

Inspiring examples of co-operation in witness and mission

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The title of my presentation allows me to move in one of two different, though complementary directions. It looks backward, at several recent examples of co-operation in mission, and it also looks to a future where co-operative mission is increasingly possible.

The English title also allows me to take the term 'inspiring' as either a verb or as an adjective. As an adjective it allows me to offer several examples to inform and encourage. As a verb it reminds me of the limited scope and achievement of co-operative mission up to this point and suggests the need to intensify efforts in this area. The ambiguity within the title is thus intended.

Secondly, what I offer is not theoretical or abstract. That would have perhaps given the false impression that everything was possible or that everything has been achieved. That would also be a false impression and a false report. By offering theology through the narrative of real, though limited, examples I hope to illustrate the realities as well as the possibilities.

A personal introduction

I am Baptist minister from England. I served five years as the pastor of a local congregation, three years working for the equivalent of a diocese, and finally served in the national Mission Department of the Baptist Union for eight years. After that I was seconded for three years by the Church Mission Society to work with the Conference of European Churches as a Researcher in European Mission. My doctoral training is in missiology and I have a personal and professional interest in contemporary Orthodox Mission. I have now been based for three months at Redcliffe College, an evangelical mission training college, where I serve as the founding Director of the Nova Research Centre and as their first Tutor in European Studies. I will teach a regular class in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Initial considerations

a. As a Baptist Minister from England I am bound by the discipline of a shared covenant with other Baptist Ministers which prioritises the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-19. This is normative of Baptist identity. However, I must immediately add that the *Charta Oecumenica*, signed by the Conference of European Churches and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Europe CEE in 2001 provides me with an ecumenically responsible framework within which to consider co-operation in mission. It is a minimalist text. It is certainly not a perfect text, but the process it envisages allows room for exploration of the contours of possible co-operation in mission in the company of other Churches, avoiding the danger of syncretism or proselytism.¹ I am also conscious that it does not bring into its scope the many Protestant mission agencies that are most likely to provoke the charges of proselytism.

b. As I understand it the witness of the Russian Orthodox Church is determined by the 2005 'Concept of the Missionary Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church 2005-2010'.² Though I suspect this does not exhaust its current missionary activity. Of course, the Document allows each Diocese the freedom to develop these general concepts according to its particular setting. I also understand that the Document helps us to understand the various informal statements of the Orthodox hierarchs, for example, Metropolitan Kyrill in an internet interview regarding Lutheranism in Russia. He was asked about the possibility of co-operation in the field of joint evangelization of children and youth. He replied,

Certainly, we should use the experience of this cooperation in Russia as well, the more so that we have very good relations with the Russian Lutherans. Social work, religious education, the Christian social thought appears to be the priority field for our interaction.

Properly speaking, it is this work that will become our common contribution to the evangelization of all Russia, including children and youth.³

Asking a representative of the DER to comment on my copy of the *Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's to the non-Orthodox*, in section 4.10 where I had underlined, 'In situations where it does not come into conflict with Orthodox faith and spiritual practice, joint programmes of religious education and catechism should be developed.', he had added in his own writing, 'Yeah!'

The 2005-2010 Missionary Document refers to educational mission (*votzerkovleniye*) as preparation for Holy Baptism. However the type of co-operation in religious education and catechism envisaged elsewhere is not mentioned in the Missionary Document. This may simply reflect a desire to distinguish between pedagogy and missiology.

Early attempts at co-operative witness

I refer here briefly to two early attempts at this point because these have both been raised by various spokesmen for the Department for External Relations as reasons why common mission is not possible.

a. The 1992 Mission Volga was organised by Campus Crusade for Christ as a twelve city tour by 250 Christians onboard the ship Alexander Radishev. Initially the Protestant organisers had sought the endorsement of the Moscow Patriarchate but Church hierarchs withheld their endorsement, stating merely that individual Orthodox were free to participate. The chief Orthodox enthusiast in Mission Volga was Fr. Markell Vetrov of St. Petersburg.

b. Co-Mission was introduced in 1992 to train teachers in Russian schools to teach Christian Values. Representatives met with the Moscow Patriarchate who expressed cautions about the Protestant perspective but considered them appropriate for teaching morality and ethics based on Scripture and the Christian Faith.⁴ Restrictions were placed on direct contact with children, a condition broached at the invitation of the Director of one school. Some Orthodox clearly felt that the dangers of likely proselytism were too serious to be ignored. The agreement with CoMission was withdrawn in February or March of 1995.⁵

