

The Bulgarian Lutheran Church:

A brief history of the Wisconsin Synod mission in Bulgaria and its transition to independent church body

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Foreign mission work has not always been a big priority for the Wisconsin Synod. Even today the leaders of the synod work to maintain a balance, to pursue gospel ministry in many different fields. Because of financial, practical, or legal considerations foreign mission work can't always be the foremost priority of this church body. Yet in the early 1990s the Wisconsin Synod made another big push to expand mission efforts, especially in Asia and Eastern Europe. The WELS mission in Bulgaria was one such new mission begun in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, due to a number of financial and cultural issues a few years ago, the Wisconsin Synod's relationship with the church in Bulgaria became very strained and much more limited. Despite the troubles that have arisen since the establishment of the mission, and the problems that still exist today, the Gospel continues to be preached there.

This paper will make use of the knowledge and experiences of missionaries and synodical board members to examine the Lutheran church in Bulgaria, the cultural challenges to sharing the Gospel there, and the struggles the church has faced as it has grown from being a mission of the Wisconsin Synod to being an independent church body, the Bulgarian Lutheran Church.

The Wisconsin Synod establishes a mission in Bulgaria

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a vast new mission field opened up. Communism for years had kept Christians missionaries out of Russia and Eastern Europe. With the fall of the communism and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the governments and law that had kept Christianity out of the Soviet Union were gone. In 1989, the Wisconsin Synod in convention resolved to make the people of the Soviet Union a concern for the Board for World Missions. At that point the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee began to make plans to begin mission work in the Soviet Union.

From 1992 to 1995 Pastor Harold Essmann, along with other pastors and missionaries visited several countries in Eastern Europe: Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and Macedonia. In September 1992, Pastor Essmann traveled to Bulgaria with Pastors Kirby Spevacek and Don Fastenau to investigate establishing a mission there. The general goal of their visit was to “spread the gospel of free grace in the country of Bulgaria.”¹ The specific goal of their visit was to determine what areas, target groups, and methods should be used. Therefore their objectives were as follows: “To consider having missionaries on the field, To use radio and/or television, To provide the printed word, To place instructors in educational agencies, To train national workers, and To investigate alternative mission methods.”²

Their trip was successful in many respects. In the course of their trip they came to a number of conclusions. Pastor Essmann related them this way:

- 1) The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was divided between the old guard and new leaders. We should enter the country immediately before the Orthodox Church recovers.
- 2) Present Protestant churches were splintering. Old believers were not accepting new converts. There were too many independent congregations and pastors. It would be better to start out new.
- 3) Reception of the gospel was cooling off, yet there was an openness on the part of the people.
- 4) We need to work through the Bulgarians. The Bulgarians are a skeptical and conservative people.
- 5) Work among the Turks and Gypsies was indeed possible.
- 6) The method of using evangelistic crusades did not work and it was outlawed in some areas of Bulgaria.
- 7) To be an effective church one needs to be a teaching and equipping church.³

Upon his return, Pastor Essmann presented a report about the investigative trip to the Japan Europe Asia Administrative Committee, the Committee for Mission Expansion, and the Board for World Missions. He recommended that Bulgaria be included with Russia as a possible

¹ Essmann, *They Lived on Another Planet* (188)

² *Ibid* (188)

³ *Ibid* (115)

mission field. And so, in January 1993, Pastor Kirby Spevacek moved with his family to Sofia, Bulgaria as the first missionary of the Wisconsin Synod's new exploratory mission there.

The work of the WELS Mission in Bulgaria

The Wisconsin Synod over the next decade called a number of missionaries to serve in Bulgaria and established a number of programs in Bulgaria. Many of these programs were based around humanitarian aid. This strategy made sense at the time because other church bodies performing mission work in the area were functioning in this way with moderate success. Offering humanitarian aid also would provide an excellent avenue for evangelism, as well as allowing the mission to address the physical needs of those who gathered to hear the Gospel.

