
The Church in the USSR: A Conversation with Hegstad

edited by Gene Daffern

Roland R. Hegstad, editor of Liberty and associate director of the public affairs department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, made the following comments during conversations with the editor of SPECTRUM in March and April 1981.

To generalize about “Adventists” in the Soviet Union is almost surely to misinform in some respects. For example, many Adventists in the United States think of two classifications of church members — “underground” and “official.” Even this generalization is wrong on two counts. First, the proper term for Adventists and other groups refusing to register with government is “unregistered churches.” (And, on the other hand, “registered.”) Second, among unregistered Seventh-day Adventists there are at least two groups (three if one includes the Shelkov faction), each with their own long-standing theological and personality differences.

It is hoped that leaders of all factions, registered and unregistered, will soon be able to elect a leader for a unified Adventist Church within the Soviet Union. Some signs of willingness to talk and to pray about issues are encouraging, but it would be premature to rejoice in the resolution of issues that go back many decades.

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Is the Shelkov Faction One of the Unregistered Adventist Groups?

By most standards it would seem to warrant that designation. However, here too, several qualifications must be entertained. For one thing, what is today called the church of the “True and Free Seventh-day Adventists” broke from the Adventist Church in 1924 over such issues as serving in the armed forces, bearing arms and registering with the government. Shelkov became leader of the group in 1954.

From information I have received both from registered and unregistered Adventists, the “True and Free Seventh-day Adventists” may be more analagous to the Shepherd’s Rod in the United States than to other unregistered Soviet Adventist factions — not in belief, but in the degree to which belief divides from the main body of Adventism. The registered Adventist congregations and the two unregistered factions recognize each other as *bone fide* SDAs, though disagreeing emphatically on some issues; but they are united in regarding the Shelkov faction as something other. However, Michael Bourdeaux, editor of the widely respected journal, *Religion in Communist Lands*, believes some of our information concerning Shelkov’s theology may be incorrect.

The “True and Free” Adventists have suffered fragmentation among themselves. Shelkov’s son-in-law, Orleg Litkov, was one who broke away, accusing Shelkov of creating a “cult of the person.” A number of ex-Shelkov people are among our registered

and unregistered orthodox Seventh-day Adventist churches. Estimates of Shelkov's followers range from 1,000 to 100,000 — the latter estimate probably influenced by the "noise" they make. A former member of the "True and Free" group told me 9,000 would be close. Others think that number, too, is exaggerated. Take your pick. There are some 30,000 registered and unregistered Adventists who, as I have indicated, regard each other with some qualifications, but nevertheless as members of the Adventist world family. Only the Lord Himself could tell us who are truly His, and I'm sure He has followers in each group.

Issues Separating the Groups

Registration with government is a basic issue. Some choose not to register as a matter of conviction, others to avoid harrassment. To become a registered church, 20 Adventists must sign a petition and, ultimately, may receive permission to meet as a congregation. Free assembly is not a right in the Soviet Union, as it is in the United States.

Sabbath observance, particularly in the matter of sending children to school on Sabbath, is a genuinely important issue. Some here in the States have assumed that registered congregations follow this practice, while the "genuine" Adventists of the unregistered congregations do not. But again, the issue is not clear-cut. Among the registered churches are Adventists who will not do so. Those in both groups who do explain that they feel children must make their own decision. Some children, they explain, have had nervous breakdowns because of the peer pressure and scorn from teachers this course may bring. When a child understands the Sabbath truth and is willing to face the consequences, I was told, parents will back his decision.

If this reasoning sounds less than satisfying, consider the consequences: A child may be taken from the parents (though not so frequently now as a few years ago) and placed in an atheist home — perhaps hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Two years ago, I met a young lady who had just been returned to her parents because she had become 18. She cried as she told me of two

younger sisters still separated from their parents. Of course, in some cases, gracious teachers and other officials honor the child's religious commitment, and things go well. But such is not the usual. When asked for counsel on this matter, I have replied: We have no pope in Washington to dictate what you must do. The same Bible I carry, you also carry; it contains God's instructions. And you have access to the Holy Spirit. Get on the line to God and seek His will.

We must keep in mind that our Soviet brethren were separated from the worldwide Adventist family for many years. The visit to the Soviet Union of R. R. Figuhr and Jean Nussbaum in 1960 marked the first contact between Adventist world leaders and our Soviet believers since at least World War II. In 1966, as I recall, I was the second member of the General Conference to visit our Soviet believers. In 1967, W. Duncan Eva and Alf Lohne were in Moscow.

