

Documents

Pentecostalist and Baptist Leader Interviewed

This interview was broadcast in English for North America by Moscow Radio on 24 May, 1975. Questions were posed by the interviewer, Pozner.

Mikhail Zhidkov, son of the first chairman of the AUCECB, studied in England before becoming presbyter of the Moscow Baptist Church, a member of the Presidium of the All-Union Council in 1966, and one of its vice-chairmen in 1974.

Petr Shatrov was a delegate from Leningrad at the 1966 ECB congress in Moscow; he is a member of the Evangelical Christians in the Apostolic Spirit, a small Pentecostal grouping which joined the ECB in 1947. He was elected to the AUCECB Presidium in 1969 as the Pentecostal representative, after a couple of years as an "Inspector of the AUCECB" smoothing out difficulties between Pentecostalists and Evangelical Christians and Baptists. He spoke at the World Pentecostal Congress in Dallas, Texas, in 1970, and visited Pentecostalists in Finland in 1972 and in Italy and Austria in 1974.

Yevgeny Bresenden and Grigory Vashchenko are the authors of several appeals to the Soviet government, the UN Commission on Human Rights and Christians throughout the world seeking permission to emigrate from the USSR, having despaired of the possibility of freedom of worship for Pentecostalists there. (See for example RCL No. 3, 1974, pp. 25-26 and Nos. 1-3, 1975, pp. 25-30). One such appeal bears 20 signatures. They, and some other Pentecostalists (see the document in RCL Nos. 1-3, 1975, p. 28), would disagree with Shatrov's views on registration.

Pozner: Sharing the mike with me this Saturday evening are two distinguished gentlemen who represent the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. This religious body unites four denominations: Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostalists and Mennonites. Mikhail Zhidkov is Vice-Chairman of the Council, while Petr Shatrov is on its presidium and represents the Pentecostalists. I am going to address my first question to Mr. Shatrov, and in so doing come to the point. My question is this: not long ago a Russian-language broadcast of the "Voice of America" stated that the Pentecostal sect is banned in the Soviet Union. Now you, Mr. Shatrov, represent the Pentecostalists in the Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Obviously you cannot represent a sect that is banned by law. Would you care to comment on that?

Shatrov: In 1945 in our country the Pentecostalists merged with the Evangelical Christians and Baptists in a common union. This was the result of the so-called August Agreement and today the majority of Pentecostalists are members of this common union. A great many of our churches are purely Pentecostal while in others Evangelical Christians, Baptists and Pentecostalists worship together. Pentecostalists have their own presbyters and senior presbyters.

Pozner: Now, do these pastors have a religious education?

Shatrov: Some do, having studied at our biblical school, while others have been elected presbyters by their parishes at local meetings.

Pozner: What I'm driving at is the possibility to get religious education. Does that in fact exist?

Shatrov: Yes, we have a biblical school that gives a two-year course. Last year nearly 200 pastors graduated and we expect to see that many for the new school year.

Pozner: Although you've certainly answered my question concerning whether or not Pentecostals have the possibility to worship in the Soviet Union, I'd like to pursue the subject of that sect's situation a bit further. According to a story released some time ago by the Moscow bureau of the Associated Press a group of Pentecostals in the far eastern maritime city of Nakhodka are being persecuted by the Soviet Government. Reportedly one of their leaders, a 34-year-old plumber by the name of Yevgeny Bresenden came to Moscow where he told this to a group of Western journalists. He said the Pentecostals had been persecuted for their religious beliefs to the point that 200 families had applied for exit visas from the USSR. These, he said, had not been issued and now they were being persecuted both for their religion and for their desire to leave the country. Now, another Pentecostal from Nakhodka, Grigory Vashchenko, was also said to be a leader of this movement. Do you have any knowledge of this, and if so I would appreciate hearing your viewpoint?

Shatrov: This year in March Mikhail Zhidkov and I visited the churches of the Kranoyarsk region, in the Far East. We were also in Nakhodka. We met with the leaders of the local Pentecostal Church and they told us their congregation, about 450 people, had no complaints. The local authorities in no way interfered with their religious activities even though their Church is not registered.

