

Ural Conference

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Viktor V. Yezhkov, M.A. in theology (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), graduated from the Udmurt State University, majoring in history. He served as a volunteer missionary and a leader of the church in Zlatoust (1995-1996). He was a pastor in Miass and Chebarkul, Chelyabinsk Region (1996-2000), in Udmurtia, including city Izhevsk (2000-2005), in Magnitogorsk and Chelyabinsk Region (2005-2011), and in Orenburg and Orenburg Region (2011-2014). Since 2014 Yezhkov has been serving as secretary of the Ural Conference/WRUC.

The Ural Conference is part of the West Russian Union Conference of the Euro-Asia Division.¹ The Ural Conference was organized in 1994. Its headquarters is in Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation.

Territory: The republics of Bashkortostan and Udmurtia, and the regions of Chelyabinsk, Ekaterinburg, Kurgan, Orenburg, and Perm (including the Komi-Permyatski District).

Statistics (June 30, 2021): Churches, 59; membership, 3,879; population, 19,168,987.²

In the Ural Conference, the general population per member ratio is 4,902.

The Ural Mountains run north to south through the territory of the Ural Conference, forming a natural divide between Europe and Asia. Therefore, the Conference is transcontinental. The Ural Conference extends 1,260 kilometers from north to south, and 1,100 kilometers from east to west.

Origin of the Adventist Work in the Territory of the Ural Conference

The first followers of Adventism came to the Orenburg Governorate at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time German colonists started moving to the area from southern Russia and the Volga territory. They were Lutherans and Mennonites,³ and some colonists had been previously introduced to Adventism.⁴ In order to visit them and to preach the Adventist message to more people, Pastor Jacob Klein arrived in the Orenburg Governorate in the summer of 1897.⁵ In November 1897, following multiple requests of the colonists, Pastor Heinrich Löbsack and Georg Lehmann visited farmsteads all over the Orenburg Governorate.⁶ The ministers preached once or even twice a day in school buildings and private homes. They also sold Adventist booklets and tracts.⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century an Adventist congregation was established in the city of Orenburg. It officially became a part of the East European Missionary Field at its 8th Session, held October 5-10, 1900. According to the December 1900 statistical report, the Orenburg church had 14 members and 33 Sabbath School members.⁸

Thanks to the ministry of Gottlieb Breckel, the Adventist message, which had been previously preached in predominantly German communities, reached Ukrainian Baptists on Belousovskiy farmstead in the Vaslilyevsky District. In 1905 five families from that farmstead accepted Adventism. In 1905 there were 41 church members in Belousovskiy. Hereafter, between 1908 and 1911, a new Adventist church was established on the nearby Moldavanskiy farmstead.⁹

During the First World War, a group of German Adventist refugees settled down in the small village of Privolnyy in the Vaslilyevskiy District. By 1917 the group numbered 34 members.¹⁰

In 1916 and 1917, Adventist churches in Orenburg, Privolnyy, and Moldavanskiy asked the provincial authorities for an official registration, but were all denied.¹¹

In such a way the Adventist message reached the southern parts of the present-day Ural Conference, where the first Adventist congregations were planted among German and later Ukrainian colonists.

Several statistical reports dated 1906-1909, and published in the *Maslina* magazine, mentioned a church named "Ural." Its membership varied from 26 to 43 and its Sabbath School numbered from 37 to 89 members.¹² It is not clear where the Ural church was located and who its members were. Adventist historian Dmitriy Yunak has suggested that the Ural church could be a general name for Adventists scattered throughout the Ural area.¹³

It is known that the first Adventists appeared in the western part of the present-day Ural Conference, in the city of Izhevsk (now the Republic of Udmurtia) in 1911.¹⁴ However, there is no more information available about what happened to the church and its members.

After the 1917 revolution, there were isolated references to an Adventist church in the city of Irbit (Sverdlovsk Region). One of its members was a delegate to the Third Siberian Regional Union Session, held in the city of Omsk on June 22-26, 1927.¹⁵ There is also information that K. Belen'kiy, a member of a church in Chelyabinsk, assisted Pastor Jacob Stieben during two weeks of his visit to that city in March-April 1927.¹⁶

In 1929, when the country was building "Magnitka" (a major iron and steel company in Russia), an Adventist couple, Pavel and Matryona Artemov, came to the city of Magnitogorsk, Chelyabinsk Region, with other builders. Later they became the core of the Adventist congregation in the city.

