

Soviet Policy towards Evangelicals

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Some Evangelical Christians in the USSR are now enjoying more freedom than before, whilst others face increasing hostility from the authorities. This apparently contradictory situation is described in recent reports from the Soviet Union. The churches of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB) enjoy more freedom than they have for many years and foreign visitors are ever more impressed with their spiritual vitality. The unregistered churches continue to produce a mass of detailed documentation on the persecution of churches and individual Christians. The contradictions are not the fault of those who report but reflect the true situation: for the registered churches things get better all the time, and every year members of unregistered churches join the ranks of the registered, but the hard core of the unregistered (and nobody knows how big or small that hard core really is) face hostility from the authorities that seems to become more rather than less bitter as time passes. These contradictions may result from the left hand not knowing what the right is doing (and in a country as large as the Soviet Union this is only to be expected) but much of the evidence indicates that the concessions and the repressions are two aspects of the same policy – the two sides of one coin.

The year 1975 can be regarded as at least a minor milestone in the evolution of Soviet policy towards religious believers. In July amendments to the Law on Religious Associations were published: although these incorporated unpublished changes in the law that had been operative since 1962, they also introduced new features.¹ Although the amendments indicated no important policy changes compared with the 1962 version of the law their publication was in itself significant. An authoritative commentary on the legal position of the churches was published later in 1975.² Christians at last could find out what rights they had and what bodies were responsible for the churches. In August 1975 the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was signed by Mr Brezhnev and published in the Soviet press.³ Although not adding to human rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights and the Pact on Civil and Political Rights (both previously ratified by the Soviet Union), the Helsinki Final Act gave Christians a new awareness of the rights which they ought to enjoy.

1975 saw the widescale implementation of a new policy towards the registration of evangelical churches. From 1945 to the 1960s evangelicals of the four major denominations – Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals and Mennonite Brethren – could be registered only in affiliation with the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECBs). Registration was a form of licensing and was apparently rarely withdrawn for failure to observe the official restrictions on religious activities. Maybe the churches rarely overstepped the mark. At any rate, the general impression given is one of relative freedom and lax control over the churches in the post-Stalin years.⁴ After the immediate post-war years, however, few new congregations were able to register. Registration as such was not seen as particularly restrictive: most unregistered congregations wished nothing better than to be registered but often could not do so because the authorities refused to register them. Pentecostals sought to register separately from the ECB Union from 1947 onwards, Mennonites from the 1950s and the Reform Baptists (*Initsiativniki*) from 1965, but without any success. Reform Adventists and Pentecostals were specifically banned under the *Instruction on the Application of the Law on Cults* of 16 March 1961.⁵ When restrictions were placed on the churches these were often beyond the law like, for example, the widely reported ban on preaching the second coming of Christ. The 1960 *Letter of Instruction* from the leaders of the ECB Union, thought to have been issued under pressure from the state authorities, demanded that services be less evangelistic, that fewer young people aged 18 to 30 be baptized, and banned children from attending services.⁶ The 1959–64 anti-religious campaign was an entirely arbitrary attack on the churches: although some churches which were closed are known to have been particularly active (e.g. the Bezhitsa church in Bryansk⁷), the overall strategy seems to have been to reduce drastically the number of places of worship. Most, though not all, of the closed churches sided with the *Initsiativniki* who opposed the new restrictions. On the whole, therefore, registration was used more as a means of controlling the number of churches rather than their activities.

