

Soviet Baptists engage in *perestroika*

The 44th congress of the Baptist Union of the USSR met from 21 to 24 February 1990 in the Izmailovo conference centre in Moscow, with the theme 'Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children'. The congress was the most democratic and outspoken in the history of the Union. Over 700 delegates representing churches from all over the Soviet Union decided on far-reaching reforms in the structure of the Union and for the first time directly elected the Union president and three vice-presidents. Hitherto, the congress had elected a council (the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists or AUCECB) which elected the officers of the Union and members of the executive (the Presidium) from among its membership. Delegates could block the election of a particular leader only by refusing to elect him to the council. This happened only once, in 1979.

The most immediately obvious effect of glasnost was on the atmosphere of the congress itself. The reports from the outgoing Union leadership were more informative than at previous congresses. Aleksei Bychkov gave detailed membership figures — the first time total membership had been reported to a congress, although the membership figure as of 1 January 1989 had been published in March 1989. There were now 204,156 members in 2,260 congregations. These figures show a net loss of some 33,000 members and 271 churches over the past year due to emigration of members and churches leaving the Union. In fact, altogether 42,000 Pentecostals were reported to have left the Union following the May 1989 decision of their leaders to withdraw in favour of establishing a

separate denominational body. This loss must have been compensated to some extent by movement into the Union from previously unregistered or independent Baptist churches, as well as by the record number of baptisms of new members. Baptisms increased steadily from 7089 in 1986 to well over 11,000 in 1989 (the final total for the year was not yet available). During the five years since the previous congress 183 new churches had been registered. (The Council of Religious Affairs has reported 155 newly registered congregations from 1985 to September 1989.)

Delegates demanded changes in the programme, reducing the number of greetings from visitors and musical items in order to allow more time for discussion and debate. Speakers from the floor addressed with great openness and directness the issues that concerned them. Needs in the areas of evangelisation, youth work, publishing and social and charitable ministries were discussed — all topics that at best could be referred to only cautiously five years ago. Concern was expressed about the effect on the churches of emigration of German Baptists to West Germany. Already over 1000 Baptist families had emigrated from churches in Kazakhstan alone. Some churches have been left virtually leaderless and with congregations far too small to fill buildings constructed by flourishing fellowships. The activity of the International Department of the Union was strongly criticised. It has always controlled foreign travel and the itineraries of foreign guests without being visibly accountable to anybody in the Union, and has widely been suspected of being a

channel for KGB influence. Although dissatisfaction with the department was often expressed privately in the past, and at earlier congresses the leadership had promised to bring it under greater control, its existence was accepted as a necessary evil. The will of this congress was clearly that the department should be dissolved and delegates will be disappointed if this does not happen. Doubts were expressed about continued membership of the World Council of Churches. Many Soviet Baptists would prefer the Union to have observer status at the WCC rather than be a full member. Ukrainian Baptists, who make up about 50% of the membership of the Union, at their conference to select congress delegates voted decisively for withdrawal from the WCC.

As one of the major items of business delegates discussed the draft of a new statute for the Union. The name of the denomination becomes officially the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of the USSR. Hitherto the Union as such has had no legal status, the officially recognised body being the All-Union Council. (The word Union in that title refers to the Soviet Union, i.e. All-Union means that the body covers the whole of the Soviet Union.) The draft re-emphasises the autonomy of local churches and the Union is now stated to consist of associations and unions of churches in the various republics coming together voluntarily for fellowship and co-operation. The larger republics will be subdivided into regional associations. In the new structure the Board of the Union will consist of the president and three vice-presidents and all chairmen of republic associations, who will be directly elected by republic conferences. A new Council of the Union, replacing the All-Union Council

hitherto elected by the congress, will consist of the board members together with the deputy chairmen from the republics and the regional chairmen from all over the Soviet Union. These chairmen will also be directly elected by delegates to regional conferences. This reform will bring Soviet Baptists closer to the European Baptist tradition of local independence, with the Union being a channel for co-operation rather than a central directing body. The Council must meet at least once a year and approve the appointments of chairmen of commissions of the Union which will co-ordinate various aspects of church activity. A congress must be called every 4 years (instead of every 5 under present rules) and the Council is empowered to call an emergency congress. Republican associations will hold their own congresses every 4 years and have elected Councils empowered to call emergency congresses. The Estonian and Latvian Baptist churches will be forming separate Unions, restoring the independence that they enjoyed before the Soviet annexation of their countries during the Second World War, though they will also be affiliated to the USSR Union in the same way as the associations in the other republics.