As far back as 1923 the Orenburg church was officially registered at 30 Ziminskaya Street.¹⁷

The period of relative religious freedom ended in the late 1920s to early 1930s. The Soviet Government began a systematic destruction of religion in the country. It is not yet known how and when the above mentioned churches in Orenburg, Belousovskiy, Privolnyy, Moldavanskiy, and Irbit ceased to exist. No information is available of what happened to the Adventist congregation in the Republic of Udmurtia after 1934.¹⁸ It has been found that Elder Andrei Kocherga from the Moldavanskiy church and his family were twice persecuted by authorities. In 1930 adult family members lost their voting rights and then, in 1931, the Kochergas were dispossessed.¹⁹ In 1935, the government closed down the church in Orenburg located at Ziminskaya Street.²⁰

The years of repression and the Second World War delayed the development of the Adventist Church in the Ural area for decades. But even during the hard times true believers strived to worship together. Starting in 1943 a group of members in the village of Kazanka in Bashkortostan met in Aleksei Teterkin's repair shop for worship. Sometimes up to 30 people gathered there, from other villages as far as 20 kilometers away.²¹

In 1947 a group of at least ten ethnic Germans, who had been exiled in 1942-1944 from the Volga territory of Russia to the city of Nizhniy Tagil, Sverdlovsk Region, organized a home church.²² That same year another company was organized in the city of Izhevsk in the Republic of Udmurtia. By 1949 this company numbered 18 members.²³ However, in April 1949, the company's leaders were arrested and imprisoned in August.²⁴ Ekaterina Vasilyeva, as the leader of the company, was given a prison term of ten years, and Tatyana Kostenkova and Pelageya Maratkanova prison terms of eight years each.²⁵

Over the following 15 years, the Adventist Church in the Urals predominantly consisted of Underground small companies met at some localities: Nizhniy Tagil (around ten members), Magnitogorsk (up to ten members), village of Kuketskiy in Perm Region (five members in 1950 and ten in 1957). In 1956 a congregation worshipped in the town of Oktyabrskiy in Bashkortostan.²⁶

From 1956-1958 the authorities in the Sverdlovsk Region disclosed Adventist companies in the cities of Irbit (8 members) and Novaya Lyalya (6 members).²⁷ A company of ten Adventist believers also met in the village of Kosoy Brod near the town of Polevskoy in the Sverdlovsk Region. Adventists met secretly in their homes, always rotating their locations. The continuous supervision and pressure from authorities often led to disbandment of organized companies. For instance, an Adventists company of 30 members in the village of Kulma, Orenburg Region, was disclosed by government authorities in 1964 and later ceased functioning.²⁸ In 1967 another company of ten members in the town of Mozhga in Udmurtia suffered the same fate.²⁹

However, in other places Adventist companies were organized. In the 1960s, Adventists came to Sukhoy Log, Sverdlovsk, Ufa, Perm, Chelyabinsk, and Kurgan. In the 1970s, local churches were established in Orenburg, Orsk, Izhevsk, Sibay, and Pervouralsk.

Beginning in the 1970s, the church embraced underground publishing of Adventist literature, a so called *Samizdat*. In intense secrecy, members typed Adventist books using cigarette paper in the cities of Sverdlovsk, Izhevsk, Magnitogorsk, and Orenburg. The literature thus typed was distributed among churches and companies in the Urals.

In the early 1980s Soviet authorities permitted registration of some churches (e.g. in the cities of Izhevsk, Orenburg, Orsk, and Magnitogorsk) in order to have better control over their activities. They also appointed communists and young activists (*Komsomol* members) to attend Adventist churches and spy on them.

From time to time police searched and raided Adventist homes and churches. Local papers printed articles that mocked and criticized the Adventist Church. However, none of that seriously affected Adventists. Local churches

and companies remained standing in the years to come.

In the latter half of the 1980s, authorities relaxed their grip as the socio-political crisis in the USSR picked up momentum. Still, up to the mid-1990s Adventist churches remained small. Any congregation of 25 members was considered a large one.

Rapid church growth began only in 1991, caused by the collapse of Soviet ideology and the economic crisis that influenced all facets of life. It was a great time for the church to start active missionary activities by holding public evangelistic programs.

The first evangelistic program in the Urals was held in Yekaterinburg in October 1991. After 193 people were baptized, the second Adventist church was organized in Yekaterinburg.³⁰

In 1992 at least three public evangelistic campaigns were held in the Urals, in the cities of Orenburg (May), Yekaterinburg (August), and Orsk (November). A total of 300 people were baptized in Orenburg and 69 in Orsk. Each of the two cities already had existing churches, but following the campaigns the second Adventist churches were planted in Orenburg and Orsk.³¹ The new converts in Yekaterinburg joined the second church that was organized a year earlier.

As time went on local pastors and even lay members joined foreign evangelists in their efforts and began holding their own outreach programs. The Adventist Church was growing quickly.

Organizational History

In spite of the fact that the first Adventist congregation appeared in the Urals as far back as 1900, the Adventist Church could grow and establish its regional organization only in the last decade of the twentieth century. The Adventist Church in the Urals struggled for its existence during long decades. The four congregations that came to life before 1917 and the two established later were closed down in the 1930s. Only in the 1940s and 1950s did the scattered church members begin meeting in groups.

