

A Visit to German Congregations in Central Asia*

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In June 1987 I was a member of a group of 20 clergymen who visited German congregations in Soviet Central Asia. The trip was organised by the Pastoral College of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia. Although we visited only three cities (Dushanbe, Alma-Ata and Karaganda) we were able to meet a wide variety of congregations. In Dushanbe we met Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists (belonging to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists); in Alma-Ata Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists (AUCECB), Church Mennonites (registered autonomously); in Karaganda Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists (AUCECB), Church Mennonites (registered autonomously), New Apostolic congregations (registered autonomously), and unregistered Baptists and Mennonites.

It is impossible to make broad generalisations on the basis of the varied experience of the different congregations, although there were some common concerns. Notable was the almost universal fear expressed about the ignorance of German amongst young ethnic Germans. What happens in the future will depend on how the language question is resolved — whether the ethnic Germans will succeed in growing into the new language, as is happening with the Baptists, whether they will succeed in preserving the language despite official shortcomings in teaching German, or whether German becomes stylised as a sacred language which young people no longer understand.

The Lutherans

The figures which Bishop Harald Kalninš, at that time the Riga based superintendent for German congregations, gave at the end of 1985 have not yet been revised. Then he spoke of 490 congregations known

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to him of which 222 were registered. These were served by about 60 preachers who had been ordained as pastors. Conversations with members and leaders of the registered congregations suggest that most of the unregistered communities are small groups or house churches, as opposed to the registered congregations which can have hundreds, even thousands of members.

Harald Kalniņš, — Bishop for the German Lutherans

On 13 November 1988, Harald Kalniņš, a pastor of the Latvian Lutheran Church, and superintendent of the registered German Lutheran congregations in the Soviet Union, was unexpectedly raised to the office of bishop for the German Lutherans. Bishops from Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland and West Germany, as well as the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Gunnar Staalsett, took part in the consecration celebrations.

The Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow had earlier summoned Kalniņš and informed him that the state had no more objections to him becoming bishop for the German Lutherans — it was not therefore a matter of a church decision but of a state concession. In view of his new position as bishop for the Germans, Kalniņš leaves his work as priest in the Latvian Lutheran Church, the Latvian consistory having made the appropriate decision to release him, so that he can concentrate fully on his new task. At the same time, he will stay vice-rector of the Theological Correspondence Institute in Riga, which gives cause for hope for the theological education of German Lutherans there.

The state permission for Harald Kalniņš to become bishop for the Germans would seem to indicate that the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Russia, which was broken up in 1937, can be re-established in the form of a German Evangelical-Lutheran Church of the Soviet Union. Amongst those who attended Kalniņš' consecration were 20 prominent representatives of German Lutheran congregations, mostly from Asia, but also Pastor Ernst Roga, at present serving in the small Lutheran church in Šilute, Lithuania. Pastor Roga had been assisting Superintendent Kalniņš by occasionally visiting Central Asian congregations. Bishop Kalniņš referred to Pastor Roga and the other representatives as his future provosts. As he will continue to live in Riga they would represent him in the Far East especially in Central Asia. The state now appears to be supporting the formation of a German Lutheran Church in an attempt to persuade the many German Lutherans proposing to depart to West Germany to remain. The Lutheran Church serves as a means of enabling Germans to accept the Soviet Union as their homeland.

No Theological Training for German Lutherans

It is apparently due to the lack of organisational structure that German Lutherans in the Soviet Union have no place for theological training. Such a place is granted only to state recognised church bodies. Moreover they are also refused admission to the Theological Correspondence Courses in Riga and Tallinn. Bearing in mind the fact that the German Catholics in the USSR have for years been able to send candidates to the Riga Seminary (in 1987 there were nine Germans out of roughly 70 students), one has to ask whether responsibility rests with the Lutheran side rather than the state. Since late 1987, Haralds Kalniņš has been vice-rector of the Theological Correspondence Courses in Riga. He hopes that in future German Lutherans will be able to follow those courses.

Young People

In Dushanbe there are hardly any young people in the congregation, to the regret of Hermann Gevorsky, the ordained pastor of the community. The losses to the Baptists are large, but also to the Catholics, whose youthful priest and committed cantor hold a strong attraction for young people. In Alma-Ata it was difficult for us to form a judgement since we were there in the middle of the week and could attend only an extended choir practice which, in comparison to that of the Baptists in Alma-Ata, struck us as of a rather poor standard. In any case, from many conversations with leaders of the congregation we inferred that the lack of young people, emigration and the losses to other faiths represent the major problems at present.