Our believers had few Bibles and even fewer Adventist books. It is not surprising that the years of attrition and conflict with authorities on behalf of conscience has produced a people who sometimes elevate policy to the level of principle and then battle each other on issues quite as enthusiastically as they battle the authorities.

For example, when I was in Moscow in 1966, one of the great issues was whether the congregation should use a common cup for communion or provide a cup for each communicant. "You are now using five goblets instead of one," I pointed out, "and if five, why not 500?"

Shelkov and the Human Rights Movement

Shelkov has been the most publicized Adventist in the Soviet Union because he linked his ministry with that of Soviet dissidents and publicized abuses of religious rights in the context of the Helsinki Accords. He also had an extensive *samizdat* publishing operation. He and his group were probably as effective as the much larger unregistered Baptist publishing enterprise.

My colleagues and I in the department of public affairs and religious liberty are interested in securing a number of Shelkov's books and papers — we know of 40 or so — and having them translated into English. It would take about \$10,000 to handle those now available. I think this project should be of tremendous interest both to the Adventist Church and world leaders of the human rights movement. Until we have access to

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these materials, it would seem well to reserve judgment on some aspects of Shelkov's teaching. Most information we have now comes from those who disagree with Shelkov's positions. Only when we have opportunity to study his work will we know to what degree his theology and other views can be described as aberrant, when compared to traditional Adventist positions.

And, whatever we find, he must be admired for standing up to 22 years or so of imprisonment and a death sentence.

Whether Shelkov acted wisely in linking the cause of the “True and Free Seventh-day Adventists” with the political aspirations of Soviet dissidents may be a judgment dependent both on principle and perspective. Certainly by so doing he incurred the acute displeasure of the Soviet state — but the practice of Christian principle may do that. Perhaps I must leave it to each SPECTRUM reader to determine for himself whether one honors the counsel of Paul in Romans 13 by linking religious issues with political and publicizing violations of a political document such as the Helsinki Accords.

One additional perspective: I was told bluntly by Dr. Mixa, a former minister of religious affairs in Czechoslovakia, that the

reason our church has gotten along as well as it has since 1968 is that Adventist leaders during the Dubcek era did not sign manifestos and other political documents, as several other churches did. I won't extrapolate too broadly from this incident; circumstances differ from country to country. But in the main, Adventists do well to stick to their gospel knitting and eschew political controversies. Certainly the Adventist-sponsored International Religious Liberty Association has achieved results through its “Quiet Diplomacy” that likely would not have been achieved through foot-stomping.

When news came to the General Conference that Shelkov had been arrested, we did not simply write him off by taking the line that this man was not a Seventh-day Adventist. I drafted a statement on behalf of the church that said in part:

We regret that the Soviet government has found it necessary to imprison an 83-year-old man because he has stated his conscience on various issues. And while Shelkov at some time in the past diverged from the Adventist Church and has a group which he calls the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists, nevertheless, we regret the circumstances that surround his arrest.

The Wisdom of Reporting Soviet Treatment of Adventists

No one has documented one incident of retaliation toward a Seventh-day Adventist in the Soviet Union, or, indeed, to any Christian, as the consequence of international publicity concerning his mistreatment. To the contrary, one can document a relaxation of government pressures, in some cases, because of international publicity. Experts on Soviet affairs, such as Michael Bourdeaux with whom I have talked, agree with these statements.

I have long urged that after trying quiet diplomacy unsuccessfully we give more publicity within our own papers and elsewhere to instances of mistreatment of Seventh-day Adventists in the Soviet Union.

Religious Toleration in the Soviet Union

I support the policy of those Soviet Adventists who seek to register congregations with the government. While the con-

stitution of the Soviet Union does not permit the promulgation of religion as it does protect the promulgation of atheism, freedom of worship by citizens, singly and corporately, is upheld — and indeed was strengthened in a recent (1978) revision. In practice, this means such freedom is guaranteed to registered congregations.

Soviet Adventists who are members of registered congregations are far from spineless acquiescers in injustice. By working with officials assured of their loyalty to the Soviet state, they have achieved some long-desired objectives. For example, two young men are now training for the ministry at Newbold College, in England. Recently, our churches have been permitted to publish a small paper, Sabbath school lessons, and week of prayer materials. During a recent meeting in Moscow with the deputy minister of religious affairs, I was impressed with his knowledge of Adventist affairs — theological and other. I found he knew every Adventist minister in

the Soviet Union by name, and a number of elders as well.