Mark Elliott of the East-West Church and Ministry Report stated in 1996 that the critics of Western Protestantism in Russia at that time argued that, "Protestants should either help Orthodoxy recoup and recover, or stand aside and allow it time to regain its strength, rather than take spiritual advantage of its present weakened condition."⁶

Co-operative approaches to mission can learn a great deal from these two early efforts. There remains much fear, suspicion, and defensiveness to be overcome in the journey towards more effective co-operation.⁷

Models and inspiration

Two things need to be said. Firstly, the examples I offer are modest in scale. Suspicion, hesitation, and hostility characterise typical attempts at co-operation in mission and witness. The terminology that has been variously used to describe this area of shared experience has been used to deepen polarised positions. CEC referred to 'Unity in mission' throughout the period of the 1990s. This had the capacity for misunderstanding because it can imply ecclesial unity. Common mission has been used also, but some within the Russian Church have remonstrated with me that here have never been any programmes of common mission as far as the Russian Church is concerned. For these and similar reasons I am only moderately optimistic about possibilities for co-operation in the immediate future. Section 5.5 of the *Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's attitude to the non-Orthodox* states that it is possible and beneficial to co-operate in diakonia, social service, and peacemaking. Suspending judgement as to whether one considers these as elements of the missionary activity of the Church, Section

5.5 concludes, "The Russian Orthodox Church maintains co-operation with various Christian denominations and international Christian organisations in the task of common witness before secular society." This was interpreted for me by a DER representative in the following way, "Normally, though not exclusively, understood as witness about morals."

Secondly, I am very aware that many of these examples are probably well known to some of you here and the limited number of examples that exist mean that they are probably reasonably widely known to Orthodox committed to the missionary task of the Churches.

With these two qualifications in mind I attempt to begin to describe various levels of co-operation in mission.

Example One: Co-operation in missiological education

Fr. Martin Ritsi, Director of the Orthodox Christian Mission Centre, St. Augustine FL, studied Church Growth and Cultural Anthropology under Peter Wagner at Fuller School of World Missions, in California, after four years missionary service in Kenya with Archbishop Anastasios (1987-90). Fr. Martin describes, "soaking up all of Wagner's courses." The motivation to attend Fuller was as a consequence of the first four years' of mission in Kenya, attending the Urbana Missions Conference as a seminarian, reading Donald McGavran's book 'Understanding Church Growth', reading the Perspectives material from Ralph P Winter. He realised that a lot of what he was encountering ran counter to common sense, "at least counter to what my common sense was telling me." He decided that if he was going to stay with the missions calling that he needed some further training.

He served in Albania from 1991-98. His choice of a Master's programme in Church Growth led him to conclude that Albania as a mission field, following the collapse of communism, was capable of being explained missiologically in terms of, 'receptivity theory'. This element of Church Growth Theory seeks the greatest spiritual harvest in the shortest time as a response to preaching the Gospel. Linguistic, social, and cultural commonalities are identified that enable the rapid spread of the Gospel. Albania was also strategic because the OCMC had to make best use of the small number of missionaries it had. On one occasion, Fr. Martin baptised half a village on the same day. There was a sense of the miraculous about what was happening.

As the Director of the OCMC, Fr. Martin attends an annual gathering of Heads of Mission Agencies called by the National Council of Churches. These leaders dialogue about what's happening in their respective agencies. On his first visit he felt like the new kid on the block, but heard others sharing about how they had turned the tide in their organisations by holding the decline in numbers of mission personnel over the previous year. He reported on a doubling of numbers, from six to twelve!

The story of Fr. Martin and OCMC is an inspiring example of protestant and evangelical contribution to missiological education. It was not co-operation in mission in a strict sense but the mutual enrichment and inspiration is very apparent.

My own limited experience of teaching 'Contemporary Orthodox Mission' in the Orthodox Theological Faculty of Alba Iulia, Romania, is evidence that, "Re-telling stories of the saints and the people of faith can inspire Orthodox believers to faith and mission."⁸ Why are these stories little known outside of Orthodox Mission Institutes such as St. Philaret's?