From the late 1960s a few Pentecostal churches were registered as individual congregations not belonging to the ECB Union,⁸ but by 1974 there seem to have been no more than a dozen such instances. From the start such registrations must have required approval by the central Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), but, in addition, the conditions demanded by local authorities seem to have gone far beyond those specified in the Law on Religious Associations.⁹ At the same time as the revised version of this law and Golst's commentary on it were published, the authorities appear to have stopped imposing these extra-legal conditions, and the

number of registered autonomous Pentecostal churches began to increase. *Initsiativniki* churches were also registered, the most well-known being the church in Kiev of which Georgi Vins had been a leader, which was registered in the summer of 1975. New Pentecostal and Baptist churches have also been registered in affiliation with the ECB Union.¹⁰

The desire to observe the law, now published in full, on the part of the authorities may have been a factor in this *volte-face* towards independent groups, for the law does not discriminate between congregations which belong to a national organization and those which function at a local level without any such affiliation. However, other domestic and international factors probably carried greater weight. First, the policy of liquidating unregistered churches by arresting many of their leaders was seen to have failed. The number of *Initsiativniki* prisoners (the only denomination for which there are comprehensive details) had begun to fall before 1975, and since then it has dropped still further to below 40.¹¹ Second, unregistered congregations continued with unabated vigour and their activity was difficult to monitor, especially when these congregations had no fixed meeting place. Third, the western focus on "basket three" of the Helsinki Agreement meant that in the international sphere the Soviet Union was closely scrutinized to see whether it observed human rights, including the "freedom of the individual to profess and practise any religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience".¹² Fourth, the authorities wished to lessen the impact of the emigration movement among Pentecostals, which began in 1976 and had grown to 20,000 applicants by May 1978.

Since 1975 the Soviet authorities, under instructions from the CRA (which is now publicly stated to have the final say in questions of registration and allocation of buildings) have actively sought to persuade unregistered congregations to register. Paradoxically, there has been considerable resistance on the part of the leaders of unregistered churches who oppose accepting the restrictions on the activity of the church laid down in Art. 17 of the 1929 Law on Religious Associations,¹³ and reject interference in the internal affairs of the church which is legalized through Art. 14 – the authorities' veto on the members of a church's executive committee.¹⁴ They also reject the registration of pastors, which has been required since the *Instruction* of 30 January 1931 on the application of the legislation on cults.¹⁵

It is the unwillingness of churches to register that has brought about the dual policy of concessions and repressions – to encourage registration and to punish those who refuse to register. On the one hand members of unregistered congregations continue to be fined and arrested, and their services continue to be disrupted. In Berdichev, Zhitomir region, Ukraine, the presbyter and deacon of the Pentecostal congregation have been threatened with arrest if the congregation does not register.¹⁶ In the

city of Zhitomir, pressure on the Pentecostals began early in 1976 when the war-crime file on the presbyter S. Demyanchuk was reopened, although he had been convicted, imprisoned and amnestied for war crimes; the congregation was given three months to make up its mind whether to register.¹⁷ In Zhitintsy, Zhitomir region, the Pentecostal congregation was allowed to meet freely after the signing of the Helsinki Agreement. But, when the congregation refused to register the authorities began again to fine the members for organizing services.¹⁸ On 24 October 1975 the plenipotentiary of the CRA for the Moscow region, A. A. Trushin, summoned Pentecostal preachers for a meeting with two KGB officials. They demanded that the congregation register and threatened prosecution if they refused.¹⁹ In December 1976 six Moscow Pentecostals were taken to a militia station and told that they would not be allowed to meet for worship until the congregation registered.²⁰

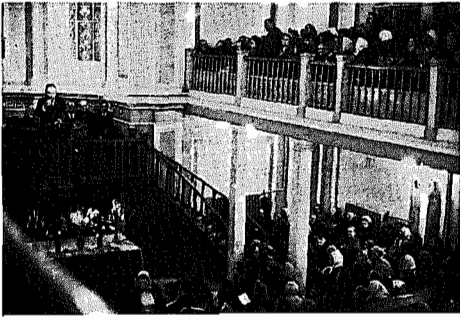
Similar pressures have been placed on Baptists. I. Ya. Antonov, presbyter in Voroshilovgrad and a member of the *Initsiativniki* Council of Churches, was arrested on the Odessa to Kharkov train on 11 September 1977. He and other members of his congregation were held for some hours and told they should register their church. Subsequently he was re-arrested and sentenced to one year's detention in a labour camp for parasitism, because he was the full-time pastor of an unregistered church²¹ and thus, in the eyes of the authorities, was unemployed. In Kharkov, too, the question of registration was raised by the authorities: the congregation at Yasnaya Polyana was visited by KGB officials from Kharkov and Kiev and by procuracy and militia officials who tried to persuade them to register.²² In Barnaul the *Initsiativniki* church was told in July 1976 that it should register,²³ while in Omsk two leaders were threatened with arrest and prosecution if they ignored the authorities' demands and continued to meet without registration.²⁴