The Bulgarian Medical Mission of Mercy was established in 1994 with a program for assisting the elderly, and with a humanitarian aid store. Coming out from under Soviet rule, Bulgaria still suffered economically, and there were many Bulgarians that lacked even basic needs. The Mission of Mercy would provide food and medical care for those who needed it. Often Bible Information Classes would be offered at the Mission of Mercy locations as well. The hope was that Bulgarians attracted by the prospect of medical or food assistance would also be willing to a missionary speak about the Bible. Any exposure at all, is better than no exposure.

The Bulgarian mission also focused on printed material such as tracts and translations of the Bible and Catechism. During the initial investigation of Bulgaria by Pastor Essmann, he and his team distributed 7500 tracts. The people to whom the tracts were offered were generally curious enough to take the tract and read it, and some even sought out such information. Even after the establishment of the mission, such tracts continued to be helpful as a simple and less confrontational form of evangelism to the conservative, private Bulgarians. There is not as much interest in Bulgarian translations of the Bible. As Pastor Essmann reported, "Bulgarians are not

acquainted with the use of the Bible because the Orthodox Church does not recommend use of the Bible on the part of the laity. Therefore, the Bible must be explained to them.”⁴

Yet Bible and Catechism translations continued to be useful tools for the missionaries in efforts such as at the Christian Information Centers. These centers were established in the larger cities such as Sofia and Varna to provide information to those unfamiliar with the Bible. These Christian Information Centers held regular Bible Classes. They initially served as worship locations before the mission had church buildings. They held Sunday School classes, distributed printed material in Bulgarian, and taught English as a Foreign Language classes. The work done at these Christian Information Centers was considered vital to the Bulgarian mission because they provided a number of opportunities to expand knowledge of Scripture in a people that were largely biblically illiterate.

As mission work expanded, the Wisconsin Synod called a number of other missionaries to serve in Bulgaria. The first missionaries to serve in Bulgaria were Pastors Kirby Spevacek and Daniel Kelm, assisted by Pastor Harold Essmann. Over the next decade many other pastors also served as missionaries. Pastors Gregory Bey, Michael Bartsch, Arno Wolfgramm, Gary Haag, John Roebke, Eric Verstein, Paul Metzger all served in Bulgaria.

The majority of the work done by the Bulgarian mission happened in Sofia, near the western border of Bulgaria. Yet, in 1999, a Christian Information Center was established in eastern Bulgaria, at Varna, along the coast of the Black Sea. One of the missionaries would move to Varna to focus his work there. In 2000, Bulgarian Pastor Vacil Bunkin was ordained and called to work in Vidin in the northwest corner of Bulgaria. Pastor Bunkin was the first graduate of the Lutheran Bible Institute and Seminary in Bulgaria. The Bible Institute and

⁴ Essmann, *They Lived on Another Planet* (102)

Seminary were established in 1996 for training Bulgarians to serve as national pastors. Vacil Bunkin was the first student there. The Seminary established by the missionaries in Bulgaria has graduated and ordained a number of national pastors since it was established: Vacil Bunkin, Strahil Naidenov, Todor Ganchovski, and Rado Radoslov. Additionally, Rado Radkov is on currently enrolled in the Seminary.

Challenges to sharing the Gospel in Bulgaria

Yet despite the opportunities and apparent growth in Bulgaria, the church has faced many obstacles to sharing the Gospel there. The many differences in culture are very likely the biggest obstacle and many of those differences are connected to communism. Communism and the Soviet Union had an immense impact on Bulgaria many years, and though their presence is fading in Bulgaria, it is still felt there. Communism had left much of Bulgaria impoverished. Bulgarians don't enjoy the wealth or leisure that most Americans enjoy. And decades of communist rule has not nurtured the desire to deal with that poverty in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian culture does not appreciate the American work ethic. It's not part of their culture, especially among the poor lower class, to value "hard work" the way it's revered in America. From their point of view: "What difference does it make if the dictator is a communist or a king? They're just not going to do much of anything. And they eke along on the edges of society."⁵ Independence and other "American" values are also not valued as highly. They lived for years under dictatorial rulers, and that's what they know how to deal with. Scott Uecker, former member of the Europe Administrative Committee, described the prevalent attitude this way: "The Bulgarians do not value the independence and the ability to vote. They would rather be told what to do and complain about it. If you expect them to make a decision about

