
Proposals for Peace and Understanding

by Neal C. Wilson

The attendance of six delegates from the Soviet Union to the 1975 General Conference Session in Vienna marked the beginning of an increasingly friendly relationship between the Kremlin and the world Adventist church. (See "Mesar Interview With an Adventist Pastor From Russia," *Spectrum*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March 1977.) Since that time delegates from the USSR have attended all Annual Councils and the 1980 General Conference Session. During the same period many world leaders of the denomination, including several vice-presidents and two successive presidents of the General Conference, have been invited to the Soviet Union, increasingly often as official guests of the government.

In October 1986 the chairman of the USSR Council on Religious Affairs, Konstantin Kharchev, visited the United States, where he was entertained by the General Conference. A chartered helicopter flew him from Washington, D.C., to the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Hagerstown, Maryland, and back to Takoma Park, where at a reception at the church's world headquarters, he was given a warm (nonalcoholic) toast by Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference. On January 27 of the next year the Council of Religious Affairs approved the establishment of an Adventist Seminary, including the construction of a building to house it. In September 1987 Karchev, accompanied by Wilson, was flown to Andrews and Loma Linda Universities, as well as being taken to other

Adventist institutions. Serious discussions continue between the Soviet government and the General Conference about their creating a joint-venture publishing company—51 percent owned by the Soviet government, 49 percent owned by the church's Review and Herald Publishing company. (See Roy Branson, "Deliver the Captives," *Spectrum*, Vol. 18, No. 4, April, 1988.)

In February 1987 Neal Wilson was invited by the Soviet government to a conference at the Grand Kremlin Palace on a "Non-Nuclear World and the Survival of Humanity," chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev and attended by luminaries such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Kris Kristofferson, Norman Mailer, Yoko Ono, Andrei Sakharov (released from internal exile only two months before), and Gore Vidal. At the conference Wilson delivered the following statement orally to the religion section; he subsequently submitted it in written form to Kharchev and Gorbachev. (See *Liberty*, Vol. 82, No. 3, May-June 1987). Regrettably, the Soviet Union has not met the May 1, 1988, deadline suggested by Wilson for "declaring an amnesty for all 'prisoners of conscience,' a gesture that would arrest and grip the attention of the world."

—The Editors

As the delegates of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we are honored to be guests at a peace conference in a nation which suffered so sorely in the Great Patriotic War. Suffered, moreover, not only for itself, but for all peoples threatened by the armies of Nazi

Germany. Scribed deeply into our memories are great battles and tragic losses—of our fathers, sons, relatives and friends who died on foreign shores.

But not forgotten are those who died unknown to us on the Eastern Front: During the desperate attempts of the Soviet Fifty-fifth and Eighth armies to break the German ring at Kolpino and Dubrovka in defense of Leningrad: on Defense Commissar Zhdanov's "Road of Life" across the ice of Lake Ladoga. Not forgotten are the heroic defense of Stalingrad and the sacrifice of Rodimtsev's guards that saved the city in September 1942. Not forgotten are the names that Zhukov's resistance bequeathed to history: the "Red Barricade" ordnance factory, the "Red October" metallurgical works, the "Dzershinsky" tractor works, the "Lazur" chemical works—the "forts" of Stalingrad.

In scores of Soviet cities great monuments speak eloquently, and yet so inadequately, of the patriots who died by the millions resisting Fascism. Nonbeliever, believer—they died side by side so that our world might live in peace. And so we come, this time not to lay wreaths at memorials to the fallen, but to give voice to our hope for peace and its requisites: justice, moral integrity, the dignity and freedom of the individual—for all those humanitarian and spiritual values for which mankind hungers.

We come to add our voices not to the "window dressing" of tired propaganda, nor to that "peculiar psychology" of which General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has spoken—"how to improve things without changing anything"—but rather to constructive proposals and programs within the purview of our Christian commitment and theology.

We represent the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a worldwide body of believers who witness in 190 nations and more than 600 languages and dialects. Some live among you—believers who uphold the right of their neighbors not to believe and who love their country, treasure its history, its culture, and its humanitarian aspirations. Believers who pray for their officials, work productively for the nation, and seek to fulfill the commission given them by Jesus Christ—to

"preach the gospel."

The gospel is "good news." And preaching it means above all else to reflect the character and teachings of Jesus Christ. Today, we call to memory messages of peace—He inspired not alone peace among nations, but peace between neighbors, peace of mind, and serenity of spirit.

"On earth *peace*, good will toward men."—Luke 2:14.

"So then, we must always aim at those things that bring *peace*."—Romans 14:19, TEV.

"So Christ came and preached the Good News of *peace* to all."—Ephesians 2:17, TEV.

"Blessed are the peacemakers."—Matthew 5:9.