Such attempts to force registration by threats and actual sanctions normally meet increased resistance from the congregations. The authorities have therefore had to resort to positive inducements. In Chernovtsy, Ukraine, newly registered Pentecostal and Baptist churches were both given unused church buildings for their services.²⁵ Local authorities are empowered to make church buildings available free of rent²⁶ but do not usually do so. Thus most new churches have to be built at the believers' expense – as would have been the case in Barnaul had they agreed to register – and automatically become the property of the State. Officials even go so far as to offer registration without demanding that a congregation commit itself to observing the legislation on religious cults, that is the congregation can be registered without accepting any restrictions on its activities. Registration on this basis was offered to the leaders of the *Initsiativniki* church in Issyk (near Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan) in 1976. On 29 December the chairman of the town soviet, S. T. Shabaldin, sum-

moned the members of the church committee for an interview and declared to them: "We have done away with the thing that you said prevented you from registering, you can register on form No. 2, and the sentence about fulfilling the legislation on religious cults will be omitted; you will be able to take your children with you to services."²⁷ The leaders refused to register the church unless their presbyter Ivan Shteffen, recently sentenced to 5 years imprisonment, was released. They argued that he had been imprisoned for activities that the authorities were now promising to allow. Permission to meet without formal registration is another form of registration without conditions. It is in effect a declared truce, during which the authorities hope that the congregation will get used to meeting freely and ultimately prefer to register rather than resume an illegal existence. In some churches the presence of children at services causes no problems for the parents or the pastor, and children are even allowed to recite poetry. This flexibility in observing the law extends also to registered churches within the ECB Union: youth choirs are organized, special services and meetings for young people are held both in the church and in homes, and children are often to be seen at services. The ECB Union is also experiencing greater cooperation from the authorities when it seeks permission to build new churches or to extend existing ones, and to register new congregations.

Although the present policy is the culmination of an experimental period, it represents nevertheless a complete reversal of the policy which operated until 1964.²⁸ Before congregations sought registration and were refused by the authorities. Today the authorities take the initiative in offering registration and attempt to make registration attractive by allowing both autonomous churches, and those in the ECB Union, freedoms that are beyond the law. They are more responsive to the wishes of believers for more and better church buildings. Yet in many cases the congregations refuse to register and the policy can be said to have met with only limited success. A. M. Bychkov, General Secretary of the ECB Union, reported in August 1976 that about 30 *Initsiativniki* churches had registered, that 35 had registered in September 1976 and that 50 had registered by April 1977.²⁹ Figures for Pentecostal churches are less precise, but there are almost certainly rather more: in 1977 alone 30 new Pentecostal churches were reported to have registered.³⁰ An unknown number of Pentecostal churches have accepted registration within the ECB Union, and a constant trickle of *Initsiativniki* returning to the Union is reported (usually groups rather than whole congregations).