Pozner: Excuse me, would you please explain that, I mean about registration.

Shatrov: Well, to receive official status any religious group is supposed to register so as to enjoy its constitutional rights. It is not forced to, but then it may not be recognized as actually existing by the local government authorities. This particular group is not registered yet, but it enjoys all its rights nonetheless. To go on with my story. We were invited to participate in the religious services and we attended them with pleasure. It was after one service that we were told about Grigory Vashchenko and Yevgeny Bresenden. What we found out was that both of them and one other man had been excommunicated by the brethren for their un-Christian conduct.

Pozner: Un-Christian conduct?

Shatrov: Yes, that's right. So what we are dealing with is not 200 families but three individuals who could hardly represent the Nakhodka church. In fact, these three do not even attend the services, having been cast out by the congregation.

Pozner: Well so far we have been speaking about concrete cases and individuals pertaining to the Pentecostal Church. I would like to broaden the discussion a bit so as to include all the denominations that make up your union, although I will continue to explore the subject of religious freedom. I want to ask Mikhail Zhidkov to comment on the issue of persecution in general. Not long ago I heard of the case of a young man, a student at one of Moscow's institutes, who made it known that he would not, and could not, join the Young Communist League because of his religious beliefs. And he, as a result of this, became the target for rather violent criticism. In fact some hotheads demanded that he be expelled. Now what I want to know is: do such things happen often and how, if at all, are religious people protected?

Zhidkov: Well, let me see, I might begin by saying that as a rule believers are not subjected to any discrimination. We have a law that protects the rights of believers, and any discrimination on religious grounds is unlawful. However, there are cases when representatives of local governments falsely interpret the law and when such conflicts arise believers act according to their rights as Soviet citizens. More often than not they appeal to us directly and we take their complaints to the government. I must say that we are always backed and, incidentally, I know about the case you mentioned. We intervened and all criticism of this young man was stopped, not to speak about his being expelled.

Pozner: Now how free are you to print and disseminate religious literature?

Zhidkov: Well we publish a bi-monthly journal called *The Fraternal Herald* which we distribute among our congregations. Last year we printed a new edition of the New Testament—30,000 copies I believe. We also publish hymn books periodically.

Pozner: Now what about contacts with Western Churches, are these available?

Zhidkov: Very much so. We are members of the Baptist World Alliance and of the World Council of Churches. We participate in their activities and we invite delegates to participate in our congresses. Last December, for instance, we had over 20 representatives of our brothers abroad at our congress.

Pozner: Incidentally, how many believers does your Church unite?

Zhidkov: Over 500,000 at about 12,000 churches.*

Pozner: Now getting back to the subject of contacts, do you send people abroad for studies?

Zhidkov: Yes, we do. At present several of our students are studying at the Hamburg Baptist seminary in Federal Germany. Three are studying at Spurgeon's College in England and we also have students in Sweden and Finland.

Pozner: Who pays for this?

Zhidkov: We cover part of these charges while the religious schools that invite our students cover the rest.

Pozner: Excuse me for a tactless question, but where do you get your money?

Zhidkov: Voluntary donations only. Five times a year every church sends us its collections and this money is spent for maintenance, salaries, missionary work and trips.

Pozner: Now a final question. A few years ago I met with a high dignitary of the Russian Orthodox Church who made the following observation about religious belief. He said that here people are more sincere in their religious beliefs than in the West and that in the West religion is "in", it is the thing to do. It can in fact even be dangerous to be outspokenly atheistic, at least in some places. So he said some people simply conform while not really having faith. How would you assess that statement?

Zhidkov: My feeling is this: it is true that in the West it is popular to be a believer. As a result some people are religious only for formality's sake. Certainly there are many sincerely devoted believers, something I have witnessed first-hand during my studies in England. However, conditions here in our country are such that only those who really need religion, who cannot be without it, are believers. It might be said that our conditions purify, leaving no doubt as to the actual belief of those who go to church.

* A more likely figure is thought to be 5,000 churches, Ed.