

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

July 1984

NCC Pilgrimage to Soviet Union:

Serving Peace or Propaganda?

The National Council of Churches is taking a public relations beating over its recent delegation to the Soviet Union. The storm centers on the tour's emphasis on "peace" and "unity," with comparatively little concern for religious and human rights.

A damaging article in The New York Times said the 266-member delegation ended its June 4-22 tour with a news conference in Moscow during which the Americans offered "praise for the status of religion in the Soviet Union and condemnation of the United States' role in the arms race." The article added:

The tour pointed up a growing role assigned to the controlled churches in representing the Soviet Union to the outside world. Russian church figures often speak out on themes, such as the deploying of American missiles in Western Europe, that echo their Government's foreign policy position. The visit of the Americans drew thousands of words of coverage in the Soviet

press, which quoted the visitors as supporting world peace and praising Soviet freedom of religion.

One of the most interesting things about the NCC trip has been the critical comment it has provoked even among liberals in the United States. Rabbi A. James Rudin, speaking on behalf of the American Jewish Committee, accused the group of missing "an enormous opportunity for moral suasion and moral leadership." Arguing that it was unacceptable to place human rights secondary to Christian unity, he continued, "I did expect better of them. I think millions of Americans expected more."

An editorial in the Washington Post noted:

By now it is no surprise that the Soviet Union, with its decades of experience in romancing Western visitors, should receive a delegation of the National Council of Churches, give its members the standard tour, and evoke from them

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IRD Launches Campaign to Support Church in Nicaragua

In response to the mounting attack by the Sandinista government of Nicaragua upon the Nicaraguan Catholic Bishops and other church leaders, the Institute on Religion and Democracy is launching a petition campaign aimed at building U.S. church support for the embattled Christians of Nicaragua.

The church-state conflict in Nicaragua is reaching crisis proportions. On June 9, Nicaraguan Archbishop Obando y Bravo led a demonstration to protest the house arrest of a priest whom the government has accused of

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Photo by Rebecca L. Hammet

Archbishop Obando y Bravo, head of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, is greeted by Washington Archbishop James A. Hickey upon the former's receipt of IRD's religious freedom award in 1982.

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generous approval of the status of religion in the Soviet Union. This is, after all, one of the ways the approved Soviet church leaders earn their keep.

In contrast to such liberal comment, the U.S. Communist Party paper Daily World acclaimed the "peace mission" of the "largest and most representative group of U.S. church people ever to visit the USSR." This article also criticized correspondents from NBC-TV and the Los Angeles Times for implying "that the peace mission would be used by the Soviet government against the U.S. and that the statements of the delegation would be misquoted and distorted by the Soviet media." John B. Lindner, staff chief of the NCC committee responded that the NCC had made other visits to the U.S.S.R. and "We were quoted correctly by the Soviet media." According to the Daily World, Lindner added, "If we were timid we would not be here."

"We are members of the common house of faith," NCC tour leader Bruce Rigdon said of U.S. and Soviet Christians. "Our relationship to each other as brothers and sisters cannot be broken, not by national hostilities or ideological disagreements. We are called to symbolize something for which the world hungers. In its simplest form, it's that we can trust each other."

Of course, tour members understood they would not have been invited to the Soviet Union if they intended to make human rights a major agenda item. "It was made clear to us not to say things to embarrass our hosts," one participant told us. Not all the participants seemed entirely convinced that the peacemaking efforts were worth these compromises.

At least one tour participant, David Stoker of the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC, dissented from the official NCC line on the tour: "My perception is the Russian Orthodox Church is tied in very closely to the state. The clergy speak strongly for peace....The official policy is peace, no one can disagree. It's very clever." Stoker and others pressed the Soviet peace fellowships about what such groups actually can do for peace. They were told that the Soviet groups may march in demonstrations and give money, but the only substantive point they can make is that the U.S. missiles in Europe are to be withdrawn. According to Stoker, there was no call for withdrawal of the Soviet SS-20 missiles from Eastern Europe nor even a call for summit talks between U.S. and Soviet leaders. "I came back less optimistic," he said.

Several other tour participants also questioned whether Soviet-controlled people-to-people dialogue can genuinely reduce U.S.-Soviet ten-

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How was the recent delegation from American churches to the Soviet Union constituted? Who selected the participants, paid for the trip, determined the program? Those were questions of accountability we began to ask ourselves as soon as the tour returned. Here are some answers:

* The tour was sponsored by the National Council of Churches "Committee on US-USSR Church Relations," a sub-committee of the NCC Executive Committee. The committee is chaired by Bruce Rigdon, who was appointed by NCC General Secretary Claire Randall. The committee staff includes John Lindner (actually a staff member of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and currently on loan to the NCC with the Presbyterian Church paying his salary) and David Weaver, a member of the Orthodox Church in America.