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But the Bible speaks not only of peace but judgment, and that too we shall remember at this peace conference, for the Apocalypse, the "Revelation of Jesus Christ," says that in a time when man has at last gained the capacity to destroy his world, God will judge mankind and "destroy them which destroy the earth."—Apocalypse 11:18.

Has mankind now this potential? As General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev reported on behalf of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

"There is. . . a qualitative leap in means of destruction, in the military sphere, 'endowing' man for the first time in history with the physical capacity for destroying all life on earth." *CPSU Report*, p. 11.

Thus, said the general secretary, "the changes in current world developments are so deep-going and significant that they require a reassessment and a comprehensive analysis of all factors. The situation created by the nuclear confrontation calls for new approaches, methods, and forms of relations between the different social systems, states, and regions."—*Ibid.*, p. 5.

Our Christian commitment compels us to re-appraise the contribution we may make to peace and the social justice intrinsic to peace. In the person of the God-man who walked among us as one of us, we see divinity and humanity combined. Thus we cannot serve God without also serving our fellowman. Not only in His incarnation but in His ministry to us we see an example of how we should relate to a choice between conflict and peace. On one occasion in a Samaritan village, Jesus and His disciples were not well

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received. Two disciples, James and John, said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" And Jesus answered: "You don't know what kind of a Spirit you belong to: for the Son of man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."—Luke 9:51-55, TEV.

I have visited the Kazan Museum in Leningrad and the Museum of Religion in Lvov. I have seen the tableaux of Christians torturing fellow Christians to bring them into God's "tender" embrace. I have seen the evidence of rich and corrupt churches allying themselves with rich and corrupt governments to oppress the poor. I have seen the unscrupulous preying on the credulous—all this in the name of Christ! And history witnesses to the truth of the exhibits.

But such exhibits show the perversion of Christianity, not its seminal purity and idealism: but other systems, too, have suffered at the hands of those who reduced lofty idealism to selfish ends. I ask only that you recall the crimes that have been done in the name of Lenin—and testified to by Soviet leaders from Khrushchev on. I note the anguished admissions of "contradictions" in General Secretary Gorbachev's report to the 27th Party Congress. But as Lenin said: "Our strength lies in stating the truth."

In fact, it is General Secretary Gorbachev's

frank call for "radical reform" and "democratization" of Soviet society, the February 7 release of 42 dissidents, and his program for peace, that encourages me to speak of a perception that must be faced if the Soviet Union is to achieve these objectives.

I refer to the widespread belief that religious freedom in the Soviet Union means something different from its meaning in many other countries, particularly those in the West.

Will our gracious hosts misunderstand me if I speak frankly of this perception? And of why, in the interests of peace, it must be addressed?

As a Christian, I find it painful to admit the emerging Communist state had reason to remember with distaste the church-state alliance that had oppressed the Russian people. And even, sad to say, set it an example of persecution, in the way it treated its religious minorities.

As a Christian, I find it painful to admit, further, that the great pogroms of history have come most often not from bad people trying to make other people bad, but from good people trying to make other people good. Well our prayer might be, "Lord, save us from the saints."

Philosopher Jacques Ellul has astutely observed:

Whatever the position adopted by the church, every time she becomes involved in politics, on every occasion the result has been unfaithfulness to herself and the abandonment of the truths of the gospel. Every time. . . she has been misled to act treasonable, either toward revealed truth or incarnate love. . . . It would seem that politics. . . is the occasion of her greatest falls, her constant temptation, the pitfall the prince of this world incessantly prepares for her.—Jacques Ellul, *Fausse Presence Au Monde Modern*, pp. 105-111.

I say, then, that while the Christian world cannot condone the persecutions of the Stalinist era and, to a lessening degree, afterward, it should understand them. In addition, I am compelled to admit that, unlike their status under the czar, all religions have equal standing before the law.

And certainly, as leader of a world church, I would not wish to leave the erroneous impression that restrictions on religion are a monopoly of the Soviet state or of Eastern Europe. The most severe restrictions today are imposed by countries dominated by fundamentalist religions.

Why, then, must I speak of Soviet policy toward believers, particularly at a conference that seeks unity on issues of peace?

Simply stated, because Christians of the Western world, and especially the United States, who are disturbed by the circumstances of their colleagues in the Soviet Union, translate their concerns into influence and support for defense alliances and strategic defense initiatives.

It is really not necessary that our hosts and we agree on whether the Christians I refer to reflect reality or perception. For perception is enough, in and of itself, to frustrate mankind's hopes for peace, and as General Secretary Gorbachev more specifically defines it, the building of "an all-embracing system of international security."—*CPSU Report*, p. 92.

As Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, which sponsored Chairman Konstantin Kharchev's U.S. visit, observed: "It is important for him [Kharchev] to understand the impact that . . . American believers have on our domestic and foreign policy" and "to know about their concern for fellow believers in the Soviet Union."

