

“What differs and what unites the worship and liturgy style of the Eurasian UMC which is placed in seven countries of the former USSR’s territory?”

Some words from historical background

In the 20th century, for almost 70 years in Russia (and the former Soviet Union) the doctrine of atheism reigned on every level, starting at the highest governmental level.

Actually, thoughts about “Dying God” in the minds of Russian people were already present in the nineteenth century. Dostoyevsky in his novels, as well as many other great Russian philosophers, writers and thinkers, described this crisis with painful trustworthiness, predicting many events that would happen within Russia in 20th century.

In the nineties of this last century, when we experienced the collapse of the USSR, an overwhelming majority of the citizenry, almost on all territories of the former USSR (Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia...) were atheists, total heathen. We had almost 5 generations of people who never heard about God as a living person. They were sure that God doesn’t exist.

The only place where God and ideas about him remained was in Russian culture: in museums where icons of ROC were on exhibitions, in conservatories where Russian people might hear beautiful oratories dedicated to God, and the writings of great Russian composers of past centuries. All oratories were performed by choruses composed of secular people. Words referring to God could be found in some Russian literature, in books by Dostoyevski, Tolstoj, and Leskov. However, not all their books with apparent religious thoughts were allowed to general public.

Of course there were believers in Russia (former and the lands of the former USSR) in all times, even throughout the years of atheism. These believers were in the ROC, the Russian Baptist Church, Catholics, and among other hiding Protestant denominations. There were also Buddhists and Muslims in the regions of the former USSR.

The percentage of believers at that time and now – according to statistical observation – has not change much. It fluctuates from 1 to 2 percent. The overwhelming majority of Russian-speaking people (249 million) still remain atheists. Although, according to statistics, 80 percent of Russians say that they are ROC believers. It is interesting that usually when you ask a Russian about God and about faith, he (she) answers, “I’m an Orthodox believer.” Rarely will they say, “I’m a Christian”. They understand the question about faith in matters of culture and traditions, instead of religion (connection between human beings and God).

The first years after the breaking up of the USSR the government didn’t know what to do with all this freedom and the Russian Orthodox Church (the ROC from here) together with other traditional religious denominations which were still recovering from the last oppressions and persecutions, took a temporizing position. United Methodists were able to act freely and they were received on high governmental levels. Almost all doors were opened to them.

United Methodist Churches (UMC) from Europe and USA actively participated in help to post Soviet people who suffered because of lack of food, medicine and social help. This assistance was distributed throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) through peace foundations, the name of organizations which work for strengthening cultural and friendly relations between Russia (Soviet Union) and other countries.

Patrick Ph. Streiff describes that situation in such words:

The General Board of Global Ministries supported initiatives among United Methodists and helped to develop a holistic ministry in view of the tremendous needs for food, medical care, education, etc. Many congregations took up prison ministries, ministry among alcoholics, health services or food and relief support. In 1991, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Soviet Peace Fund and Methodists agencies agreed upon a co-operative programme for development. Relief work was immediately taken up on a large scale.¹

Evangelization and Church Development happened chaotically here and there. The UMC did not have a clear plan for it. United Methodists just wanted to help to suffering Post-Soviet people.

In those years that huge humanitarian help and strong relationships with peace foundations played important role for spreading the UMC in Eurasia later.

Till this time, to be a United Methodist believer here in Eurasia means either to be a participant of a Methodist's cult (in view of Russian Orthodox believers), or to be a member of unknown church (for huge number of unchurched people in Eurasia the UMC is an unknown church).

According to recent statistical datum, the number of United Methodists in Eurasia is about 2000 people. Among 249 millions people living in Eurasia this number looks so insignificantly. But we exist and our faith is objectively acts in our life.

Differences in Worship style and in liturgy in the UMC of Euro-Asia

Meanwhile the number of UMC and Bible groups were increasing and now we have about 100 churches and Bible Groups here in Eurasia. Some groups were organized by leaders of the existing UMC, but most of groups and churches were organized by people who got to know about United Methodist theology and decided to

¹ Streiff, Patrick. *Methodism in Europe: 19th and 20th century*. Narva: Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary, 2003, 244.

join to the UMC, although they have another denominational background in the beginning.

Some of our pastors came to the UMC from Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) backgrounds. As a result this fact strongly influence the style of Worship in their churches.

When I visit our churches with educational seminars and other activities, I see this various difference in all its richness, including cultural and traditional differences.