Baptisms

When one looks at the register of baptisms, it is difficult to believe that there should be such concern over future growth. In Dushanbe, for example, there were over 120 baptisms in 1978, 1980, 1981, 1984 and 1986 respectively. Yet the figures are misleading as baptism often takes place now whether the candidate or his family is known to the congregation or not and with a minimum of preliminary discussion. Even unbaptised godparents are now accepted. This reflects the underlying understanding of baptism as stamping the seal of Christ on the individual whilst the other stated objective, Christian education, assumes less importance. Baptism of children is often seen as part of German tradition, as an acknowledgement of German nationality,

and as a form of 'insurance' against all eventualities. This too reveals a certain change in the Soviet climate for now families with only the slightest contact with the church do not fear to bring their children to baptism.

State Registration of Religious Rites

For many years the state authorities, without any legal basis, had demanded lists of those baptised, confirmed and married in church, as well as the names and addresses of parents and godparents in the case of baptisms. We were told that every three months only the statistics were given to the local office of the Council for Religious Affairs, but that lists of names and addresses had to be available for inspection by the authorities. Such inspections happened rarely.

Young Critics in Karaganda

In Karaganda we attended a youth service which drew in some 300 young people. Conversations after the service revealed a strong apocalyptic strain among many: How do people in your country think about the forthcoming return of Christ? How do you interpret the 'signs of the time'? What do you think about the 1,000-year reign of Christ? There was also a concern with legalistic matters such as the Christian attitude to smoking or cardplaying. Again and again the question of conversion and 'being born again' cropped up, as they asked us about our experience of being converted.

With these theological concerns uppermost we were surprised to hear from the same young people critical opinions about leaders of the congregation who were seen as too submissive in their dealings with the authorities, and too resistant to changes such as the introduction of Russian into the service. On the whole, however, this has not led to open splits, though some young people have left to join the Baptists, Pentecostals or, more rarely, the Catholics. Moreover, these debates are generally carried out in a friendly fraternal spirit.

Theological Questioning

For the West German theologians in our group it was necessary, though not always easy, to put aside their own theological positions as they met believers whose central problem for many years had been simply survival. It was not our task to unsettle the preaching brothers

and their congregations with modern theological questioning. We could act only as informants imparting practical questions about the liturgy, baptism and preaching, and information about our own church life.

Catholics

The character of the Catholic congregations in Central Asia tends to reflect that of their priest far more than is the case among Protestants. When a Catholic group of more than 20 believers applies for registration it has to be able to offer a priest who will be equally acceptable to the state authorities. There appear to be a considerable number of unregistered Catholic circles and groups who gather around generally elderly ladies, but amongst these it is very difficult to carry out catechetical and pastoral work.

Alma-Ata

From a lengthy conversation with Father Georg, a 70-year-old Ukrainian Catholic priest of the Byzantine rite, it appears that his congregation in Alma-Ata is predominantly elderly. He was particularly concerned at the lack of young people, something he blamed on parents who failed to offer a personal example or to cooperate in giving their children a religious education. Earlier he used to carry out catechetical work, illegally, but now he has given it up.

Dushanbe and Karaganda

These towns served by energetic Lithuanian priests — Father Benedict Jurčis in Dushanbe and Father Albinus in Karaganda — present an entirely different picture. Both have beautiful places of worship.

Here as elsewhere in an effort to keep on the right side of the law the pastors sought to prevent us from establishing any real contact with members of the congregation. On the other hand there was much evidence to suggest that they found ways to get round official restrictions on certain activities such as youth work and catechism class.

In Dushanbe the Catholics had an enthusiastic and relatively young choir master, Georg Gsell. He now works full time for the church, having earlier lost his job as a school music teacher because of his church involvement. In 1986 he composed a children's mass in

German, followed in 1987 by one in Russian. Both have been performed in the church. Quite calmly he stated:

For the moment I am allowed to carry on with my activities but I am certain that some time I shall be called to account for my work with young people. This must not be allowed to stop us carrying out this most important task.