Up to the late 1970s and early 1980s the territory of the present-day Ural Conference only had small Adventist companies of 5 to 15 members. Some companies located in the cities of regional significance gradually transformed into local churches officially registered by authorities.

The *perestroika* of the late 1980s, and the political and social changes it brought to the USSR, broke new ground for the Adventist Church. People were increasingly interested in spiritual things, and religious congregations and groups could freely meet and do missionary work. Public evangelism became a key outreach method for a decade.

Rapid membership growth in the 1990s required establishment of organizational structure. In 1994 the Ural Conference was organized. It comprised seven territorial entities of the Russian Federation: the Orenburg, Perm,

Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, and Kurgan Regions, the Republic of Bashkortostan, and the Republic of Udmurtia. Pastor Igor Krasilnikov became the conference's first president and was twice re-elected as the leader of the Ural Conference.

In 1994 the Ural Conference comprised 21 churches with more than 3,000 members. By the end of 2000, the Ural Conference had 70 churches with 5,668 members. However, by 2010 church growth not only slowed but started to decrease. Public evangelism was no longer as effective as before. This outreach method is still being used, but in a different format.

As of today, the Ural Conference has 59 churches and 65 companies with 2,775 members.

Presidents

I.V. Krasilnikov (1994-2001); Yu. D. Yunak (2001-2002); G.I. Golovach (2002-2010); V.A. Nikityuk (2010-2013); E.A. Shimanovskiy (2013 – 2019); M.Yu. Dolzhenko (2019 – present).

SOURCES

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Yunak, D. O. *Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii (1886-2000)*. Zaokskiy: Istochnik Zhizni, 2002.

NOTES

1. This article was translated from Russian into English by Elvira Sulaimankulova.
2. "Ural Conference." *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2022), <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=10076>.
3. D.N. Denisov, V.V. Ezhkov, *Aventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v konfessionalnom prostranstve Orenburgskogo Kraya* (Orenburg: OOO IPK, "Universitet," 2015), 11.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Heinrich Löbsack, *Velikoye Adventistskoye dvizheniye i Adventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii* (Rostov-na-Donu: Altair, 2006), 186.

7. D.N. Denisov, V.V. Ezhkov, *Aventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v konfessionalnom prostranstve Orenburgskogo Kraya* (Orenburg: OOO IPK "Universitet", 2015), 13.
8. Ibid., 15.
9. Ibid., 24-25.
10. Ibid., 26-27.
11. Ibid., 31.
12. *Maslina, Magazine Supplement*, February 1908, 26; May 1908, 56; September 1908, 94; December 1908, 149; February 1909, 26; May 1909, 57; October 1909, 104, 153; D.O. Yunak, *Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii (1886-2000)* (Zaokskiy: Istochnik Zhizni, 2002), 238.
13. Ibid., 238.
14. Yu.M. Ivonin, *Khristianstvo v Udmurtii: istoriya i sovremennost'* (Ustinov: Udmurtia, 1987), 50, 55, 57.
15. "Tretiy s"ezd Sibirskogo Oblastnogo Soyuz ASD," *Golos Istiny*, September 1927, 30.
16. Jacob Stieben, "V buryu i tyomnuyu noch po Sibiri i Kirgizskoy respublike," *Golos Istiny*, August 1927, 27.
17. D.N. Denisov, V.V. Ezhkov, *Aventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v konfessionalnom prostranstve Orenburgskogo Kraya* (Orenburg: OOO IPK "Universitet", 2015), 35.
18. Central State Archive of the Udmurt Republic, Fund P-551, Series 1, File 67, 46.
19. Ibid., 36.
20. Ibid., 38.
21. As recollected by R.A. Nikolaeva, daughter of A.B. Teterkin. Personal Archives.
22. As written by Pastor A.G. Chesnokov, according to oral information provided by M.Ya. Frank, a church member from city of Nizhny Tagil. Personal Archives.
23. Central State Archive of the Udmurt Republic, Fund P-551, Series 1, File 87, 31.
24. Ibid.
25. *Kniga pamyati zhertv politicheskikh repressiy* (Izhevsk: Udmurtia, 2001), 48, 144, 181.

26. As recollected by R.A. Nikolaeva, daughter of A.B. Teterkin. Personal Archives.

27. Central State Archive of the Russian Federation, Fund P-6991, Series 3, File 846, 46.

28. D.N. Denisov, V.V. Ezhkov, *Aventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v konfessionalnom prostranstve Orenburgskogo Kraya* (Orenburg: OOO IPK, "Universitet," 2015), 39.

29. Central State Archive of the Udmurt Republic, Fund P-551, Series 1, File 176, p. 131.

30. As recollected by I.V. Krasilnikov, the first president of the Ural Conference. Personal Archives.

31. D.N. Denisov, V.V. Ezhkov, *Aventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v konfessionalnom prostranstve Orenburgskogo Kraya* (Orenburg: OOO IPK, "Universitet," 2015), 70, 74, 76.

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