Why are the leaders of the unregistered churches so obstinate? Firstly, in many cases the local authorities are not prepared to waive the requirement that the church should accept the restrictions specified in the legislation on religious cults. Secondly, many of the leaders have suffered imprisonment or frequent fines for the right to organize their church life



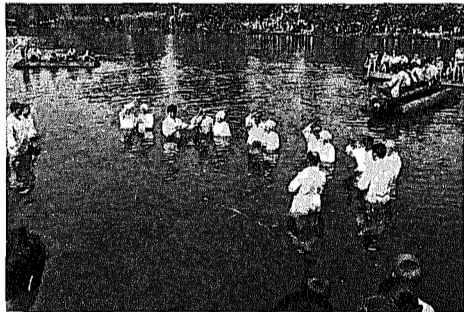
The Baptist church in Moscow. The headquarters of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB) are housed next door. (Courtesy Keston College)



A baptism at the Moscow Baptist church. For registered congregations like this one "things get better all the time" (see "Soviet Policy towards Evangelicals", pp. 4-12). (Courtesy Keston College)



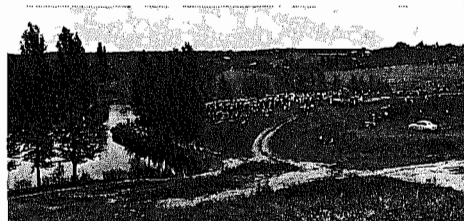
Baptismal service of a registered congregation. The service is being held in a river because many Baptist churches do not contain a baptistry. (Courtesy Keston College)



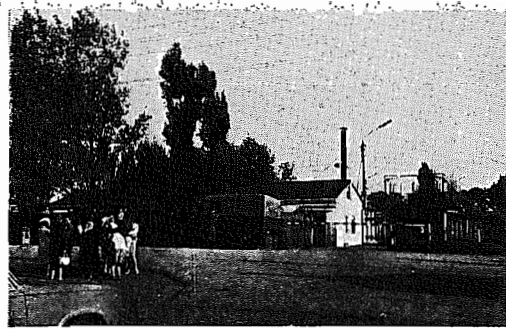
Unregistered Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECBs), called *Initsiativniki*, baptize new members. © Keston College



Unregistered ECBs celebrate communion in the open air. Without registration a congregation cannot obtain a building from the authorities for their services. © Keston College



Left: Members of unregistered ECB congregations in the USSR meet in the open air, away from the public eye. The position of unregistered evangelical congregations is discussed in "Soviet Policy towards Evangelicals" (pp. 4-12). © Keston College

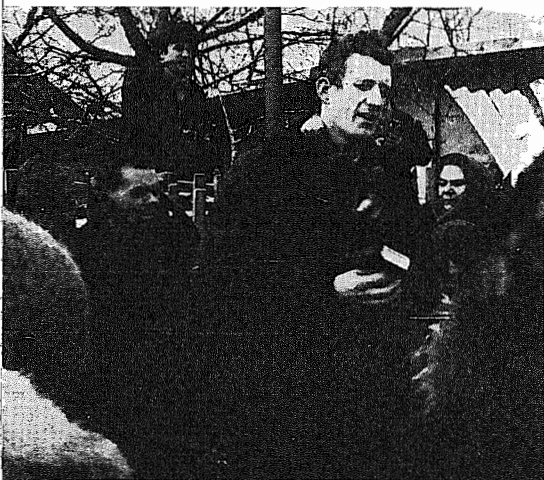


Above left Reprisals against evangelical Christians in Volzhsk, Mari ASSR. This is a rare photograph of arrests taking place. The hostility of the Soviet authorities towards unregistered evangelical Christians is growing more bitter (see "Soviet Policy towards Evangelicals", pp. 4-12).

Above right A group of Baptists wait outside a labour camp (in the town of Ust-Labinsk, Krasnodar krai) on 10 September 1977 to welcome Dina Kravchenko, who is about to be released after a four-year sentence.



Upper left The remains of the hut (or "tent") built in 1977 by the Rostov-on-Don unregistered ECB congregation for their services. The hut was demolished by the police in August 1977, rebuilt by the congregation and demolished by the police again. See the document "Events in Rostov-on-Don", pp. 21-2.