⁵ Uecker Interview

something, they really struggle with that. They would prefer to avoid the responsibilities, because then they know that you're held responsible for what happened."⁶ Such an attitude isn't sinful or contrary to the healthy growth of a church, but they are challenges that American missionaries had to deal with in Bulgaria. An American Lutheran church will not look like a Bulgarian Lutheran church.

Many Bulgarians are educated and literate, yet very few have much knowledge about the Bible or Christianity. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church has survived Communism, but it has not promoted the Gospel message of free grace or biblical instruction. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church claims a history going back to the first century A.D. when Christian communities were established in the Balkan Mountains. "After the adoption of the Christian faith by Prince Boris I (865), Christianity became the official religion in the Bulgarian State."⁷ Approximately 82% of Bulgarians claim to be members of the Orthodox Church. Though Bulgarian Orthodoxy is not the official state religion, it is the traditional religion of Bulgaria, and in the eyes of most being a Bulgarian means belonging to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church remains a force to be reckoned with. They have a large presence in the government of Bulgaria, and though they do not actively oppose the Bulgarian Lutheran Church, they do not make life easy for any of the church bodies attempting to establish new missions in Bulgaria, at times taking such tactics as refusing to allow construction of a church.

But above all, the cultural differences between Americans and Bulgarians brought the biggest challenges for Americans doing mission work there. Most Bulgarians simply weren't used to dealing with Americans or didn't trust them. One Missionary expressed the difficulties in communicating with Bulgarians this way:

⁶ Uecker Interview

⁷ Official BOC website

There was a lot of apprehension about Americans being there, curiosity. They had been forbidden from speaking with foreigners for many years, some of them their whole lives, and so now to be able to freely speak with foreigners was something that was completely new to them. There was a lot of control over their thinking, and that was difficult to deal with. They had a process of only telling the truth to people that they knew and trusted very well, and if it was anyone else, they just wanted to find out what you wanted to hear, and they would make sure to tell you that, and that had a deep impact on our mission.⁸

Conflict between Bulgarians and Americans

The departure of the American missionaries from Bulgaria was not an over-night development. Unfortunately, there were tensions between the American missionaries and the Bulgarian leaders in the church for a few years. The cultural differences played a role in these disagreements, yet it was largely a difference in vision between the Americans and Bulgarians. The Bulgarian church was still very young and it dealt with the challenges it faced in a different way than might seem natural to an American pastor.

The eventual goal of the mission was to grow the Bulgarian church into a thriving, self-sufficient church: one that focused on strengthening its members and growth through outreach. Yet for the Bulgarian pastors there seemed to be more a focus on mere survival, and there is no denying that the existence of the Bulgarian Lutheran Church seemed tenuous at times. Yet disagreements in ministry plans and philosophies drove a wedge between the national pastors and the missionaries that was difficult to deal with. Mr. Scott Uecker described the situation this way.