It was reported in July 1988 that Georg Gsell is applying to emigrate to West Germany.

The position of the altar in Dushanbe showed the impact of Vatican II, though Father Benedict said that only two or three Catholic churches in the Soviet Union had made the alterations which created a new sense of community between priest and congregation. All three priests we spoke to acknowledged that the innovations of Vatican II had had only a limited impact in the Soviet Union.

Episcopal Care

For the time being the Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow wants Latvian bishops to fulfil episcopal duties in the Soviet diaspora. Only recently has a Latvian bishop been allowed to visit Central Asia. Hence most of the churches and prayer houses have not been consecrated and it has been difficult to arrange confirmations. The priests we spoke to in 1987 gave some indication that they would prefer to be under the jurisdiction of the Lithuanian hierarchy, though they gave no reasons for this preference.

Leaving aside national (Lithuanian) considerations it is likely that the priests would prefer to be under the jurisdiction of a strong Lithuanian hierarchy rather than a relatively weak Latvian hierarchy. At present the latter comprises the aged Cardinal Vaivods (92), his auxiliary — and the successor apparently favoured by the state — Bishop Cakuls, who is in poor health, and the recently consecrated auxiliary, Bishop Wilhelms Nukšs. The more dynamic candidate favoured by the Cardinal was shunted off to a rural parish.

The situation is not helped by the fact that Rome itself does not seem to have clarified properly the jurisdictional question, though it still adheres to the fiction of the archdiocese of Mohilev, now in practice defunct. For many years the vacuum was filled by prelate Michael Köhler who in Asia had *de facto* the authority of a bishop, but since his death in 1983 confusion over who is responsible for pastoral care of Central Asia has increased.

The problem has been exacerbated by the growing number of Roman Catholic parishes in the region. In 1987 German congregations

were registered in the towns of Fergana (Uzbekistan) and Vakhsh (Tadzhikistan), bringing the total up to approximately 35. Most of these are mixed German and Polish congregations, which hold services in both languages and in Russian. Where there is no priest there can be no legally recognised congregation, though sometimes registered priests ignore the law to provide these groups with pastoral care. On a day-to-day basis the spiritual life of such communities is often supervised by experienced and deeply committed elderly ladies ('church mothers'). The fact that the teaching of these ladies often blurs the fundamentals of the faith with superstition means that considerable catechetical work remains to be done, according to at least one of the priests we met.

Bishop Nukšs in Central Asia

For probably the first time in Soviet post-war history a Catholic bishop has received state permission to pay official visits to Catholic parishes in Central Asia: auxiliary Bishop Vilhelms Nukšs of the Latvian Roman Catholic Church was allowed to travel to Central Asia in June 1988. He consecrated churches, altars, and administered the holy sacrament of confirmation. The parishioners greeted him with great joy and emotion. He hopes to carry out this service every year in future, so that the needs of the Catholic parishes throughout the diaspora can be better met. As in the case of official cooperation with the German Lutherans, the state's permission for a Latvian bishop to visit Central Asia (as well as Transcarpathian Ukraine and White Russia) demonstrates the efforts of the Gorbachev administration to gain the support of believers by making concessions to them.

Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB)

Of around 3,800 congregations within the All-Union Council about 65 are German speaking. Most of these are essentially Mennonite congregations located in the southern Urals area (Orenburg region), in the Omsk, Novosibirsk and Tomsk regions, and in the newer German settlement areas in Central Asia. Many of them joined the AUCECB in 1963 because there was no other means of gaining legal recognition. Alongside the German congregations are 'German sections' who form part of wider Russian congregations but have separate German services. There are said to be about 300 of these.

The All-Union Council and the State

The All-Union Council appears to be disliked by some of the other registered Christian groups. Both Orthodox and Lutherans sometimes expressed the opinion that 'the Baptists are fishing in our pond. . . Let them gain converts from the communists.' There is also criticism of the apparently close dependence of the AUCECB on the state. In Alma-Ata we were told that the state authorities had given the Baptists 100,000 roubles for a new building. When I asked a Baptist leader about this he explained that the old prayer building was demolished to make way for an extension to the local munitions factory in 1980 and that after tough negotiations the state paid 120,000 roubles in compensation.

