

Christ to the Children: How an Evangelical Initiative Supported Sunday Schools in Romania and Beyond

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Note: This article first appeared in East-West Church Report, vol. 28 no.2 (2020), 12-16. LOI is grateful to the editor, Geraldine Fagan, for permission to reproduce it here.

When it comes to preparing Sunday school curricula for children, Western Evangelicals tend to have both experience and resources. But if they wish to utilize their expertise to assist Orthodox Christians in post-Communist states, they face a formidable challenge: operating in a way that is deemed to be doctrinally sound and culturally appropriate by local church communities. For many years, I was closely involved in one such project, which came to be known as Christ to the Children. I hope that my account of this experience will support those seeking to navigate this delicate sphere.

Phase One: Russia

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1990-91, Bill Greig, Jr.,—then head of Gospel Light Publications, an established Evangelical producer of Sunday school material based in California—suggested adapting his organization’s children’s Bible curriculum for use in Orthodox contexts in Russia. Work on the project formally began in 1992, and the role of Jim Morgenroth (d. 2019) was crucial in the early stages.¹ An American, Jim was at the time director in Russia for Dorcas, a Dutch humanitarian organization providing aid to the poor of St. Petersburg.² In the more pro-ecumenical climate that existed in Russia immediately following the Soviet collapse, Jim sought and identified several Orthodox bishops open to Bill’s idea and started working with them on the adaptation of Gospel Light material.

Despite a shared biblical background with the Orthodox, the original material was thoroughly Evangelical—a major revision was an absolute must. At this point, another key person joined the project: Dr. Constance Tarasar (d. 2014).³ In 1965 she became the first Orthodox woman in the United States to be awarded a Master of Divinity degree from Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, New York. Her doctoral dissertation of 1989, moreover, proposed a curriculum design model for Orthodox Christian religious education. Here too she was a pioneer, becoming the first Orthodox Christian educator in the United States to receive a doctorate in the field of education. She was clearly the right person for the task, and gladly accepted the challenge.

By integrating the contemporary pedagogical methodology of Gospel Light with her own vision for Orthodox Christian education, Constance produced the first textbooks of the new Orthodox biblical curriculum. Her basic lesson template—used in every subsequent version of the program—included four elements:

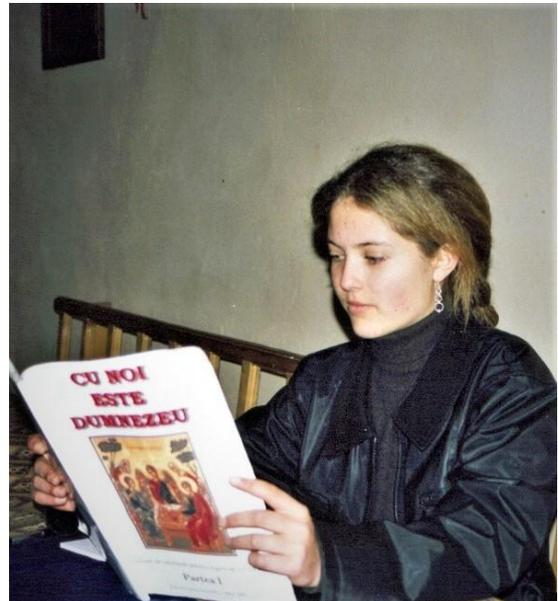
- A biblical text, with the program guiding children through the entire Bible in approximately four years.
- An illustration of the main spiritual and moral lessons of the particular biblical text in the life of an Orthodox saint.
- A playful way of interacting with the content of the lesson, such as a puzzle or crossword.
- A family exercise, which the children had to do at home with the involvement of their parents and siblings.

The program projected the creation of a total of 12 textbooks for age groups ranging from six to 17 years old, to be used as Sunday school material in Orthodox parishes. Once Constance retired from active ministry, production of this material was taken on by another woman specializing in Christian education, this time an Oriental Orthodox of the Armenian Apostolic Church: Sirarpi Aivazian. Other contributors included a Chicago-based priest of the Orthodox Church in America, Fr. John Matusiak (d. 2019).

Once the first textbooks were complete—including guides for both students and teachers—an adaptation and translation process started in Russia, again with funding provided by Gospel Light. Unfortunately, however, the climate for such ecumenical initiatives deteriorated steadily during the 1990s. In part, this was due to the local assumption that Western Christian missions in Russia were proselytizing, or

“poaching” from the Orthodox flock. The Russian Orthodox Church also increasingly preferred to rely upon support from those holding political power, as in the tsarist period. (The Church’s sustained lobbying efforts to introduce spiritual education through a government-funded Orthodox Culture program in public schools met with success in 2010.)⁴ What had started out as a promising educational project thus met with insurmountable obstacles. The program was eventually sidelined and, despite initial promise and repeated efforts to revive the project, never received the seal of approval from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Viewing Christ to the Children materials, Romania (all photographs by the author)



Phase Two: Romania

The focus of the project then switched to Romania. While in Russia in the early 1990s, Jim Morgenroth had met Christopher Shore, a Canadian Mennonite working to provide microloans to the poor. Chris followed the development of the Orthodox biblical curriculum with great interest, but was forced to leave Russia after several years due to threats from the local mafia. I knew Chris personally, as we had both been involved in the ministry of the Navigators when he lived for a few years as an undercover missionary in Communist Romania.⁵ In late 1997, in my capacity as a board member of World Vision Romania, I was pleased to endorse Chris as our new national director.