* This particular tour is one of no less than five exchanges planned for 1984-85. The other tours include: an official delegation from the Soviet church earlier this spring, an official 15-person delegation from the NCC to the USSR this October, and two groups of Soviet church mem-

bers coming to the U.S. next year. In addition, there is serious discussion of repeating the large US delegation next June.

* The 266 tour participants were each responsible for the \$2,700 cost of the trip. Tour arrangements were made by the the official Soviet government agency Intourist.

* The June tour was dominated by Presbyterians. In addition to the leadership of Presbyterians Bruce Rigdon and John Lindner, some 101 Presbyterian laypersons and clergy made the trip. (Runner up was the Reformed Church in America with 40.)

* One might even argue that the ecumenical sponsorship of the USSR tour was a bit of a facade. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is overwhelmingly the largest donor to the US-USSR Church Relations committee. The largest single grant was \$40,000 from a special Presbyterian endowment for peace. Other gifts include \$10,000 from the Reformed Church, \$1,500 from the United Church of Christ, \$500 from the Orthodox Church in America, and some smaller gifts.

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sions. But a spokesman for the group maintained, "The message that we gave wherever we went was that a key to making peace...is for people in the U.S. to understand that it is possible in the Soviet Union to worship God, to love God and one's country as we do in our country."

The NCC's view contrasts with the Soviet government's views as they were reported in a May 29 article from Religious News Service:

The Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda has voiced serious concern about religious influence among minority Soviet populations and called for more vigorous efforts to stamp it out. Pravda charged that foreign enemies of communism had used religion to bolster nationalist sentiments in a reference to both Christian and Moslem believers.... "One must not underestimate this danger," the newspaper said.... "Clearly, what is needed now is an improvement in the methods of atheistic propagation and a more energetic counter-propaganda." □



Photo by Thomas G. Kochel

Above, Patriarch Pimen of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR, at the opening of the 1982 Moscow conference against nuclear war.

Nicaragua Debate at Presbyterian Assembly

Delegates (commissioners, in Presbyterian parlance) to the recent General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) were given the opportunity to hear the democratic, anti-Sandinista side of events in Nicaragua by a team of people sponsored by the IRD.

The PC(USA) has been very active in Central American affairs. No other mainline denomination runs a church-wide grass roots lobby and education program comparable to Presbyterian Advocates on Central America. Presbyterian Advocates lobbies in the name of all Presbyterians for an end to U.S. military aid to El Salvador, Honduras, and the anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

The bias in PC(USA) positions on Central America has been reinforced by the large numbers of Presbyterians who participate in official tours of Nicaragua, where they are lobbied for the Sandinista point of view. Upon returning to

the U.S., many have become active in the pro-Sandinista "solidarity network." By now many Presbyterians have seen the effect of this program in the denominationally-produced filmstrip "Born of the People" which lauds "liberation theology" and the Sandinistas in the context of a popularized Marxist view of Central American history.

At the urging of its Presbyterian supporters, the IRD decided to counter this pro-Sandinista bias by bringing the views of democratic anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans to the Phoenix General Assembly, May 30 - June 6. We could not ask Nicaraguans still residing in Nicaragua to publicly criticize the Sandinistas -- since 1981 that has been against Nicaraguan law, and is punishable by three to ten years in prison. Instead, we invited two recently exiled Nicara-

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quans to Phoenix: Humberto Belli and Geraldine O'Leary de Macias. Both had opposed Somoza and are familiar with the pro-Sandinista Christian organizations on which Presbyterian tours often rely.

Humberto Belli was a member of the Sandinista Front but broke with it to become a close associate of the Archbishop of Managua, Miquel Obando y Bravo. Before leaving Nicaragua he was the editorial page editor of the newspaper La Prensa, which has led the criticism

of human rights violations under both Somoza and the Sandinistas. Geraldine O'Leary de Macias is an ex-Maryknoll nun with more than a decade of experience in Nicaragua. Her husband is Edgard Macias, who was Vice Minister of Labor in the Sandinista government.

Our efforts in Phoenix focused on two denominational committees: the General Assembly committee on peacemaking and the special panel recently established to study the NCC and the WCC. The peacemaking committee was assigned the overtures and reports on Central America and would contribute that section of the report to the General Assembly.