What was also striking about the Baptists was the note of confidence and self-assurance in their behaviour, something which contrasted clearly with the public caution of other groups. One's first impression is of a greater inner freedom than in the case of the religious communities which are not permitted to build up a nationwide church organisation. During our visits however, there were constant warnings from members of the congregations against 'informers in their own ranks'.

In Dushanbe and in Karaganda we were introduced to children's and youth groups among the AUCECB congregations. These groups, — particularly in Karaganda — were of considerable size with approximately 80 young people, clearly under the age of 18.

Theological Training

The AUCECB has evidently made no further progress towards obtaining its urgently needed preachers' seminary. The Council has been making efforts for years to gain a building permit for a genuine theological college. The correspondence courses in biblical studies, which have been available for 20 years, offer what amounts to further vocational training for recognised preachers. Every year 30 new participants are admitted to the courses. A central commission chooses the 30 entrants from the total number of candidates put forward by the senior presbyters (regional leaders) of the separate districts. Those chosen are almost invariably destined for positions of leadership; some of them even receive permission to study abroad — in Switzerland, the GDR, the German Federal Republic, and Britain. The All-Union Council's main hope and aim, however, is not to use the courses to build up a body of future leaders, but to ensure that all presbyters (by which term is meant the spiritual leaders of

congregations) receive a regular course of study at the preachers' seminary. The building site is available, the architects' plans have been ready for years, the necessary funds are in hand. Only state permission is lacking. The hope that the centenary in 1984 of the first Baptist Congress might be marked by the granting of state permission as a kind of 'birthday present' has proved an empty one.

The Language Question

Linguistically speaking, the situation of ethnically German congregations and groups in the AUCECB is characterised by a perceptible transition to Russian as the language of worship. The German-speaking services were for the most part attended only by the older generation. It was indeed a depressing picture in Dushanbe: barely 100 out of a total of 800 church members were present at the German service. (Many had gone to a German Baptist wedding, we were told.) During the service a Sunday school took place, at which some 35 children and young people from 8 to 18 years were present in various classes.

A Wedding in Karaganda

In Karaganda we attended a wedding. On the previous day a group of about 15-20 women were busy with preparations. Situated in a ghostly landscape of slagheaps, the prayer-house consists of a prayer-room proper, with seats for approximately 800 worshippers, numerous side-rooms, including rooms for orchestral and choral rehearsals (the performances there were most impressive), and various outbuildings. Finally there was a building with one side open to wind and weather, intended for use during the summer season — equipped with long tables and benches, gaily decorated, with room for at least 300 people. At the time of the wedding we found this building full of people, their ages ranging from the very young to the very old. Young people were serving those seated. What surprised us was the quietness and modest quality of the festivities (naturally there was no alcohol!). We were able to hand the happy couple, who spoke little German, a Bible.

Among the 300 or so, mostly aged, participants at the German service there were about 50 between the ages of 45 and 55. Of the 80 to 100 young people, only about half a dozen could follow what was being said in German over the loudspeakers. Our impressions were very much the same when we visited the choral rehearsal in Alma-Ata.

Autonomously Registered Mennonite Congregations

Besides the predominantly Mennonite German-speaking congregations in the All-Union Council, there is an as yet undetermined number of Mennonite congregations which have resisted incorporation into the Council. Only since the beginning of the 1970s have they had the opportunity to register 'autonomously' — that is to say, independently of the All-Union Council. These are mainly the congregations of Mennonite Brethren, who fear (it would seem justly) that being merged in the Baptist All-Union Council would cost them their Mennonite identity, which they regard as inseparable from their German speech and their centuries-old traditions. They number about 25 congregations. In Karaganda we received the impression that state interference brought some unrest into their community.

Groups of Church Mennonites

The so called 'Old' or Church Mennonites, have not, up to now, been accepted in the AUCECB, on the grounds that they do not regard 'conversion' and 'spiritual rebirth' as essential conditions for membership. Baptism at the age of 14 or thereabouts was in earlier times something of a formal act for the Church Mennonites, rather like confirmation in the Protestant church. Besides, even today they practise baptism by sprinkling, in contrast to the total immersion, customary amongst the Mennonite Brethren and Evangelical Christians and Baptists. The custom of foot-washing has fallen into disuse.