The previous centralised structure was imposed by the Soviet authorities as a means of controlling the church. The indirect election procedure ensured that the authorities had to put pressure on only a relatively small group of leaders to ensure the election of Union officials that they favoured. The structure of the Union was remarkably similar to that of the Communist Party, no doubt in the hope that it could more easily be manipulated. The Union Congress, meeting every five years, elected a Council, which corresponded to the Party Central Committee. It in turn elected a Presidium (Executive), cor-

responding to the Politburo, and a General Secretary, who was clearly seen as the most powerful official of the Union. Republic and regional superintendents (*starshiye presviteriy* — senior presbyters), while nominally elected from below, were often imposed from above, and duplicated the structure of republic and regional Party secretaries. Reforms within the Union over the past 25 years had begun to modify this structure, for example with superintendents standing for election at regional conferences. However, it was only at the conference of the churches of the Russian republic in January of this year that for the first time three deputy superintendents were elected from a list of five candidates. It is interesting to note that the new structure mirrors the trend in Soviet society, with strong moves towards local autonomy and independence combined with a stronger executive-style president. (The Baptists elected their new-style president just a few weeks before the Supreme Soviet elected Mikhail Gorbachev as president with greatly increased powers.)

Under the new election procedure delegates gained direct control over the choice of leader for the four top positions in the Union. Two whole sessions on the third day of the congress were devoted to discussion of the merits of the candidates nominated for these posts. The new president, 44-year-old Grigori Komendant, since 1981 the deputy superintendent for Baptist churches in Ukraine, received the support of 90% of delegates. Komendant was elected to the Union's council at the last congress in 1985 and in May 1989 was made a non-voting member of the executive. His three deputies are Aleksei Bychkov, who has been General Secretary since 1971; Nikolai Kolesnikov, who has been Treasurer since 1979; and Aleksandr Firisyuk,

deputy superintendent for Belorussia and since May 1989 acting chairman of the Union's audit committee. The top leadership, therefore, represents a mix of those with experience in running the Union and new blood. The post of General Secretary has been abolished, with the three vice-presidents sharing out responsibility for various aspects of Union activity. Bychkov will be responsible for education and overseas communication, Kolesnikov for mission and evangelism and Firisyuk for administration and finance.

Furthermore, according to the retiring Union president Yevgeni Logvinenko, speaking after the congress, there was for the first time in recent years no interference by state officials in the leadership elections — presumably since the last free conferences of the Baptist and Evangelical Christian Unions in the late 1920's. This is the first public admission that there has been outside interference in Baptist Union elections, although it was known that in the past a Council of Religious Affairs official was always present for the elections even though all other non-delegates were excluded from the proceedings.

Ex-vice president Yakov Dukhonenko, who was elected president at the last meeting of the All-Union Council in December 1989 decided not to stand for president at the Congress as he did not wish to move to Moscow from Kiev. However, as superintendent for Ukraine he will be a member of the new board as will the outgoing president, Yevgeni Logvinenko, who is superintendent for the Russian republic. However, some other past executive members will be retiring from the top leadership, notably Mikhail Zhidkov, an executive member for over twenty years and son of the first AUCECB president Yakov Zhidkov, who headed the Union from 1944 to 1966. He has

recently been involved in the social and charity work of the church and he is expected to devote himself to this full-time.

The changing situation under *glasnost*' and *perestroika* had already had the effect of increasing local independence and initiatives. Several new periodicals have begun to appear both officially and unofficially. The monthly newspaper of the Union *Khristianskoye slovo* (*Christian Word*), which began publication in March 1989 as *Informatsionny byulleten'* (*Information Bulletin*), was preceded by four months by the unofficial newspaper *Protestant*. These have been followed by *Khrystyans'ke zhyttya* (*Christian Life*) published every two months by the Ukrainian Baptists; *Vera i zhizn'* (*Faith and Life*), issued by Baptists in the Russian Federation; and *Dal'nevostochny khristianin* (*Christian in the Far East*), edited by Sergei Fomenko from Khabarovsk. With the lifting of restrictions training courses for preachers and Sunday school teachers have been started in at least fifteen regions and republics and by individual local churches. The Protestant publishing group have also begun holding non-official Bible courses lasting one month each in Moscow.

One highlight of the congress was the official publication of the history of the Baptist movement in Russia and the USSR, for which material has been gathered over the past decade. A copy of the book was presented to all delegates.

In addition to the delegates there were 250 observers and guests from within the Soviet Union and 34 foreign guests, including Baptist

World Alliance president, Noel Vose, BWA president-elect, Knud Wumpelman, BWA general secretary, Denton Lotz, European Baptist Federation secretary, Karl-Heinz Walter, and David Coffey, general secretary elect of the British Baptist Union. On the evening of 21 February Denton Lotz and Nikolai Kolesnikov led a seminar on evangelism for congress participants.

The congress concluded by approving the issue of two appeals, addressed to all believers in the USSR and to the peoples of the USSR pleading for ethnic tolerance, and a letter to President Gorbachev outlining their desire to see Sunday schools and other church activities legalised, and pressing for the early enactment of the long-promised Law on Freedom of Conscience.

On Monday 26 February, the Union held a press conference. New president, Grigori Komendant pledged to implement the wishes of the congress for structural changes. He said that if he was unable to do so within six months he would resign and call another congress.

Although previous congresses have been held with the consent and co-operation of the Soviet authorities this congress was for the first time held in a state conference centre rather than in the cramped premises of the Moscow Baptist Church and headquarters. A short report on the opening service of the congress on the evening of 20 February appeared in the government newspaper, *Izvestiya*, on 21 February and on television news.