Example Two: Bulgaria and the Jesus film

In Bulgaria, during late 1999 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church co-operated with evangelical Christians to distribute 3,000 copies of the 1979 Jesus film. The mayor in Sofia was supportive and made a venue available. Over one thousand letters of thanks were sent by grateful people. Only two letters were negative, and one of those was from an evangelical pastor!

Last year, the Bulgarian Church distanced itself from a countrywide project offering free showings of the film "The Story of Jesus for Children", based on the 1979 film.⁹ The reason offered by Doncho Alexandrov, spokesperson for the church's metropolitan of Varna, was that the campaign was run by the Protestant organization, Agape, a registered NGO. He stated that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church had its own programme to celebrate Easter. "This film is an attempt to evangelise Bulgaria [and] to turn it into a Protestant country," he said.

The film was screened free of charge at major cinemas in Sofia and in large cities and towns throughout the country. The screenings ran for the four weeks prior to Easter and were advertised through a large-scale campaign. After screenings, viewers were handed CDs and brochures on Christian family values, the New Testament, and Christian ethics.

The same film was at the centre of both programmes of evangelization and presumably many of the evangelicals involved were the same in both cases. Co-operation in mission is clearly dependent upon the context, determined by the particularities of history, self-identity, and suspicion.

Example Three: Alpha & Orthodoxy

During June 2005, Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk, Belarus, attended an Alpha International Conference at the Anglican Parish Church of Holy Trinity, Brompton in the fashionable South Kensington district of London.

A number of CMS mission partners have run the course in southern Russia, Romania and Ukraine and in keeping with its calling of being a bridge-builder, CMS invited the two senior hierarchs to the International Alpha Conference.

Metropolitan Filaret was so moved by people's testimonies about their lives being transformed by Alpha that he went up onto the dais to address the gathering where he prayed to the Holy Spirit for the meeting in a, 'somewhat Orthodox yet charismatic manner'.¹⁰

In 2006, the seriousness with which Alpha is being explored was indicated by the request of 'The Light of Orthodoxy' that Metropolitan Filaret, as the Chair of the Theological Commission, issue it with an official instruction to conduct a full study into Alpha and to see how adaptable it is to the Orthodox Church and theology. Obviously there are questions about the more charismatic elements, particularly 'speaking in tongues'.

Writing in 2006, the former CMS Manager for Central and Eastern Europe, Timothy Okroev, wrote, "Russia is a traditionally Orthodox country but millions of people remain nominal Christians there without always realizing their spiritual roots and their membership of the wider Body of Christ. As evangelical movements begin to emerge and participate in strands of the Church in Russia's outreach, CMS strives to help them in that mission."¹¹ CMS continues to support initiatives that relate to Alpha within the Russian Church, even the anticipated Orthodox Alpha office in order to make Alpha an official evangelistic tool of the Church and the Missionary Department under Archbishop Ioann.

In Russia during 2006 there were 2,755 Alpha manuals sold by Alpha Russia. Since Alpha was first made available in Russia, 16,972 manuals have been sold. In 2004 there were 172 Alpha courses running in Russia, in 2005 there were 203, and in 2006 there were 240. During 2006 there was an average of 45 guests per Alpha course and each course was run on average three times. This means it is *possible* that up to as many as 32,400 people attended at least one Alpha course in 2006. In practice, there are likely to have been a core of people who will have attended each of the three courses in any one location (organizers and hosts, for example). This makes it more likely that somewhere between 25,000-28,000 are likely to have attended an Alpha course for the *first time* in 2006.¹²

Example Four: Developing elements of Orthodox missiology in co-operation with the non-Orthodox

In 2003 the World Council of Churches organized the, 'School for Mission: Preaching the Gospel in Eastern Europe'. It was held in Warsaw, 9th-16th October 2003, at the European Centre for Communication and Culture in conjunction with the Conference of European Churches. Working in a co-operative environment alongside missiologists representing many Christian Churches, evangelism was defined by the Orthodox participants as: "Proclaiming, presenting and witnessing in love the good news of salvation which Jesus Christ offers through the Church to all a-religious and non-Christians, and nominal believers. This proclamation, presentation and witness must always be done in a way that respects the freedom of the other".¹³

Example Five: Co-operative witness to the European Institutions

Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, of Vienna and Austria, the representative of the Russian Church to the European Institutions in Brussels, has written of the necessity of Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelicals in Europe making joint representation to the European Institutions. On the 17th May 2007, Bishop Hilarion represented the Russian Church at a meeting of the Leaders of the European Religious Communities with the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. He addressed the need for a consultative group, "within the European Commission whose special task would be to bring together the EU leaders and the religious representatives on a regular basis."¹⁴

This missionary opportunity is offered by the Draft Constitutional Treaty of the European Union. Article I-52, Clause 3, envisages an open, transparent, and frequent dialogue between the Churches and the European Institutions.