The distinction between Church Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren is becoming blurred. The Church Mennonites believe at all events that the experience of 'conversion' or 'awakening' of the Mennonite Brethren — inasmuch as these experiences are the necessary conditions for acceptance into the circle of brothers and sisters — are often brought about artificially by some kind of auto-suggestion, or specially cultivated, and are therefore often merely superficial. In the case of the Church Mennonites nobody is required to have experienced conversion, or the spiritual rebirth which is held to follow from it, as a condition of membership of the community. The total of autonomously registered Church Mennonite congregations is reckoned by them to be about 20. Like Lutherans and Catholics, both autonomously registered Mennonite Brethren and Church Mennonite communities are not allowed to form a supra-regional organisation.

Despite what has been said, the Church Mennonite congregations of

Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Kirgiziya, Turkmenistan) have set up a kind of standing conference which meets monthly to discuss current problems. These meetings are unofficial but are tolerated. Each congregation sends between three and six brothers to the meeting place. The state authorities take no action; they do not hinder the meetings. (Our Lutheran partners had tried to explain the harmful isolation of the individual Lutheran congregations of Central Asia — lack of exchanges described as 'stewing in their own juice' — by claiming that informal supra-regional meetings were legally forbidden.)

With regard to language some autonomous Mennonite congregations seem to be exemplary — although no general conclusions can be drawn from the small number of congregations we visited. My experience of meeting church members in this area who could understand German — though almost totally unable to speak it — was apparently exceptional. I was able to visit households in which four generations were living under the same roof (from the 94-year-old great-grandmother to the three year-old great-grandson) among whom a totally genuine *Werderplattdeutsch* (a West Prussian dialect, similar to that of East Prussia but not the Mennonite *Plattdeutsch*) was spoken. It was a moving experience to hear *Werderplattdeutsch*, as nowadays the dialects of East and West Prussia, now part of Poland, are dying out. The elder of the Church Mennonite congregation in Karaganda, Julius Sievert, told me that at their conferences the leading brothers urged that a conscious effort be made to use German among all members of the congregations, and particularly at home. He added:

The Lutherans are inconsistent. They demand the use of the language of Martin Luther for religious services and meetings of the congregation. Yet, for reasons of professional advancement, to avoid trouble with the authorities, and indeed to ensure their children's future in school, they often speak Russian — even in the home. It is no wonder that the young people are not able to follow religious services, especially the sermon; it is not surprising that they become bored, or stay away from services, or join the Baptists. So we urge our people to speak German constantly, at home and with their children. It is a duty that we owe to our heritage.

Unregistered Evangelicals and Baptists in Karaganda

Contact was established through my 'escort', A. Goncharov, the Russian executive committee chairman of the registered German

AUCECB congregation. He explained to me that there was a very good relationship between the registered and the unregistered communities, at any rate in Karaganda; they were at odds only in their attitude to registration. Goncharov obviously said nothing about the state control that results from registration. As soon became apparent, the unregistered congregations (the Council of Churches) regard with great disquiet the state tactics of approaching them via their contacts with those registered in the All-Union Council; the unregistered congregations feel that it could be an attempt to gain control over them.

After a short visit to a meeting of the unregistered Baptists, Goncharov wanted to bring us back to the registered. Great trouble — indeed vehement insistence — was needed to make sure that we had an undisturbed conversation with the brothers' council (Rudolf Klassen's *Schacht 38*) of the unregistered congregation. The conversations were concerned with the inner freedom of the congregations, their guerilla war with the authorities, and their Gospel witness.

There were two impressions: firstly, a certain carefree attitude, secondly, an attitude of calm defiance. These were qualities of which we had almost lost sight after two weeks among the German congregations of Central Asia. Yet these qualities were clearly only symptomatic of something else — a deep inner freedom, which everybody seemed to possess despite the lack of outer freedom. It had already become second nature for us to make no more than oblique references to certain themes, as if to signal the message, 'We don't talk about that here!' or 'Don't mention that when *he* is about!' We had soon got used to having to go out into the open air to discuss certain questions. Among the 'separated brothers', however, there was none of this. Using totally free speech — something that at first really startled us — the tactics used by the state were spoken of openly; trials were described, including the methods of manipulating them. What we were told was important; much more important, however, was the experience of this freedom and of the particular qualities of this community.

