

Soviets Plan a Spectacular Use of Churches

News reports have been arising announcing that there will be a celebration in Moscow in 1988 of the one thousand years of the coming of Christianity to Russia. Various reports are appearing in ecumenical journals, and they have been reported from Moscow itself. This promises to be a spectacularly designed use of religion by the Soviets. The Christianity which Russia now permits and uses is supposed to be the same Christianity that Vladimir I, the Grand Duke of Kiev and a descendant of Vikings, accepted in his baptism. He represented the Christianity of Constantinople. His baptism occurred in 988.

The extent of this celebration has been reported by Wilmar Thorkelson, Religious News Service correspondent from Minnesota who went to Moscow in 1984 as the guest of the Moscow Patriarch. He is Patriarch Pimen, who sponsored the world conference of religion on peace in May, 1982, where the Soviet peace offensive was promoted. Thorkelson reveals that the National Council of Churches of the USA is expecting to take two to three thousand U. S. Christians to the Soviet Union for the observation. He wrote: "Because the Division of Eastern and Western Christianity had not taken place in 988, the millenium will be an event that other Christian communities, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Baptists-Evangelicals of the USSR, are expected to recognize and observe.

"Religious dignitaries from around the world will be invited to the observance, and the event is expected to attract 2,000 to 3,000 U.S. Christians according to the National Council of Churches, which will participate in the observance."

This is two and one-half years ahead of the event. The Associated Press story that carried the Thorkelson report opened: "The Soviet government has

celebration, in 1988, of the millenium of Christianity in the Soviet Union and for the ongoing work of the Russian Orthodox Church." The story also reports that the "Moscow Patriarchate, under the leadership of Patriarch Pimen, has set up commissions to plan a nationwide observance of the millenium."

The year 1988 will also be the 40th anniversary of the founding of the International Council of Christian Churches in Amsterdam, August 12-19, 1948 and also of the World Council of Churches August 24 to September 5, 1948, also in Amsterdam.

Thorkelson reported also: "Relations between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Vatican generally are regarded as good. It's not forgotten here that one of Russian Orthodoxy's ranking prelates, Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad, a former president of the World Council of Churches, died in Rome while on a visit to Pope John Paul I.

In an interview, Bishop Sergiy of Solnechnogorsk, deputy head of the Moscow Patriarchate's external affairs department, said: "The Russian Orthodox Church regards its membership in the World Council of Churches as 'very important' and appreciates the results of the council's 1983 assembly in Vancouver."

"On human rights, Bishop Sergiy said that the Soviets have a different attitude toward this problem than Westerners, explaining: 'We don't consider this to be a problem.' He rejected Western claims that 'several persons are suffering for their faith' in the Soviet Union.

"The Russian Orthodox Church takes an active part in the Soviet Peace Committee and makes a major contribution to the Soviet Peace Fund, which the bishop said is used not only for peace work, but also to provide assistance to developing countries and to victims of natural disasters."

Alexei Bichkov was born in the Klin district of the Soviet Union, not far from Moscow. His parents were Baptist, and, following his conversion experience, he was baptized in the Moscow Baptist Church.



Bichkov now serves as General Secretary of the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Moscow. He was ordained into the pastoral ministry in May, 1970 and has been one of the pastors of the Moscow Baptist Church. He first became a full-time worker of the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists as one of the teachers of the Bible courses. He was then elected vice-president and in 1972 he was elected to his present position as general secretary.

Dr. Bichkov is a former president of the European Baptist Federation, and he now serves on the BWA General Council. He is also an active member of the Study Commission on Christian Ethics and regularly participates in sessions of that Commission.

The 1985 Baptist World Congress will be remembered in history as the Congress when eleven Baptist bodies worked in close cooperation to make the meetings a success.

The Baptist groups represented on the Congress Steering Committee and the Committee on Local Arrangements are:

- American Baptist Churches in the USA
- Baptist General Conference
- California State Baptist Convention
- General Association of General Baptists
- Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention, USA
- National Baptist Convention of America
- National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.
- North American Baptist Conference
- Progressive National Baptist Convention
- Seventh Day Baptist General Conference
- Southern Baptist Convention