That concern embraces not only the right to worship within a church or mosque or synagogue but the right freely to witness to one's faith in society—a right that many believers hold is given to his children by God Himself, and that therefore is not rightly man's to withhold.

Will I be misunderstood if I make a constructive proposal? Perhaps one that no churchman, given the history of ecclesiastical intolerance, has the right to ask? I ask it, I believe, on behalf of many who respect not only this great nation's sacrifice for peace in the Great Patriotic War, but also the idealism that motivated the Leninist experiment in equality. And I dare to ask it because I believe that coupled with General Secretary Gorbachev's initiatives for democratization and for a nuclear-free world must be a meaningful change in Soviet policy toward its religious minorities.

I believe that delegates to this conference should do General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Chairman Konstantin Kharchev the honor of believing that the democratization they promote

is something more than "window dressing." That the paper on religious tolerance and peace that Chairman Kharchev presented in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A., October 1986, foreshadowed further advances toward religious freedom; that the report presented by General Secretary Gorbachev to the 27th Party Congress does reflect a new idealism as well as a new reality in confronting "contradictions" in Soviet society. (If I understand that word "contradiction," it's what we Christians refer to as "sin," which comes from a Greek word meaning to fall short of the mark.)

The changes in policy toward religious minorities in the Soviet Union that I have personally observed may be made progressively, little noticed by the world: or they may be made dramatically, with maximum impact on the world, and consequently, with maximum impact on detente and nuclear disarmament and world peace.

I suggest then, that on or before May 1, 1988—the 1,000th year of Christianity in Russia—the Soviet government witness to its greatness and generosity of spirit by declaring an amnesty for all "prisoners of conscience," a gesture that would arrest and grip the attention of the world.

I have faith to believe that this dramatic gesture of goodwill shall be followed by further democratization of relationships between the Soviet state and Soviet believers.

I suggest that on or before May 1, 1988—the 1,000th year of Christianity in Russia—the Soviet government declare an amnesty for all "prisoners of conscience," a gesture that would grip the attention of the world.

I suggest further, and do so with problems in my own country on my conscience, that this democratization include a new commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief.

I would think it particularly helpful should this commitment include the following:

1. Respect for religious holy days. This means,

in part, that Orthodox and other believers observing such a holy day as Easter may do so without discrimination. This means also that believers observing the seventh-day Sabbath may do so without penalty at their place of employment. Respect for religious holy days means also that the children of Sabbathkeepers will not be required to be in school on Sabbath, an accommodation made in most nations.

2. Not only freedom of worship (within the confines of a church building) but freedom to practice one's religion, to "witness."

I ask consideration for these proposals not contentiously, but respectfully, in the spirit of peace. In these proposals our delegation shares with you what General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has called a "Leninist answer"—that is, that "Communists want the truth always and under all circumstances." And the truth is that believers' concerns must be addressed if democratization and nuclear disarmament are to receive credibility. Our proposals, then, are milestones on the way to peace: milestones that must be traversed on the way to what Secretary Gorbachev has called "an all-embracing system of international security."

This system includes, as he said in his speech to the 27th Party Congress, not only the military sphere, but the political, economic, and humanitarian as well. In the latter, he called for "cooperation in the dissemination of the idea of peace, disarmament, and international security; greater flow of general objective information and broader contact between peoples for the purpose of learning about one another, reinforcement of the spirit of mutual understanding and concord in relations between them."—*CPSU Report*.

Our proposals serve these objectives and thus, we believe, the national interests of the Soviet state, as well as the interests of all humanity.

Though not sharing the Communist vision of present reality and the future hope of mankind, we do not participate in that "unreality" that dismisses mankind's woes and needs as objectives to be met only in some future paradise. Rather, as a

world church, we seek to reflect, as best we can, Christ's selfless service to the poor and oppressed.

Therefore, we would like to explore the following areas of cooperation that fit within Mr. Gorbachev's humanitarian sphere—science, education, and medicine.

1. We are very actively involved in anti-drug and anti-alcoholism programs. Through the International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency, we work with many governments. We would be happy to help train people who could reduce absenteeism, accidents, and other alcohol-related problems in industry and elsewhere.

2. In our hospital system—including some 500 hospitals and clinics worldwide—we have pioneered certain methods that are being used successfully in major medical centers. Among them: heart catheterization, angiography, transurethral prostatectomies, and proton-beam acceleration. We are also giving special postgraduate training at our Loma Linda University Medical Center, near Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

3. We seek further participation in cultural exchange programs.

4. We would welcome opportunity to sit down and discuss any of the above technologies, procedures, specialities, and programs—as well as others—that might be of mutual benefit.

Whatever the field, and however small our contribution, we welcome opportunities to enhance understanding and aid humanity in its social, moral, physical, and spiritual needs.

God Himself has commissioned mankind to hold back the night of nuclear annihilation. With General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, we are convinced that indeed "God on high has not refused to give us enough wisdom to find ways to bring an improvement in our relations."

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