Hilarion points to the essential missionary task of the Orthodox Church in Europe in the following way, "It is important that the Orthodox actively participate in the dialogue with European political structures, at a time when the identity of the New Europe is still in the process of formation..."¹⁵ This missionary task follows from the Orthodox rejection of a private-public divide in the realm of faith. Treating faith as purely personal, "contradicts the missionary imperative of... Christianity."¹⁶

Representatives of Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical Churches met recently in Brussels to discuss together a submission to the Council of Europe's white paper on 'Intercultural dialogue in Europe'. This is a timely and necessary example of critical missionary solidarity between the Christian Churches in Europe vis-à-vis the European Institutions.

Example Six: Co-operating in diaconal mission in Oxford

The city of Oxford, England, is home to a Night shelter for the homeless. Playing a key role in this shelter are the local Oxford churches. This is an excellent example of ecumenical co-operation in mission, and one in which the Oxford Orthodox Community plays an important role.¹⁷

Example Seven: Co-operative approaches to buildings and mission

When Syrian Orthodox and Swedish Lutheran liturgical vestments are interspersed in the same vestry closet, something quite unique is underway. In the Parish of Råslett, south of Jonkoping in Sweden, the Oriental Syrian Orthodox Church is making use of the Lutheran Parish building. Father Thomas and Pastor Birgitta Aschan are at the centre of a unique ecumenical encounter that grows out of a shared commitment to minister to the peoples of their area in Sweden. Once a year the two Priests celebrate their respective Liturgies at the same table with the blessing and permission of their respective Bishops. The interspersed form of the Eucharistic liturgies symbolises the mutual commitment of the Lutheran and the Syrian Orthodox communities to each other, given practical expression through the social care extended by each to the other.

The diverse diaconal and spiritual services offered by the Råslett church, in southern Jonkoping, reflect the personal and spiritual needs of the surrounding population, a high percentage of them immigrant workers. Sharing liturgically and pastorally in this way carries the risk of misunderstanding, but this type of risk is characteristic of those who claim to follow Christ in the mission of God.

In the Nekresi Diocese in the North East of Georgia, the Presbyterian Church of the USA had entered a partnership with the Orthodox Bishop of the Diocese and were providing essential funds for the extensive renovation and repair of the Church buildings of the Diocese. \$150,000 had been raised by PCUSA congregations to assist in this renovation work and had provided for a parish and cultural centre at the heart of the local community.

Example eight: Co-operative mission and non-Orthodox missionary societies.

The Church Missionary Society of the Church of England, or Anglican Church, has wide experience of co-operation in mission with Orthodox Churches in Romania, Georgia, Russia, Egypt, Armenia, and naturally in the UK. It supports educational programmes for the Armenian Brotherhood, for example. It has developed positive relationships with some parts of the Lord's Army in Romania, in particular co-operating in summer Childrens' Camps and evangelistic literature. In Georgia the CMS has co-operated in the recent past with Zarebi, with 20% of their support helping to fund salary costs of the staff, office expenses including rent and administration costs, with 80% supporting the actual running costs of over ten different projects, varying from community development and medical outreach to diaconia and mission in Islamic context.

Some suggested guidelines for co-operative approaches to witness and mission

- Pay diligent attention to values of openness, honesty and trust.
- Develop a common commitment to ecumenical discipline.
- Do not be afraid of critical solidarity with the partner in mission.
- Work hard at explaining and understanding the terminology of mission and witness.
- Avoid drawing attention to the weaknesses of the partner's practice and theology of mission whilst only pointing to the best examples from your own practice and theology.
- Avoid attributing theological positions to your partner – ask them to explain their position.