Of course, not even the deputy minister or the minister of religious affairs himself controls how laws are applied to Christians in the Soviet Union. But good relations on every level can be helpful. Recently a high official was instrumental in securing the release of one of our ministers from prison.

Members of our recognized churches in the Soviet Union believe it to be not only wise policy but the imperative of Scripture itself that Adventists be good citizens. Certainly they should not be stigmatized as compromisers by those in this country and elsewhere who are far removed from the realities of their witness and its consequences.

Many have themselves spent years in prison camps. Many are prepared to spend more before compromising the essentials of the gospel.

A Letter to Soviet Adventists

October 31, 1979
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ: From the depths of our hearts we greet each one of you with the wishes expressed by John, the apostle of love: “My prayer for you, my very dear friend, is that you may be as healthy and prosperous in every way as you are in soul. I was delighted when the brothers arrived and spoke so highly of the sincerity of your life — obviously you are living in the truth. Nothing brings me greater joy than hearing that

my children are living in the truth” (3 John 2-4, Phillips).

We are not only thinking about the life to come but we wish you physical and spiritual blessings in this present life. The personal acquaintance we have with some of you and the good testimonies we hear from others regarding your faithfulness give us cause to rejoice. When we think of you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a warm feeling of Christian fellowship. We often mention you in our prayers as we talk to our heavenly

Father. We trust that you likewise include us in your prayers, so that we can join together in a blessed fellowship before the throne of Grace each day.

As the year 1979 hastens toward its close, we look back with gratitude for what God has done for His people. We also look forward with great anticipation to what He has prepared for us in the future. With confidence we place ourselves in His hands and trust His guidance. It is very fitting that the Week of Prayer comes to the church toward the end of the year. It gives us all a special opportunity to seek the Lord for spiritual strength and personal dedication.

Here in Washington, D.C., we have just concluded the annual meetings of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Representatives from many parts of the world were here for spiritual fellowship and counsel on matters pertaining to the church. This year, for the first time, two representatives from the USSR were with us: Pastor M. Kulakov, from Tula in the Federated Republic, and Pastor N. Zhukaluk, from Lvov in the Ukraine. They brought us greetings from believers in the USSR and studied with us the great fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. Their presence was greatly appreciated as we counseled together. They, in a very fine way, represented the USSR and Adventist believers there. God blessed their testimonies and their influence.

We are happy to hear that in most of the Soviet republics, our churches now have the opportunity of electing district senior pastors and also senior pastors for the entire republics. We trust these organizational steps will serve to unify Seventh-day Adventists in fellowship and faith, and will strengthen their witness.

From time to time questions are raised as to the attitude of the General Conference toward believers and their church organizations in countries where it has not been possible to follow in detail the organizational procedures Seventh-day Adventists have outlined in their *Church Manual* and *Working*

Policy. To this we answer that the following principles should be practiced and serve as a guide in such situations:

1) The General Conference can recognize only one Seventh-day Adventist organization in any country. This would normally be the one recognized by the authorities. We conduct our work in harmony with biblical principles expressed in texts such as Romans 13:1-8 and Acts 5:29. On this basis we encourage all who consider themselves to be Seventh-day Adventists to identify with the recognized body of believers. We are convinced that this is in harmony with biblical and Spirit of Prophecy counsel to the church.

2) The General Conference recognizes that in some countries there are divisions of opinion among those who profess to be good and faithful Seventh-day Adventists. Usually, these differences of opinion do not relate to fundamental doctrinal matters, but rather, as to how individuals understand and practice Bible instruction such as "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). We honor the conscience of each believer in this respect and reach out with brotherly love and pastoral concern to all who want to obey God's commandments and be considered members of the spiritual body of Seventh-day Adventist believers.

3) The General Conference appeals to those who hold differing opinions to talk to and fellowship with each other in love and with mutual respect. Fellow believers should avoid attitudes, actions and words that misrepresent the church and tend to create unholy strife among believers.

In all this we aim for unity in Christ, oneness in faith and practice, and, hopefully, eventual union in one church organization.

We send you our Christian greetings and brotherly love. Both the present and the future are cared for by the promises of God. We are all admonished: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 27:14, RSV).

Your brethren in Christ,
Neal C. Wilson, President
Alf Lohne, Vice President