We sought and after some uncertainty received permission to speak at the open hearing scheduled by the peacemaking committee. Macias and Belli argued that they were representative of many Christians who fought to overthrow Somoza but now saw the revolution stolen by an armed Marxist-Leninist vanguard. During the revolution they had received support from U.S. churches in opposing the Somoza dictatorship. But now when they criticize the Sandinistas for seeking a dictatorship, the churches are silent. They both found this particularly surprising since the Sandinistas are now imposing restrictions on the churches that even Somoza had not attempted.

As a result of our efforts a minority report on Central America was submitted by members of the Peacemaking Committee. The minority report asserted that since testimony given in the committee's open hearing challenged key portions of the 1983 report on Central America "Adventure and Hope" the resolution reaffirming the denomination's Central American program should be referred back to a committee for a study. The proposed study would be "prepared by those whose several ideological positions differ in regard to the involvement of the USA in Central America...." Unfortunately, this reasonable call for fairness was not even presented to the General Assembly for debate. The majority report was presented and quickly voted for without discussion.

The open hearings on the NCC and the WCC were perhaps the most important events scheduled at the General Assembly. The hearings were sponsored by a Presbyterian Panel recommended by the Committee on Mission and Unity at the 1983 General Assembly. This was the church's response to overtures from presbyteries calling for an investigation into the controversy over the CBS "60 Minutes" and The Reader's Digest exposés of NCC and WCC support to the

Left Losing Grip

Another important sign of change in the Presbyterian Church was the unexpected defeat of William P. Thompson in his campaign for election to the office of Stated Clerk in the reunited denomination. Thompson has been characterized in The Christian Century as "for 18 years one of the most influential Protestant churchmen -- if not the most...."

His rejection by the delegates certainly had many causes. But Thompson's use of his office in advocating causes not clearly endorsed by Presbyterian General Assemblies -- the normal source of authority for the actions of the Stated Clerk -- was pointed out by many commentators.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the election is that in at least one mainline denomination, the governing body is repeatedly acting against the plans of the staff. Staff activists in the PC(USA) can henceforth be far less certain that they can push radical programs without paying a price come the next General Assembly.

At the next General Assembly, of course, the independent-minded panel on the NCC/WCC will present its report. The Advisory Council on Church and Society will also present a report calling for the denomination to step up its lobbying on economic issues. There may even be some discussion of the denomination's highly one-sided lobbying on Central America, and of the large role played by Presbyterians in the NCC's campaign to improve the image of church-state relations in the Soviet Union.

The small circle that has dominated past General Assemblies seems to be losing its grip in the wake of the controversies that came to a head in 1983. 1984 and 1985 will provide unparalleled opportunities for bringing changes to one of the U.S. denominations that is most influential in shaping the policies of the NCC and the WCC.

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radical Left. The final report of the panel is planned for the 1985 General Assembly.

The IRD decided to present Nicaragua as a case study of denominational support to the anti-democratic Left. I provided the committee with a sketch of church funding for organizations of the pro-Sandinista solidarity network in the U.S. and Nicaragua, focusing on organizations such as the Antonio Valdivieso Ecumenical Center, the Central American Historical Institute, the Evangelical Committee for Aid to Development (CEPAD), and the Latin American Evangelical Committee for Christian Education (CELADEC). Geraldine Macias spoke of her direct experience with many of these pro-Sandinista groups. And Belli showed the committee several examples of publications produced by these organizations.

After hearing these statements and seeing samples of publications by these organizations, the chairman of the committee, Jack Shirek, acknowledged that our concerns are indeed very serious ones. He seemed to find it incredible that the NCC and WCC could fund such organizations, and asked for further evidence. We agreed to provide copies of whatever official records of financial transfers are available to the IRD. The committee will now be conducting its own investigation into these organizations.

Saturday evening the Presbyterian Lay Committee hosted a panel discussion "Nicaragua: the Other Side" with Belli and Macias. (The Lay Committee publishes The Presbyterian Layman, which has the largest circulation of any publication in the denomination.)

An article in The Arizona Republic on June 10 which was stimulated by this discussion captured the nature of the problem very well:

In the five years since the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, an almost continual procession of American denominational leaders and religious figures has made pilgrimages to worship at the shrine of the Sandinista revolution. They have returned to the United States to condemn the Reagan administration's policies in the area, to adopt resolutions of support for the Sandinistas in denominational assemblies, and to apologize for what they call the isolated and excusable excesses of an as yet infant revolution....