There was quite an argument between them. The Americans want to go down and start a new mission (in the south-central part of the country) and the Bulgarians didn't want it. In the south-central part of the country there is a large city connected with Sofia by interstate and the Bulgarians did not want to start that mission and the Americans said they were going to start one anyhow.⁹

⁸ Bartsch Interview

⁹ Uecker Interview

The Bulgarian pastors made the argument that they did not want to start the mission because they did not want to be spread out. They were concerned about replacing the older Bulgarian pastors once they were ready to retire. Though the Seminary had seen a few students, the pastors did not believe there was enough growth to sustain another church in Bulgaria. The American pastors simply said that since it was an American program run with American dollars, if they wanted to start a new mission church, they would do that. When the Bulgarian pastors heard this, they dug in their heels in a minor issue in order to get what they wanted. The Bulgarian pastors refused to sign off on the visa application extension of Missionary John Roebke. And when the Americans tried to force the Bulgarians to do it, they still refused. “There were really some very heated exchanges at the time. And some things were said by the Bulgarians that should not have been said by called workers. And some things were said by the Americans that should not have been said by called workers. So it was going to be a rift, and, in my opinion, there wasn’t going to be a happy ending from this.”¹⁰

From the perspective of the Europe Administrative Committee, there was really no way back from this point. The relationship between the American missionaries and the national pastors had degraded too far and there wasn’t an easy way to ease those tensions as they existed. There was no longer any brotherly cooperation between the two groups. The American missionaries insisted that “their role was still critical in the development of this fledgling church body. They did not feel that the leadership of the BLC had displayed the maturity to be able to handle its own affairs with integrity.” On the other hand, the national pastors insisted they would run *their* church as they wished. It was a difficult decision to make, but the Board for World

¹⁰ Uecker Interview

Missions decided to recall the remaining missionaries from Bulgaria, and seek other ways to support the church there.

It's difficult to determine when a Christian has reached maturity. And when Christian mission sets the goal of passing off leadership to the national Christian church, the issue of maturity or immaturity can become even murkier. Yet, as history has shown, when one is working with a fellow Christian who has less understanding or a faulty understanding about something, it's unwise to move forward and hope you can teach them better along the way. It just doesn't often work educate as you go. Scott Uecker expressed his feelings about that relationship between missionary and national pastor this way: "If we want the national church to become an independent church and they make a decision that runs contrary to what our WELS guys want to do, it's still their church. We're there to help them, and if, when we leave them, whether it's 2004 or 2014, if they don't want that mission down there, in my opinion, it was their call."¹¹

In hindsight, it seems that perhaps some of the problems arose between the groups because of the way that mission work first began in Bulgaria. The mission had focused first of all on the poor, those with physical needs. The Holy Spirit blessed their work, and the church grew, yet the majority of the church was older and poorer. There wasn't as much ambition to grow and do evangelism among the national pastors or the members as the missionaries had hoped. Scott Uecker explained,

When we were working with these people, it turned out that it wasn't going to grow fast like Americans hoped it would. They weren't going to take financial responsibility for themselves. It still bothers me today to see when we go to India, for example, we're working with orphanages and old folks' homes. They certainly need our help, but if we start working with those people and then we have the expectation that at some point in time they're going to start contributing, and start supporting their own church and pastor,

¹¹ Uecker Interview

it's pretty unlikely. It's the lowest level of society that's always the most willing to change to something new and the mid levels and the upper levels that are tough to crack because those people either have a hope of success in the society as it's structured or are successful in that society and they're not looking for change.¹²

It is unwise to try to assign blame to either side in the conflicts. Mistakes were made and there may have been ulterior motives involved in some cases, yet we can rejoice that God's Word continued to be proclaimed. It was very unfortunate that relationships broke down between the called workers in Bulgaria the way they did, but the Wisconsin Synod had to act so that Gospel proclamation could continue, and the budget shortfall in 2004 provided the impetus for a change in the relationship between the Americans and Bulgarians that many hoped would solve their problems.

Independence, of a Sort

When the financial situation in the Wisconsin Synod demanded cuts of some sort, the World Mission Board studied its options. They determined that they needed to recall a number of missionaries, and their options were to spread out the cuts, to recall a one missionary each from several different fields, or to recall all the missionaries from a single field. In a way the conflict between the Bulgarian pastors and the missionaries was convenient. The board for world missions would recall the four remaining missionaries in Bulgaria. This would allow other mission fields to continue fully staffed for a while. The Administrative Committee also hoped that a slightly different relationship with the Bulgarian Church would ease tensions and encourage a more productive relationship.