It is quite out of the question to speak of an 'underground church', as is sometimes done in the West. Believers do not live in hiding, they do not speak in whispers. The unregistered Baptists regard it as their duty to bear witness and to make their convictions known to the general public. Sometimes their activities seem unduly provocative; we may reject as excessive or 'inappropriate' some of the things done by the congregations refusing registration, just as some of the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses are regarded with distaste here in the West — things like open-air services, or various practices associated with mission (such as the singing of choruses in trains or buses or other

public places, door-to-door work, or the random accosting of members of the public).

Right from the first contact, with a disembodied voice, we were startled by the Karaganda congregation's public work: in the village street, where we happened to be, we heard the testimony of a brother, speaking over a public address system in Russian. A few young men, standing by a gate, asked what we wanted. When they heard that we came from the Federal Republic, they immediately answered us in German and led us into a courtyard, in which about 300 people (80 to 90 per cent of them young) were sitting on benches in the open air; they were singing, praying aloud, and listening to the testimony of the brothers. After the particular brother who was preaching the Word had finished with a Russian hymn, we were greeted and the meeting continued informally in German — German addresses, German songs, prayers in German.

The illegal congregations of the Council of Churches work in public, and their work is directed towards the public. It is a feature of present state policy, one indeed that goes back several years, to avoid systematic persecution or destruction of these communities, in order not to cause a high degree of public indignation, whether at home or abroad. Undoubtedly there is careful and systematic surveillance, and efforts are made to infiltrate believers' ranks. It seems that the state apparatus makes a move when there is a pressing need or a particularly favourable opportunity; perhaps the best comparison is with a permanent state of martial law that is but rarely made use of. The local press rages first and foremost against the illegal groupings of the Council of Churches and the believers who belong to them; in such articles the latter are starkly contrasted with the registered congregations of the All-Union Council, who are cited as shining examples of readiness to cooperate with the state. There is, at all events, a general belief that since the beginning of 1987 there has been a moderation — or at least a change — in the methods of state organs. On the whole gatherings for worship on the part of the unregistered in Central Asia are no longer interfered with; the authorities content themselves with surveillance. Brothers who are caught transporting literature produced by the underground press *Khristianin* are no longer sentenced to long periods of detention, their literature is simply confiscated. A sceptical attitude towards *perestroika* prevails; but there are also some signs of hope.

The Future

So far as the inner strength of the congregations is concerned, one can be pretty sure that a stage has now been reached at which their future

is being decided: will they remain German, or assume a Russian character? Such a transition, conceivable in the case of Baptists and Catholics, is almost unimaginable for the Lutherans, who would, should the latter happen, lose members to the Baptists. Much hangs, in fact, upon the attitude of the Soviet school authorities and the practice of the individual schools: will they actually put into practice the regulations which allow special instruction for Germans in the German language? That is, of course, if it is not already too late for such efforts to be made.

In another respect, too, the fate of the German-speaking congregations stands at a parting of the ways: the more liberal Soviet emigration policy seems to aim at weakening congregations by granting permits to the specially committed leaders. One remembers the words of the elder of the autonomous Church Mennonite community in Alma-Ata, Brother Sundermann, spoken in the summer of 1987: 'Nowadays the fundamental problem of our congregations is not the religious policy of the state, but emigration to the German Federal Republic.' Now he himself is in the West. During 1987 no fewer than 14,500 Germans were able to leave the Soviet Union; during 1988 more than 40,000. The figures speak for themselves. Hence the comments made by members of congregations: 'Those who are determined to remain German, and want their children to remain German, must get out of the country now!'

Perestroika — *Scepticism or Hope?*

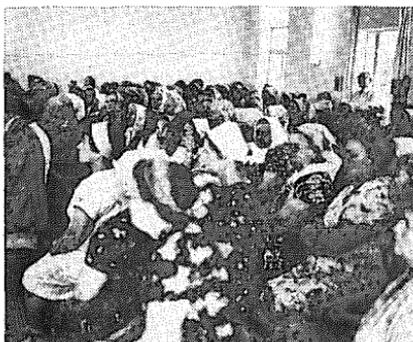
Undoubtedly one hears the term *perestroika* used from time to time, but of the liberating quality of *glasnost* we noticed little. If one enquires of German and Russian Christians, the similarity of the answers is astounding:

When Khrushchev loosened our chains after Stalin's death [the so-called thaw] we Christians had great hopes of an improvement in our conditions. And what came of it? Christians were persecuted and churches closed in a way that had not happened since the 1930s. Perhaps *perestroika* is no more than a gigantic piece of play-acting,

All the same one notices that people would like to be hopeful, and that paradoxically — despite all their scepticism — they indeed have hope. Certainly the anti-alcohol campaign has enormously impressed both the German believers and the Russian Baptists — although nobody believes that it will be successful. Yet Gorbachev has tackled this thorny problem. Will there be *perestroika* in church-state



Baptism in the Lutheran prayer house,
Karaganda.