The article went on to note that Belli and Macias "tell a different story, one considerably at odds with the pious pronouncements of liberal American church leaders." These two argue that

the radical Left in Nicaragua preaches a liberation theology based on Marxist-Leninist ideals. It seeks the complete identity of both the state and church with the Sandinista party and the revolution as part of a larger strategy to form a Cuban-style totalitarian state.

The IRD project at the Presbyterian General Assembly proves that even a limited effort can bring about change. The question of church support for pro-Sandinista groups has been squarely placed before the panel on the NCC/WCC. And commissioners moved by our arguments just fell short of bringing the pro-democratic, anti-Sandinista side of the story before the General Assembly. The debate will not end with this General Assembly.

— Kerry Ptacek

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conspiring with antigovernment rebels. In retaliation, the Sandinistas expelled ten priests from Nicaragua. Archbishop Obando condemned the expulsion as "evidence that Marxism is trying to eliminate the church in Nicaragua because Marxism is the enemy of the church."

Two days later, Pope John Paul II sharply criticized the Nicaraguan government's action, expressing his "firm disapproval" and saying the action was "openly harmful to the church." The Pope called upon the Nicaraguans to reverse their decision, which he described as "painful and particularly grave."

The IRD has assembled evidence of significant financial and organizational assistance to institutions in Nicaragua which consistently defend the Sandinista government. The IRD petition calls upon "the Christian communities of North America to withdraw any financial or organizational assistance to the Nicaraguan government itself or church and educational organizations which support that government until it is proved that the churches of Nicaragua are safe and free."

Among the church groups which support pro-government organizations in Nicaragua are: the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Copies of the IRD petition and 15-page background paper are available by writing IRD, 1000 16th Street N.W., Suite LL 50, Washington, D.C. 20036. □

BRIEFS

■ **Humberto Noble Alexander**, a Seventh Day Adventist pastor, was among the 26 Cuban political prisoners released to **Jesse Jackson**. He had been sentenced by the Castro regime to an 18-year prison term as a counterrevolutionary -- for preaching the doctrine of original sin. But he actually served 2 years and 3 months beyond the expiration of his sentence for "refusing to be rehabilitated." While in Combinado del Este prison he was the spiritual adviser to **Armando Valladares**, the Cuban poet honored by the IRD last July with its Religious Freedom award.

■ Hong Kong Bishop **J.B. Cheng-Chung Wu** has written to the British foreign secretary expressing the deep concern of Hong Kong's Catholic community about the church's future. He calls for safeguards to guarantee the church's right to communicate with Rome and to run its own schools. (The British government is at present negotiating with Peking over the future of the Crown colony after the 99-year lease on the new territories runs out in 1997.)

Hong Kong Catholics, said Bishop Wu, have been disquieted by recent press reports of long prison sentences of Catholic priests. He described the People's Republic of China's current policy for the control of all religions as "not very reassuring."

The bishop listed two rights in particular which he seeks to have assured: "The right of Catholics in Hong Kong to continue to exercise their freedom of worship and belief to the full extent now enjoyed by them, including their right to maintain existing links with the pope as well as their fellow believers in the rest of the world; and the right of non-governmental organizations -- such as the Catholic church -- to continue to provide schools to meet the educational needs of parents for their children."

■ **Philip Potter's** successor as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches will be **Emilio Castro**, 57, a Methodist from Uruguay. He was for 11 years the director of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and prior to that, president of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Uruguay. A WCC insider, he is respected by advocates of liberation theology.

■ The Episcopal Church recently restored its \$2,000-a-year grant to the Washington Office on Africa, after the church-based coalition withdrew its pamphlet, "Election 1984: Stop U.S. Support for Apartheid." The pamphlet called for the defeat of **Ronald Reagan** this fall and Episcopal officials considered it a violation of non-partisan policy.

■ Leftist rebels in El Salvador have made what is believed to be their first denunciation of the Catholic Church. A broadcast on the rebel's Radio Venceremos followed a sermon by Bishop **Gregorio Rosa Chavez** in which he condemned a recent guerrilla assault and criticized their "forced recruiting" of youth. The church has become "partial not to the side of the poor but on the side of the army and the rich," according to the clandestine radio station. **Roberto Toruella**, a spokesman for the archdiocese, responded, "The fact is, they want us always to talk in their favor, and that is not possible because they are not always right. The church has pointed out the errors of both sides," he said. "It has been fair and objective. We are looking out for everyone's rights, not just the rights of some."

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