The Wisconsin Synod still maintains a close relationship with the Bulgarian Lutheran Church, not just as sister synods and fellow members of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference. The Wisconsin Synod still supports the Bulgarian Church in a very big way. The

¹² Uecker Interview

current relationship is that the Bulgarian national pastors take care of the administration of the church and the ministry in Bulgaria, and the Wisconsin Synod supports that ministry with its funds. The financial oversight and review had been taken care of in Bulgaria by the missionaries previously, but now that oversight would be done by a member of the Administrative Committee: initially Scott Uecker, and presently Rob Drecktrah. Scott Uecker described how he oversaw the Wisconsin Synod's financial support:

Our funding had always been supervised by someone on the field, which was why I was then asked to go there, because I do a lot with finances. Each summer in June I would make a trip to Bulgaria and run a financial review on what had been done. And all the details of their funding came to my computer here. And I would review their individual expenditures and decide what we were going to reimburse and what we weren't going to reimburse. And all of that detail work Mike [Bartsch] had been doing on the field I was now doing via the internet. We would develop a business plan for the next year when I was there. We would review what had been done in the past year. I would go over their finances, present a new budget and work with them on that.¹³

It might seem strange that the Wisconsin Synod would continue to support the church in Bulgaria without any missionaries in the field, and time has shown that this isn't an ideal situation, but there are a number of factors to remember. Financially the Bulgarian Church was and continues to be unable to support itself. Pastor Valleskey, former member of the Europe Administrative Committee explained,

Most of [the] members are old pensioners who are not in a position to contribute monetarily to the church. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which is the only model they have known, historically has not supported itself by the freewill offerings of its members. Instead, they have supported themselves by a variety of cottage industries. So the BLC members are mostly poor and have no model from their past of supporting a church by their freewill offerings. We are teaching stewardship and the people do give offerings, but it will be a slow process before the church is able to come to self-support.¹⁴

Another important factor to remember is that we still agree doctrinally. The problems that separated the missionaries from the mission were personal and financial. We can still support

¹³ Uecker Interview

¹⁴ Valleskey Interview

the church because it is a need and they continue to preach God's Word. Scott Uecker explained his feelings on the matter. “The argument wasn’t over interpretation of Scripture. The argument was not over something where we’d say we could no longer work with people who were doing this. Actually the argument was over the same thing we were arguing over in the States: Do you continue to support missions at a time when you can’t support the main body of the church?”

Yet the Wisconsin Synod recognized the importance of maintaining a close pastoral connection with the Bulgarian Church in Bulgaria. The worker training program begun in Bulgaria was of special concern. Pastor Valleskey said, “The entire worker training program was carried on by the missionaries, and the BLC was not prepared [or] equipped to take over this program. WELS continued to help them by supplying them with a Friendly Counselor in Armin Panning, who helped much to keep the worker training program going.”¹⁵ The Friendly Counselor would not only continue training of pastoral students, but he would also act as a pastoral counselor for the pastors and churches in Bulgaria. Pastor Panning served as Friendly Counselor for eighteen months, and returned home in August 2006.

Yet, when the Administrative Committee had difficulty filling the position after the departure of Pastor Panning, they developed a plan to encourage pastoral training in conjunction with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and St. Sophia Seminary, Ukraine through the use of distance learning. Pastor John Vogt now carries out the duties of Friendly Counselor, yet his time is not spent in Bulgaria alone. Initially after the missionaries had been recalled, Pastor Vogt had been invited to be part of a three-professor team to examine the Bulgarian seminary students who had been left without instructors. Now Pastor Vogt serves as the WELS Regional Coordinator for Eastern Europe. This is a shared time call with the ELS. Pastor Vogt explained,

