

Evangelism as Authentic Discipleship

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The calling

For me primarily and at the present moment, participation in evangelism and mission work of the church is a way to practise repentance, obedience, and learning.

The first evangelical calling of Christ was “Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17, KJV). One can read this precept as a call for personal *metanoia*, but it is also a reminder of the proximity of the kingdom of God, urging Christians to spread the news of its coming.

With regard to obedience, we hear in Luke, “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done that which was our duty to do’ ” (Luke 17:10). Evangelism is an inherent natural desire of any heart burning with Christ’s love, but also it is obedience to his word to spread the *evangelion*.

And finally, with regard to learning, we read, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:29, KJV). Christ-like evangelism is about constant learning from our Lord: learning to accept ourselves and our situations in all their complexity, and to humbly do our work.

Russian Orthodox Church, Belarus

In order to get a glimpse of the present situation of the Orthodox Church in Belarus, I shall turn to some statistics. We are a 9.5-million-strong nation living on 207,600 square kilometres. Belarus’ modern independence began in 1990, after the dissolution

of the Soviet Union. In 1994, the first presidential elections took place, introducing Alexander Lukashenko as president. He kept this position in the elections in 2001, 2006, and 2010. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) repeatedly assesses the elections in Belarus as “flawed.”

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Christian churches regained the right to practise religion freely, although the law on freedom of faith still has many restrictions on religious organizations. The Orthodox Church in the Republic of Belarus is an exarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church. As of January 2012, of the 3374 religious entities registered under current legislation, 1642 belonged to the Belarusian Orthodox Church, 506 to the Catholic Church, and 1073 to Protestant (of various denominations) organizations.¹ According to research done by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Science in early 2013, among the 80 percent of the population stating they believe in God, only 6–8 percent regularly go to church.²

Often nowadays Christians have to take into account the local legislation on freedom of faith while practising their evangelistic ministry. In Belarus, the law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations states that the religious activity – evangelism being a religious activity – can be provided only by a registered religious organization, and only in those places and certain territories where it is registered.

These constraints are not fatal for evangelism; they serve to illustrate the local conditions. The Orthodox Church spreads the good news through the parishes, monasteries, sisterhoods of mercy, brotherhoods of laypersons, and church mass media. However, as we see from the figures on church attendance, there has been a certain failure in planting the interest in this vast majority of believers to live a new life as church members.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that baptism has ceased to be a major event in the spiritual journey of believers. People are baptised either as infants/children (in the majority of cases) or as adults but without due preparation and with no participation of the church community apart from the priest conducting the baptism. For such people, we cannot speak even of their knowledge of Christian teaching, much less their motivation to share the gospel with the others.

¹ www.belarus21.by/ru/main_menu/religion/sotr/new_url_199888707

² <http://dengi.onliner.by/2013/03/22/veruyu>

Living out evangelism through authentic discipleship

The work of God in this world and in the communities of the faithful never ceases; therefore, new contemporary forms of living out the evangelical calling and ministry arise. Below, I briefly look at several forms of ministry present in various contexts in the Orthodox Church: the ministry-oriented Christian organizations; the spiritual movements/communities; and theological schools.

Ministry-oriented organizations can have a variety of foci: mission, social work, education, ecology, etc. However, all of these, if genuinely Christian, have to be based on and include evangelism. Evangelism precedes any form of the ministry, as it is in response to evangelism that any ministry appears. With the help of the parable of the sower, Christ explains that the seed of the word has to be received and bear fruit.

The Orthodox Mission Network (OMN), which started with regular annual consultations in 2010, consists of organizations dealing with mission, social work, and education, including the following:

- Orthodox Christian Mission Centre (OCMC), based in Florida, US, is mandated by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas to do mission work worldwide. It recruits, prepares, sends, and supports Orthodox missionaries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and South and Eastern Europe.
- “Filantropia” of the Orthodox Church in Finland³ is a merger of mission and social aid organizations acting together as of 2013. It runs mission, education, and aid programmes in Africa and Eastern Europe.
- The Russian Orthodox Mission Society of St Serapion Kozheozersky⁴ is working in the mission field in various regions of the world, including Asia and Africa.

We also benefit from the participation of spiritual movements and communities, which practise evangelism as part of the life vocation of their members:

- The Lord’s Army from Romania was founded in the beginning of 20th century by Fr Iosif Trifa. This community has branches all over Romania; its life is focused on common worship, and studying and living out the Gospel.
- Transfiguration Union of Brotherhoods from Russia was begun in the 1970s by Fr Georgi Kotchetkov. This fellowship’s primary activity is evangelism and catechism

³ <http://kirkkotoimii.fi/ortaid/pages/in-english.php>

⁴ www.serapion.org

of the baptised Orthodox who do not have connection with the church, and also non-Christians. The brotherhoods are spread across Russia, Belarus, and Moldova.

Last but not least, we work with missiologists, teachers, and students of theological schools, focusing on mission from Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Greece, Germany, and others. This connection is important as it gives us access to contemporary missiology research and stimulates exchanges between mission practitioners and researchers. One of the planned activities of the Orthodox Mission Network is to help organize training opportunities for missionaries with experience and beginners in this field.

All of these forms of life and ministry in the church contribute to the church's evangelism if there is a continuous effort to be obedient to God and God's word, to repent of our sins and mistakes, and to learn from Christ, the good shepherd, who gave his life for his people.

Orthodox Mission Network

In 2010, thousands of Christians around the world remembered the centenary of the mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910. In February of 2010, Orthodox missiologists and mission workers gathered in Minsk to speak about various aspects and challenges that they face in their ministry. One of the highlights of this meeting, which took place in a post-Communist country, was the need for the church to be free in order to evangelize – free not only on the basis of the law, but also free from the totalitarian spirit.

The common desire was to continue consultation meetings for Orthodox missionaries on a regular basis. Since 2010, the OMN has met in Bulgaria, Finland, Romania and Albania. The following points have been identified as goals of the common work in the network:

- To provide a platform for meeting and sharing good mission practices and resources;
- To organize monitoring of mission ministries;
- To encourage mission work;
- To advocate for world evangelism of the church;
- To work for more visibility of mission ministries (also in the mass media);
- To create and run programmes for missionary reflection and learning;
- To promote the idea of creation of a training centre for missionaries.

Apart from providing a regular platform for meeting, sharing, and starting various bilateral and multilateral mission initiatives, the OMN plans to organize its first international training for missionaries in Albania in 2014.

Much needs to be done to be able to move in each of these directions. We hope and pray for God's blessing and assistance and are open to new members dedicated to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.