In some of our UMC buildings in Russia we have rooms where ROC icons are a centered place of Worship, with candles and all sings of reverence. We have believers, UMC believers, Russian UMC believers who have such need – to pray God before the icon, to pray for dead friends and relatives and to put the lighting candle for their souls (traditions of the ROC).

In this connection, I remember, in one book I read that in the naked and simple Protestantism there are so little place for sacral feeling, feeling of awe before God.

I think it is not accidentally that our believers in Russia tend to satisfy their need for sacral feeling, arranging special the ROC rooms for Worship and Prayer.

In fact, when our UMC believers, Russian UMC believers bring their treasured family's icons to our UM Churches, it is a sign of big trust. And when we allowed them to do it, it showed to them that we are not a sect (cult), we are the Church.

In some of our churches Worship style reminds Worship service in Pentecostal and Charismatical churches: free and contemporary style of musical worship, prayers in tongues publicly, prophetic spirit and so on.

In some of our churches people are very suspicious if you start to pray in tongues, because they have a very strong Baptist's background and you will not notice in their place of Worship any sign of icons and so on...

In some of our churches, which are placed in Central Asia – the worship is quite different from everything which you might see. For example, in one place in Uzbekistan, our believers, ethnically Uzbeks, forced to hide their Christianity because of political persecutions from local administrative agents. Our people are gathering around the table (dastarkhan), where all kind of traditional food is placed and then they take their Bibles and start to sing quietly, pray and listen the preacher, who is sitting also at the table. All these things are doing because of the police which may rush into your home just to know what are you doing. Government is very suspicious to any religious activity among ethnically Uzbeks because of fear of terrorism.

Somehow this style of worship which our brothers and sisters in Uzbekistan forced to do, reminds me the picture where Jesus and His disciples gathered together on Last Supper. There is something symbolical in this parallel.

What unites the United Methodist Churches of Eurasia, in spite of cultural, traditional and other differences?

People who live in the post-soviet territory and who are calling themselves United Methodist Christians are still seeking their own identity. The first UMC in Moscow recently celebrated its 17th anniversary. It means, that first Methodists came to Moscow 17 years ago. As United Methodists believers we need to know more about our Church, about the task which God gave to our Church in Eurasian territory and how we may fulfill this task fruitfully, not contradicting the traditional and cultural setting of our living, but using these differences synergistically.

Here in Eurasia we don't have many United Methodist books. Only few of them were translated on Russian. Most of our pastors and leaders are reading the books which are written by either Pentecostal, Charismatical, or Baptist's authors.

Our pastors and laity get to know about the United Methodist doctrines, worship and liturgy style mostly through:

- 1) Theological Seminary of Russian United Methodist Church
- 2) Annual Conferences of the Eurasian UMC
- 3) Seminars on conference, district or local levels, which are conducted by our friends from the UMC abroad

So it was very important for the Eurasian UMC when the first official hymn-book of the Russian United Methodist Church, *Mir Vam* (Peace to You), was published in 2002. For most of our United Methodist believers it was one of the few links, which connected us with common United Methodists believes which are expressed in hymns and songs, and this book has also connections with Russian culture and other cultural traditional songs of our global UMC.

Another very important step was publishing of the Worship Book of the Russian United Methodist Church - *Come, worship the Lord* – 2004. In this book which now all our Eurasian churches have, we practice the same Worship style, which is based on United Methodist theological background with some cultural disseminations (impregnations). But I have to say that this book is suitable mostly for Russia, and for people who feel big influence from Russian Orthodox culture. If we think about future, we will need another Book of Worship for our believers who live in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and may be in Turkmenistan. They live in countries where the ROC doesn't have such influence like in Russia. They life in countries where traditional religion is Islam.

Next big step in our United Methodist self-identification was publication of United Methodist catechism - *We believe* - the book produced by the Russia United Methodist

Church. The book was written by UM missionary, Ev Erbele, who lived and served in Russia for more than 10 years. One part of this book explains the main basis of Christian beliefs, another part of the book explains features of United Methodist Church's belief.

Finally, after more than 15 years UM presence in Eurasia, we have the Book of Discipline of the UMC in Northern Europe translated on Russian. So it is one more step, the very important step towards our United Methodist's self-identification and self-understanding here in Eurasia.

So among numerous difficulties, different cultural and traditional settings, the UMC in Eurasia is still seeking its own identity. I'm sure that the UMC in Russia will be different from the UMC in Ukraine and in Kazakhstan. National culture and traditions, history and roots will influence the image of the future UMC in Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan. However, the general connections with the main message of Wesley about Christ, a message about the grace of our Lord which is seeking (prevenient), justifying and sanctifying believers will remain.