¹⁵ Valleskey Interview

50% of me belongs to WELS. Under the WELS part of my call, I am to offer assistance to the pastors and congregations of the Bulgarian and Albanian Lutheran Churches. My assistance in Bulgaria so far has been primarily to oversee the theological training of the men who were pressed into service as pastors in the absence of missionaries. In this connection I have made a half dozen teaching trips to Bulgaria, arranged for two Bulgarians to attend some courses at the seminary here in Ukraine, and have taught many Internet classes. With the 50% ELS owns, I serve as Field Coordinator for Ukraine and Rector/President of St. Sophia Lutheran Seminary.¹⁶

Beyond serving the seminary, Pastor Vogt also offers pastoral assistance to the pastors and congregations of the Bulgarian and Albanian Lutheran Churches when necessary.

Continuing Challenges

The Bulgarian Church has found some stability in the last five years, but it continues to face a number of challenges. Growth in the church continues to be slow. The slow growth seems to be largely a cultural difficulty. There doesn't seem to be much ambition among the national leaders to expand beyond the status quo. Bulgaria has one of the lowest population growth rates in the world. It has suffered from negative population growth since the early 1990s. Many young people emigrate out of Bulgaria to find a better life in Western Europe or America, with no intention of ever returning to Bulgaria. The demographics and the primary mission focus of the Bulgarian Lutheran Church don't seem to encourage rapid growth either.

The field began as humanitarian aid stations. And truthfully, it would be comparable to Salvation Army stations in the United States. And when we went over there with humanitarian aid we thought that would be great because that's what other churches were doing. What we learned is that it's not great because the people that we began working with were the lowest class of society and in a society that really does not value hard work or independence, things that Americans would think very highly of.¹⁷

Yet the challenge remains that among the higher classes of society, there is not much interest in a new, unfamiliar church. Along with those factors, one must also recognize that Christianity is not as novel as it was when Communism first fell. The Western world still holds a lot of

¹⁶ Vogt Interview

¹⁷ Uecker Interview

attraction for most Bulgarians, but Christianity isn't seen as part of that western world as much as philosophies like materialism.

The Bulgarian Lutheran Church has also had to deal with some internal struggles as well. When American missionaries were present, they helped smooth over the problems and divisions between the national pastors. Yet after the missionaries left, a couple scandals occurred among the leadership that really hurt the church.

One of the pastors [Vacil Bunkin] came up with a new theory about marriage where he had his legal spouse and his spiritual spouse. He would have been the boy wonder of the BLC pastorate, a young guy who was just a super student. He left the rest of them in the dust when he was in the Seminary program. He had been in a Seminary program for Orthodox priesthood before this, very interested in the church, but with all of that talent came an ego and he decided he needed two partners, his legal wife with two kids, and his spiritual partner.¹⁸

The other pastors of the BLC were quick to respond to this error. They told Bunkin he could not participate in public ministry and took away his call. Bunkin did repent, and the other pastors were willing to believe he was repentant and to accept him back as a member of the faith, but they informed him that he would no longer be able to participate in public ministry because he had committed a public sin and did not meet the biblical standards for public ministers. Bunkin was shocked because he did not want to give up his ministry, but the other pastors held their ground.

A short time later, the Church had to deal with a scandal involving the president of the church, a scandal the church is still dealing with currently and which has had many legal ramifications. When the American missionaries left Bulgarian, Pastor Georgi Karakostow continued as the president of the Bulgarian Lutheran Church. When the church in Vidin became vacant because Pastor Bunkin had been removed from the ministry because of his public sin, the

¹⁸ Uecker Interview

church building sat empty. However, in the mean time, the city started doing better economically, and the building increased in value considerably. Pastor Karakostow, because of his position of authority, sold the building, but he let greed get the better of him and kept money belonging to the BLC for himself. The Wisconsin Synod is currently trying to help the church get its money back, but the legal system in Bulgaria is much different from the American legal system, and it is taking a lot of time for the cases to be resolved. The Wisconsin Synod is also currently funding the legal battle with the understanding that when the BLC prevails in court, they will pay back the WELS. They simply can't afford to fight this battle on their own right now.