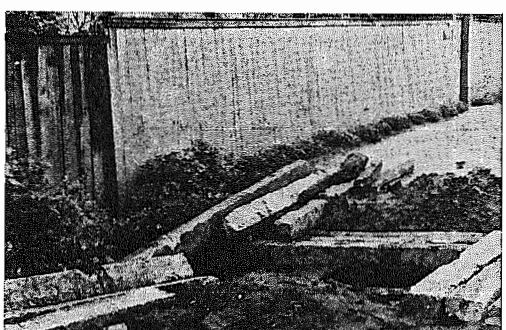


Lower left The Rostov-on-Don congregation meet for a service on the site where their hut once stood. A policeman holding a camera stands in the background.

Bottom left A shelter built for the wedding of a couple from an unregistered ECB congregation is torn down by the local authorities. The day before the wedding, which was due to take place on 14 May 1978 in Merefa, Kharkov oblast, the couple were interrogated by the police and four other members of the congregation were arrested.

Bottom right Planks removed from a bridge to prevent guests reaching the wedding in Merefa, Kharkov oblast. All those who managed to get there were arrested. Some were fined and others imprisoned for 15 days.

All photographs © Keston College



and worship with no state interference. Such leaders simply distrust the authorities when they offer registration, even without conditions. The legislation restricting religious life still stands and in many places is rigorously applied. They suspect that the authorities will sooner or later put pressure on them to observe the legislation, and the experience of some congregations already confirms this. Thirdly, registration does not necessarily put an end to problems with the authorities. The Bezhitsa church, re-registered within the ECB Union in 1976, had difficulty in finding a building which the authorities would allow them to purchase. Then in August and September 1977 their church, which they had by then managed to buy and which they had almost finished renovating, was confiscated and demolished. The Dedovsk *Initsiativniki* church, registered as an autonomous congregation, found that the money which it had raised to buy a church building was confiscated in February 1978. Then in May 1978 the house which they were using as a church was barricaded by the police, and they had to enter by the windows. This happened with the knowledge and apparent consent of Ye. A. Tarasov, the CRA official responsible for Evangelical churches throughout the USSR.⁵¹ Finally, the leaders of unregistered churches wonder what advantages there are in this policy for the Soviet government. Pentecostals see the policy as an attempt to divert attention, both of Pentecostals at home and of opinion abroad, from the movement to emigrate – as a temporary alleviation of persecution to encourage people to think that there is no need to emigrate after all. *Initsiativniki* see the policy as an attempt to fragment their movement because they are asked to renounce all links with the unregistered Council of Churches. All fear that registration would lead to greater surveillance and infiltration by the security police, and a gradual erosion of their freedom.

Some Pentecostals and a few *Initsiativniki* see the alternatives before them as either registration, which they believe will lead to complete control by the atheist authorities and the death of the church, or emigration, which will allow them to carry on their church life without outside interference. Many others see a third way: the freedom of the outlaw with all the risks that this entails. They believe that they are called to an uncompromising witness in Soviet society, and will not voluntarily accept any limitations on their freedom. Unregistered Baptists continue their activity with undiminished effort and report many conversions, especially at youth rallies on 1 May and 7 November, the Soviet Union's two major public holidays. The Council of Churches continues to meet, and the Council of Prisoners' Relatives is assembling more and more information in its bulletins, which now cover the whole life of the unregistered churches: during 1977 seven bulletins appeared, the longest comprising 80 pages. The bulletins and other literature are still printed and circulated in the Soviet Union, despite the discovery of a printing

press near Leningrad in March 1977. At least one other press is known to be functioning, for the March 1977 arrests were announced on a printed leaflet and the first copies of the whole Bible were printed in 1978. Most Pentecostals, particularly those who have decided not to apply to emigrate, prefer to avoid publicity, and as a result much less is known about their activities. The few reports available indicate some very large congregations whose size is growing (as many as 1,000 members worshipping in smaller groups in private homes in Vinnitsa, for example).