May I remind you of something written by Professor Kochetkov in 2002?

“Russian Orthodox and Protestant believers can collaborate in fields such as evangelism, mission, catechism, humanitarian aid and charity, publishing and distributing books. The most difficult part of the problem is finding a common language with the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet it is most desirable to promote some contacts, or interaction, or networking to coordinate plans and actions. Most often this can be done only through humility and mutual repentance. Repentance will make Christians closer to Christ and to each other.”¹⁸

To the spirit of this vision I add my sincere prayer to the Lord of the Harvest, 'Lord send more labourers!' and may I be permitted to add, 'May Orthodox and Protestant labour together in the same harvest!'

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Footnotes

¹ 2. Proclaiming the Gospel together

The most important task of the churches in Europe is the common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all. The widespread lack of corporate and individual orientation and falling away from Christian values challenge Christians to testify to their faith, particularly in response to the quest for meaning which is being pursued in so many forms. This witness will require increased dedication to Christian education (e.g. catechism classes) and pastoral care in local congregations, with a sharing of experiences in these fields. It is equally important for the whole people of God together to communicate the Gospel in the public domain, which also means responsible commitments to social and political issues.

We commit ourselves

- to discuss our plans for evangelisation with other churches, entering into agreements with them and thus avoiding harmful competition and the risk of fresh divisions;
- to recognise that every person can freely choose his or her religious and church affiliation as a matter of conscience, which means not inducing anyone to convert through moral pressure or material incentive, but also not hindering anyone from entering into conversion of his or her own free will.

² КОНЦЕПЦИЯ МИССИОНЕРСКОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ РУССКОЙ ПРАВОСЛАВНОЙ ЦЕРКВИ НА 2005-2010 ГОДЫ

³ DECR Communication Service. www.mospat.ru

⁴ 'CoMission: Teaching Teachers in Russia', in *Christianity Today*, 14 December 1992, p57

⁵ See 'CoMission Agreement cancelled', in *Christianity Today*, 24 March 1995, p52

⁶ Mark Elliott, 'East European Missions, Perestroika, and Orthodox-Evangelical Tensions', in *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol XVI [2], Apr 1996.

⁷ For more on this see, for example, Mark Elliott Response to "Evangelical Missions in Eastern Orthodox Lands", in *Trinity World Forum*, Winter 1996

"Bradley Nassif's... Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism has tackled difficult but important work in seeking better understanding between these two Christian traditions. In addition, a hearty endorsement is in order for his four-step plan for missionary work in Eastern Orthodox lands, focusing on 1) thorough cultural preparation, 2) the exercise of common courtesy and deference, 3) the study of Orthodoxy, and 4) the use of the church fathers as well as Scripture to counter theological aberrations among some Orthodox.

As Dr. Nassif suggests, Evangelical ministries should make good faith efforts to develop cordial relations with Orthodox hierarchs and priests. And where possible, this should include making common cause in combatting such evils as alcoholism and drug abuse, and in distributing Christian literature acceptable to both parties. *Direct cooperation in evangelism has been much more difficult to realize*, [Emphasis mine] but one exceptional case, Mission Volga, deserves close examination."

⁸ Personal conversation with Bishop Basil, former Bishop of the Diocese of Sourozh, Oxford, November 2003.

⁹ 'Orthodox Church frowns on Jesus Film', in *Ecumenical News International*, 7 April 2006

¹⁰ Telephone conversation with Timothy Okroev: 14th July 2005

¹¹ Timothy Okroev, CMS newsletter, April 2006

¹² Estimated from *International Alpha Courses in 2006*, Unpublished report for Alpha International, Christian Research, London, 2006, pp9-13.

¹³ *Ecumenical Letter on Evangelism*, WCC, Issue 1, March 2004

¹⁴ Alfayev, Bp. H., *Europaica*, No 120, 16th May 2007

¹⁵ Alfayev, Bp. H., 'Orthodoxy in a New Europe: problems and perspectives', in *Religion in Eastern Europe*, XXIV 3, June 2004, p24

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p24

¹⁷ Personal conversation with Fr. Stephen Platt, Oxford, November 2003.

¹⁸ George Kochetkov, 'Russian Orthodox and Protestants: dialogue on missions', in *Religion in Eastern Europe* Volume XXII, Number 5, October 2002.