consideration; and
- WHEREAS 3) five promising fields have been incorporated into the program and budget of the appropriate executive committees of the BWM (Bulgaria, the Dominican Republic, India, Russia, and Thailand); therefore be it
- RESOLVED a) That the synod in convention ratify the decision to incorporate these five fields into the world mission program of our synod, so that the promises of our Savior may be heard in these lands.

ADOPTED

Reference: BORAM--pp. 57-59

Subject: *Mission Outreach to Japan, Russia, and Bulgaria*

Resolution No. 4

- WHEREAS 1) the Lord has blessed the growth of the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church (LECC) in Japan through baptisms and confirmations and continues to bless them as they continue to achieve financial autonomy; and
- WHEREAS 2) the Lord's power has been evident in the establishment of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) in Russia, in the establishment of a Christian Information Center there, and in his gift of two Russian seminary students; and

WHEREAS 3) we want to note the dedication and contribution of pioneer missionary Philip Malchow and his wife, Sarah, as well as the volunteer work of Robert Voss and Carol Voss and of Bob and Rhoda Grebe; and

WHEREAS 4) the Lord has blessed the Lutheran Church of Bulgaria by providing for the establishment and registration of this church body, and by providing opportunities for mission outreach in Sofia, and through his encouragement of this church with two seminary students; therefore be it

RESOLVED a) That we urge the people of WELS to continue to pray for the spreading of the Gospel by these church bodies in their respective areas; and be it finally

RESOLVED b) That we encourage the people of WELS to continue to thank the Lord for all the faithful missionaries and volunteers he gives his Church.

(Proceedings of the Fifty-third Biennial Convention: WELS, Milwaukee: NPH, pp. 88-90)

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