As long as unregistered congregations still exist, some Soviet officials will be tempted to use administrative or judicial sanctions against them. The *Initsiativniki* church in Rostov-on-Don has recently undergone intense repression.²² But, equally, as long as there are still unregistered churches on a significant scale they will have a beneficial effect on conditions for the registered churches. The existence of the *Initsiativniki* and the desire of both the State and the Baptist authorities to bring them back into the ECB Union, led to far-ranging reforms in the Union, beginning with the establishment of regular congresses since 1963 and culminating in a far greater degree of consultation at all levels of church life. The quantity of religious literature printed in recent years by the ECB Union, although still hopelessly inadequate, has increased dramatically, and some literature has been imported with the United Bible Societies acting as intermediary. Twenty-five thousand Bibles and 5,000 concordances are due to be delivered by the end of 1978. Youth work, though not yet children's work, is possible in many churches, and the registered churches receive a constant stream of new members, many of them from non-religious families. The leaders of the unregistered churches, however, will want to see much more Christian literature produced in the USSR and will want religious education for children by the churches legalized before they will agree to register. If such concessions were ever made it might be difficult for the authorities to return to the old restrictions without causing widespread unrest in the churches. A reversal of the limited liberalization which has already taken place in the treatment of the registered churches would lead to an increase in dissent within the churches and defections to the unregistered churches. This is what the present policy is aiming to avoid, so the situation of registered Evangelical churches should not get worse; rather, further improvements are possible. But harsh treatment of unregistered churches is likely to continue, and could become more serious, like that of the Rostov church, in order to make lack of registration less attractive, and consequently registration more attractive.

¹ See Walter Sawatsky, "The New Soviet Law on Religion", *RCL*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1976, pp. 4-10.

² G. R. Golst, *Religiya i zakon (Religion and Law)*, Moscow, "Yuridicheskaya literatura", 1975, reviewed in *RCL*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1976, pp. 32-4.

³ E.g. *Pravda*, 2 August 1975.

⁴ A case of loss of registration and its restoration after Stalin's death is reported in *Bratsky vestnik* (*Fraternal Herald*) 1953, No. 2-3, p. 106. The congregation in Stalinsk, Kazakhstan, came under the influence of "extreme Pentecostals" and lost its registration and meeting place. They were able to regain their registration after excommunicating some Pentecostals, bought a church and recommenced worship on 23 May 1953.

⁵ Art. 23 reads: "Religious societies and groups of believers belonging to sects, whose doctrine and the nature of whose activities have an anti-state and fanatical character, may not be registered: Jehovah's Witnesses, Penecostals, True Orthodox Christians, the True Orthodox Church, Reform Adventists, followers of Murashko, etc."

⁶ Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, Macmillan, London, 1968, pp.20-1.

⁷ *Bratsky vestnik*, No. 2, 1958, p. 77. It was closed in 1961 and re-registered in 1976.

⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 2, 1971, p. 76.

⁹ For example, M. Khlevnoi was alleged to have influenced the Nikolaev congregation to reject registration. Among the conditions he opposed were renunciation of "fanatical rites" including speaking in tongues and breaking of bread and renunciation of monetary collections for the church and its ministers. See sentence of 31 May 1974 of the Korabelsky district people's court, Nikolaev, p. 2 (document listed in *RCL*, Vol. 3, Nos. 4-5, 1975, DS/1974/P/14).

¹⁰ E.g. *Bratsky vestnik*, No. 2, 1978, p. 74.

¹¹ *Bulletin 56* of the Council of ECB Prisoners' Relatives, 1978, puts the number at 36.

¹² Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Final Act, 1 (a) vii.

¹³ "Religious associations are forbidden:

- (a) to create mutual aid funds, cooperatives, producer associations and in any way to use the property at their disposal for any purposes other than the satisfaction of religious needs;
- (b) to give material support to their members;
- (c) to organize special meetings for children, young people, or prayer meetings or other meetings for women, or general meetings, groups, circles or sections for Bible study, study of literature, handicrafts or work, or to organize excursions and children's playgrounds, to open libraries or reading rooms, to set up sanatoria or medical aid programmes.