Among Chris’s first initiatives in that role was to invite Bill Greig, Jr., and Jim Morgenroth to Bucharest in January 1998 in order to explore the possibility of transplanting the thwarted curriculum project from Russia to Romania. During our discussion we agreed that the best vehicle for this venture was probably the Lord’s Army, a pietistic renewal movement within the Romanian Orthodox Church that had recently emerged from the catacombs after the fall of Communism.

Fr. Vasile Mihoc, a renowned biblical scholar and head of the Lord’s Army, was also a member of our board. He agreed that he and his team would take on the adaptation of the biblical curriculum for the Romanian context, with support from World Vision. Starting with the English templates created by Dr. Tarasar, the title chosen for the program was Christ to the Children. After approximately two years, however, it became apparent that the Lord’s Army movement did not have the required expertise or sophistication to run the program on the huge scale required. We also discovered that mainstreaming the program was extremely difficult, given that the Lord’s Army was still facing opposition from some bishops within the Romanian Orthodox Church. The project consequently stalled for a time.

The next phase of the project commenced in 2001, with the Romanian Orthodox Church as partner following approval by its Holy Synod. Funding was provided by World Vision Romania thanks to a special grant obtained from a foundation in the United States. This was the point in the project when production of the curriculum was taken over by a team led by Ms. Sirarpi Aivazian.

Phase Three: Five More Post-Communist States

Building on the success of the project in Romania, World Vision’s regional office for the Middle East and Eastern Europe came to an agreement with Gospel Light to provide joint funding to extend the program to other countries in its purview, including to non-Orthodox churches if at all possible. Gospel Light proved unable to continue the project, however, and transferred copyright of the curriculum to World Vision, while our attempts to promote the program in other churches met with little interest.⁶ By contrast, Orthodox in the region—both Eastern and Oriental—were extremely keen to receive this type of catechetical material, as it met a real need—at least in the immediate post-Communist context—following decades of atheist prohibition of such activities. As a result, Christ to the Children was progressively introduced in Armenia, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, and Georgia, in addition to Lebanon, where it served Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Christians.⁷

Adaptation of the curriculum was performed by teams appointed by the Orthodox hierarchy in each country, while the logistic co-ordination of the program was provided by the Faith and Development team of World Vision—of which I was director, with Jim Morgenroth as manager. Each year we organized a “training of trainers” event in one of the countries involved, with participants coming together to report on progress and to ensure that the quality of the program was maintained and augmented.

While bishops in some of these countries tried to use the curriculum for teaching religion in public schools, Christ to the Children was in fact designed from the outset as a parish-based program. This was due to our conviction that the local Christian community is the right space for the spiritual formation of children. While Orthodox churches were eager to benefit from the program, they rarely invested funds to support it, with the exception of Romania and—to a certain extent—Armenia. The reason given for this was the relative poverty of the churches concerned, but this contributed to funders beginning to doubt the sustainability of the project, and over time sources of funding dried up. In 2012 World Vision conducted an evaluation of the project, and in 2014 decided to stop funding it, allowing local churches to take it over. Currently, Christ to the Children materials are still being used in Albania, Armenia, and Georgia, for as long as supplies last.

Jim Morgenroth in Georgia with American Orthodox priest Fr. Theodore Niklasson (left), and in Armenia with Sirarpi Aivazian and Romanian Orthodox priest Fr. Viorel Sava (right)



Lessons Learned

Numerous valuable findings and observations made in the course of the project were underscored during the evaluation process:

- The need for children’s biblical education, and for catechism in general, is still great in most Orthodox churches—both Eastern and Oriental, especially as such activities were outlawed for many decades during the Communist period.
- Although a certain tradition of children’s catechism existed before Communism—especially in matters of doctrine and practice, but less so in terms of biblical knowledge—this was virtually lost prior to 1989. The program initiated by Gospel Light and funded by World Vision contributed greatly to its revival and further development.
- Very few Orthodox fully grasp the importance of child catechism for the future of their church in the context of the rapid re-secularization of post-Communist societies.
- Following the fall of Communism, Orthodox churches focused their recovery efforts upon their buildings. Very few resources were invested in the “soft” dimension of church life—including children’s education—on the grounds that the churches could not afford to do so.
- Religious education was reintroduced into public schools in much of the region after 1989. As the related expenses were covered by state budgets, all churches—not just Orthodox—favored this approach, despite its obvious inadequacy in terms of transmitting the essentials of the faith to the next generation.
- While ecumenism continues to be viewed with suspicion by most Orthodox people in Eastern Europe, many concrete needs of Orthodox churches in the region were met with financial contributions from ecumenical partners, as was the Christ to the Children program.
- Flexibility to alter the curriculum in ways that better fit the reality on the ground proved necessary. The original design of Christ to the Children involved each parish establishing a religious education model resembling the school system, with 12 or 13 classes. However, no Orthodox parish ever had the facilities or the number of teachers—let alone children—required for this. As a result, the children were taught in two or three mixed age groups, with the curriculum adapted to meet their needs.
- Similarly, the management of the program by World Vision as designed by Jim Morgenroth operated from the premise that each country would need approximately the same amount of financial resources for the curriculum adaptation process. In practice, however, the costs of the process (salaries, materials, etc.) proved very different in each country, and there were also great variations in the size of local Orthodox populations.
- The success of the program in each national context fundamentally depended upon the commitment of the local Orthodox hierarchy to the centrality of child catechism in the life of their church. In Lebanon, for example, the Eastern Orthodox variant of the program abruptly ceased operations when the priest in charge of it left the country, and his bishop did not appoint anyone to continue the work. In Romania, by contrast, the vision and commitment of Patriarch Daniel has proved key to the program’s survival despite many difficulties, as well as to its current success.
- World Vision’s centralized approach towards problem-solving due to its pyramid structure meant that some contextual difficulties were not resolved. For example, the linguistic difference between Western Armenian (spoken in Lebanon and large areas of the Lebanese diaspora) and Eastern Armenian (spoken within Armenia itself)—compounded by the existence of two Armenian Catholicosates [ecclesial governing bodies]—eventually led to the demise of the program in Lebanon. Similarly, suspicions between the Orthodox in Bosnia and Serbia led to the dismissal—unjust, in my view—of the World Vision and Orthodox program co-ordinators.
- Perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of the project was the formation in each country of a group of local Orthodox professionals dedicated to children’s catechism. Supported by World Vision’s annual “training of trainers” events, its purpose was to ensure the certification of teachers, to monitor progress, and to provide regular training. Except in Romania, this did not come to fruition due to the cessation of funding.
- An incidental benefit of the program was the creation in every country involved of a network of Orthodox experts in children’s catechism, which fueled the sharing of encouragement and

experience among the various national churches. However, this proved to be insufficiently developed to be sustainable without World Vision’s logistic support, and it virtually ceased once funding was discontinued.

- Overall, the impact of the program depended upon three essential criteria: the quality of the teaching materials; the quality of the methodological training for teachers; and the degree to which the program was integrated into official church structures.



Participants in (left), and Sirarpi Aivazian teaching at (right), Christ to the Children Teacher Training Conference in Yerevan, Armenia, May 2004



A Modest Triumph

Romania is the only country where the program has been fully incorporated into the life of the local Orthodox Church. A strong ecclesial infrastructure exists to support the project: each eparchy, or diocese, has a catechism department with staff who are paid by the church to co-ordinate the religious education of children within parishes. In 2019 the Romanian Orthodox Church organized its 12th annual congress dedicated to the promotion of our project.⁸ A commission appointed by Patriarch Daniel is currently working to redesign the curriculum, incorporating findings from previous phases of the program and the latest pedagogical insights, and also with a view to contextualizing it fully in church life.

For as long as this program lasted in the various countries, the lives of tens of thousands of Orthodox children were touched. I believe it also played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the Church in post-Communist contexts. Most Orthodox churches are still not able to support such a significant effort financially or in other ways, and they still do not fully grasp the need in the area of children’s catechization. Yet wherever such a conviction does exist, as it does in Romania, the thoughtful catechization of Orthodox children is assured—and with it, perhaps, the very existence of the Church in years to come.

(Left to right) Sirarpi Aivazian, Karine Harutunyan—World Vision Armenia Faith and Development Co-ordinator—and the author, Danut Manastireanu.



Notes:

¹ Jim’s obituary may be found at

<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/journaltimes/obituary.aspx?pid=193147919>.

² <https://russia.dorcas.org/tag/orphans-en/>.

³ Fuller information about Dr. Constance Tarasar and her contribution to Orthodox Christian education may be found at <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/constance-tarasar>.

⁴ Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia—Religious Policy after Communism*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 141-51.

⁵ For further information on the work of the Navigators, see Milan Cícel with Geraldine Fagan, “Before and After 1968: One Spiritual Journey in Communist Czechoslovakia,” *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2018), 1-5.

⁶ Gospel Light went into bankruptcy in 2015. It was bought subsequently by the Christian publisher David C. Cook, but the Orthodox biblical curriculum project was not reintroduced.

⁷ There have also been attempts to extend the program to Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine, as well as Egypt, the UK, and the USA.

⁸ In 2018 Sorin-Constantin Lungoci defended a Ph.D. thesis at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, entitled *Hristos împărtăşit copiilor—rediviva catehizării parohiale: Context, conţinut, strategii didactice*. It analyzes the history and perspectives of the Christ to the Children program within the Romanian Orthodox Church.

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