A Lutheran service in Dushanbe.

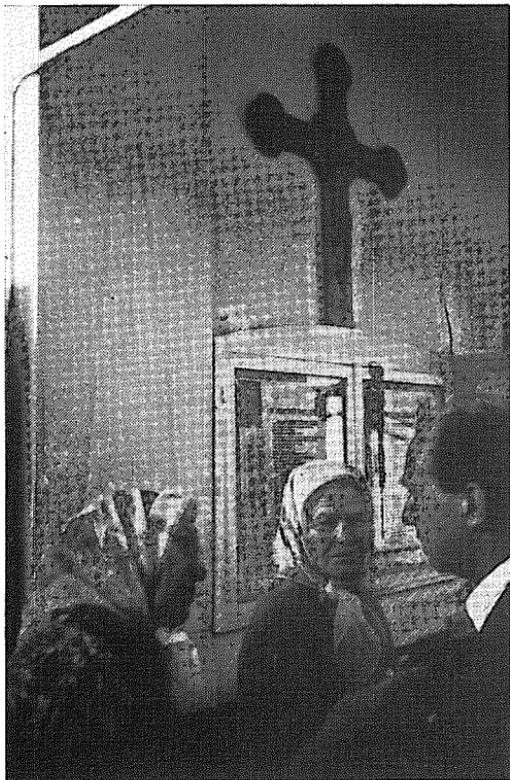
Lutherans in Central Asia.

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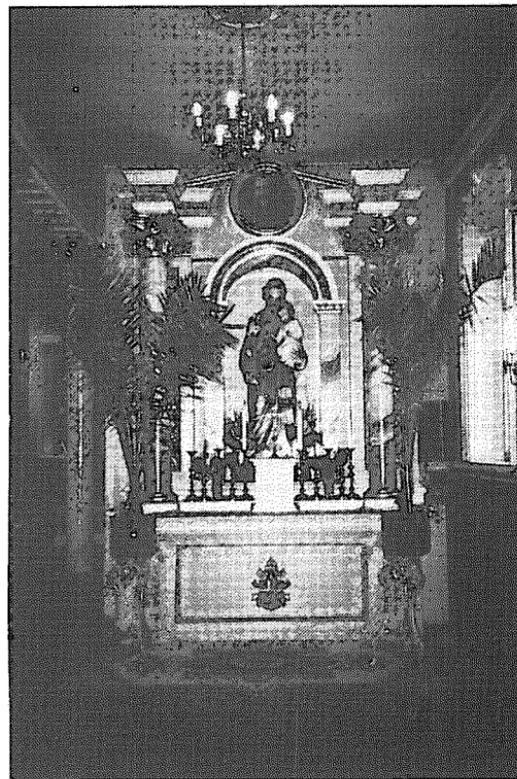
(Photos courtesy Gerd Stricker, Glaube in der 2 Welt.)



A wedding in the Lutheran prayer house in Dushanbe.



Outside the Roman Catholic church in
Alma-Ata.



A side altar in the Roman Catholic Church
in Karaganda.

Roman Catholics in Central Asia.

See article on pp. 19-33.

(Photos courtesy Gerd Stricker, Glaube in der 2 Welt.)

relations? Despite millennium celebrations, despite the reception of Orthodox church leaders in the Kremlin, despite many promises, despite the churches' expressions of thanks for state concessions, such Christians remain sceptical. Believers in the country doubt whether a genuine separation of church and state will come about; they fear that the churches and congregations will remain under the direct control of the state, which will never abandon its hold over religious affairs. True, the state will allow the churches small freedoms, praised to the skies in propaganda, but will nevertheless deny true freedom of religion.

For the German congregations in the Soviet Union, however, their problems today are of a different kind. . .

Translated from German by Arvan Gordon and John Gunnell