The Bulgarian Lutheran Church now has a new president and are trying to move past the difficulties and challenges it continues to face, yet it is still a very young church, living in the midst of a difficult time in a difficult culture.

Blessings in the face of hardship

Nevertheless, though it can be tempting to focus on the problems the Bulgarian Lutheran Church has faced, one can not ignore the blessings God has poured out on the church. Though Wisconsin Synod missionaries have been gone from Bulgaria for five years, the national pastors have continued to preach the Gospel. They have continued to hold to the Bible with doctrinal purity, serving their congregations, and feeding the souls of the members there. They have dealt with problems as they have arisen rather than ignore or excuse them.

Pastor Valleskey remains optimistic and hopeful about the future of the Bulgarian Lutheran Church. "The BLC has gone through a lot of bumps and shocks in its brief existence, but the Lord has brought it to this point. [There are] many outstanding individual believers in the BLC that any WELS congregation would be proud to have as members. The gospel is at work,

and we need to be patient to give the gospel time to do its work in order to overcome the problems and challenges that this young church still faces.”¹⁹

Mr. Scott Uecker continues to be encouraged by the work he sees going on the BLC and the continued dedication of its workers.

They have continued to be the church that they were before we left. They certainly have had their difficulties with the pastorate, but they continue to do the work of the church. And I don't think it's really either [sped] up because we had guys on site, or slowed down because we withdrew our guys. I think that the independence their pastors have shown once our pastors left the field is a good sign for them, and it's also a good sign for the training that we were giving them. So while Mike [Bartsch] and Paul [Metzger] were over there, the guys were trained in what was necessary to be a pastor and to continue preaching and teaching the Word. And it was sort of a baptism by fire: throw them into the fire and let them learn how to swim in the deep end. And they did learn to swim.²⁰

One especially bright spot in the opinion of all involved with the BLC is Vicar Rado Radkov. Vicar Radkov is a young man who filled in as a pastor in Varna when the missionaries were withdrawn. He supports himself by driving a city bus, and yet continues to lead a thriving ministry and to study in order to graduate from the seminary and be ordained. Pastor Vogt shared two stories to illustrate his dedication.

In 2007 and again in 2008 I spent two weeks in Varna teaching him – in the heat of the summer. He worked a full shift each day and then came for 4 hours of classes. We even had classes on the Saturdays. On the Sundays he'd drive his bus run, and then we'd have classes for a few hours until within 30 minutes of when he had to conduct the evening worship service. And yet he never complained.

Once, in connection with Paul's being all things to all people in order to win some, he said that he wasn't interested in sports. I asked him what do the men in your congregation speak about before or after the service.

“Sports,” he replied.

“Then you better get interested in sports,” I said.

Several months later I talked with Rado and asked: “How's the Varna football team doing?”

With a smile, he replied: “We've won three in a row!”²¹

¹⁹ Valleskey Interview

²⁰ Uecker Interview

²¹ Vogt Interview

There are many difficult lessons one can take from the Bulgarian Lutheran Church, though its history is brief. Mission work can be incredibly difficult work, especially foreign mission work. Yet, in many ways the mission in Bulgaria has thrived. We can see God's blessings on the Bulgarian Lutheran Church by its mere existence. God blessed the words of the missionaries who traveled far from home to share the Gospel message of free grace and forgiveness with strangers. And God continues to bless the work of the national pastors in Bulgaria, who have taken to heart the Word and want to share it with their neighbors. It can be difficult at times to see God's hand at work in the midst of earthly troubles, but we can be certain he is working, and will continue to work until he has gathered every last one of his children into his heavenly kingdom. Praise God for bringing his saving Word to lost souls in Bulgaria. May God continue to bless the work there until he comes again in glory.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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