In prayer buildings and premises only those books may be stored which are necessary for the conduct of the cult in question."

¹⁴ "The registering bodies have the right to remove individual members from the membership of the executive body of a religious society or group of believers."

¹⁵ Art. 5 reads ". . . The above-mentioned ministers of the cult may commence their activity only after the religious society or group of believers has presented details of them to the registering body." The *Instruction on keeping a record of religious associations, prayer houses and buildings and also on the registration of executive organs of religious associations and ministers of the cult*, of 31 October 1968, Arts. 16-19 elaborate on these arrangements. For a commentary on the application of the revised Law on Religious Associations in the Ukrainian SSR see document on pp. 12-15.

¹⁶ *Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 41, Russian edition, Khronika Press, New York, 1976, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Report, undated, but autumn 1976 (listed in *RCL*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1976, DS/1976/P/12).

¹⁹ *Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 38, Russian edition, Khronika Press, New York, 1976, p. 67.

²⁰ *Communication*, December 1976 (listed in *RCL*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1976, DS/1976/P/13).

²¹ *Bulletin 45* of the Council of ECB Prisoners' Relatives, 1977, p. 11; *Bulletin 53*, 1978, pp. 18-19.

²² *Bulletin 42*, 1977, p. 38.

²³ *Bulletin 36*, 1976, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ *Bulletin 42*, 1977, pp. 19-20.

²⁵ *Information Bulletin* of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of USSR, December 1977.

²⁶ Law on Religious Associations, 8 April 1929, Art. 10.

²⁷ *Bulletin 42* of the Council of ECB Prisoners' Relatives, 1977, p. 66.

²⁸ See document on pp. 20-1 (Pentecostal Appeal to WCC).

²⁹ *Bratsky vestnik*, No. 5, 1976, p. 65; *ibid.*, No. 6, 1976, p. 9; *British Weekly*, 22 April 1977, p. 4.

³⁰ *Euroflame*, January 1978, p. 8.

³¹ *Bulletin 54* of the Council of ECB Prisoners' Relatives, 1978, pp. 24-5 and 29-31.

³² See document on pp. 21-2 (extracts from *Chronicle of Current Events*, Nos. 47 and 49).

Appendix

Soviet Law on Religion: Ukrainian Comment

The Ukrainian atheist monthly Lyudyna i svit (Man and the World) in its June 1978 issue (pp. 16-20) published a commentary on the revised "Regulations on religious associations in the Ukrainian SSR". This commentary written by O. Havrylyuk, is entitled "Legal Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience". The article emphasizes the restrictive nature of the legislation and illustrates the importance placed on registration as a means of controlling the activities of churches, while denying that it in any way limits freedom of conscience.

[. . .] In our country citizens are guaranteed full realization of freedom of conscience, that is the right to confess or not to confess any religion, to hold or not to hold a religious world-view, to perform religious cults or conduct atheist propaganda. It is not by chance that Soviet legislation on cults is justifiably called legislation on freedom of conscience. It excludes any kind of constraint on man's conscience.

Soviet legislation on cults has been developed and refined simultaneously with the development of socialist democracy. The "Regulations on religious

associations in the Ukrainian SSR" were adopted by decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR on 1 November 1976. [. . .]

The present legislation on cults makes provision for questions about the registration of religious associations and the opening and closing of places of worship to be decided by a central body, the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) attached to the USSR Council of Ministers. The "Regulations" define the role and functions of the CRA attached to the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR, a state body which is one of the structural subdivisions of the CRA attached to the USSR Council of Ministers.

In the new legislation the principle of centralization in the exercise of control over the implementation of the legislation on religious cults, is embodied in several articles.

The "Regulations" state that believing citizens who have reached the age of 18 may, for the satisfaction of their religious needs, come together voluntarily into religious congregations, which are local associations of believing citizens of one and the same cult, denomination or movement.