Belarus Union of Churches Conference

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Belarus Union of Churches Conference is part of the Euro-Asia Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Belarus Union of Churches Conference was organized in 2008. Its headquarters are in Minsk, Belarus.
Prerequisites for the Emergence of Protestantism in the Belarusian Lands

The Reformation that started in Germany spread throughout Europe. The influence of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague, as well as Franciscus Scorina, contributed to the spread of Reformation ideas in the Belarusian lands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1413, Jerome visited Vitebsk, Polotsk, Pskov, Vilna, as well as other cities of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. His sermons helped foster the first Hussite communities. Franciscus Scorina was the first among the Eastern Slavs to begin translating and publishing the Bible in the old Belarusian language, first in Prague, and then in Vilna.

The greatest development of Protestantism in the Belarusian lands took place in the 1550–60s. Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł, Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, can be rightly called “the apostle of Reformation” for this country. The Warsaw Confederation, signed January 28, 1573, granted freedom of religion in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was the second (after Hungary) legal act in a European country that declared the principles of equality of people of different faiths.

By the close of the sixteenth century, the Counter Reformation started to gain strength in the Belarusian territory. In subsequent years, Protestantism remained a minority faith in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. By the close of the eighteenth century the Belarusian lands became a part of the Russian Empire, and in the twentieth century Belarus was proclaimed a Union Republic of the USSR.

The Origin and Formation of Adventism in Belarus

Despite the Protestantism’s minority status in Belarus, interest in the Word of God manifested itself in every generation. The Adventist message reached the East Slavic lands in the late 19th century.

It is known that Herbert Schmitz, an ethnic German, was the first Adventist missionary to Belarusian lands, to the city of Minsk, at the turn of the twentieth century. The first baptism was in 1902 in Minsk by Ottiliya Gustavovna Boeme, who later became the founder of an Adventist community in that city.

The report of the Chief of Police of Minsk, Mr. Sokolov, No. 178, on January 30, 1914, states, “In Minsk, there is a legal group of Seventh-day Adventists, organized about 9-10 years ago. The organizer of the said group numbering now sixteen full-fledged adult members is a Lutheran, Ottiliya Gustavovna Boeme.”

Philipp Nikonovich Kuzemko was one of the first Russian-speaking preachers in the city of Minsk. From 1908 to 1911 he was subject to repression by the tsarist government. In Soviet times in 1930, F. N. Kuzemko was sentenced to three years in concentration camps, and after returning was arrested again and then executed by shooting on August 27, 1937. He was rehabilitated on December 26, 1989.

From February 25 to 28, 1910, a session of the West Russian Mission Field was held in Warsaw, at which H. J. Löbsak was elected president. In addition, he continued pastoral service in Adventist communities in the cities of Vilna and Minsk. In 1910, Pastor Gustav Arnhold was invited by G. I. Loebsak to serve in Minsk, and his family moved there from Poland.

Tracts, books, and other literature played a significant role in the spread of the Adventist message. The literature was printed in the cities of Helsinki, Hamburg, and Riga in Russian, German, Latvian, Estonian, and Polish.

Adventism in Western Belarus and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic before 1945

In 1921, under the Treaty of Riga, western territories of Belarus (Grodno and Brest Governorates) were included in the territory of Poland.

The Adventist message was brought to the territory of Polesye by missionaries M. Dolgun, A. Niewyadomski, K. Bartel, Ya. Kuliak, and A. Kruk, who came from Germany and Poland from 1922 to 1924. In 1926, Adventist leaders in Poland sent Ferdinand Dzik to serve in the city of Grodno. In the interwar period, Pastors Rolski, Lipski, and Wierzbowski also served in the Grodno Region.

In 1922, a group of believers observing the Sabbath invited missionary Mikhail Dolgun to the village Ostrov, where he baptized eight people, including representatives from the villages Knubovo and Morozovichi. As time went on, the Adventist message also reached villages Fedory, Ovsemirovo, and Zholkino. Since Fedory was located between the two last-mentioned villages, a house of prayer was built in Fedory from 1928 to 1932 to subsequently become a place for district meetings. That was the first large prayer house in Belarus, in which worship services have been conducted to this day.

The largest Adventist congregations were located in Konyukhi, Ovsemirovo, Pinsk, Slonim, Fedory, Knubovo, Zholkino, Ostrov, Parshevichi, and Morozovichi. That was the time of successful development of Adventism in
Belarusian Polesye. In addition, there were Adventist congregations in the cities of Brest, Baranovichi, Kobrin, Grodno, and Lida.10

On September 17, 1939, the western Belarusian lands became part of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). They now faced the Soviet hostility toward religious organizations.

During World War II Adventists, like all the inhabitants of Belarus, suffered persecution. According to official statistics, every fourth resident of Belarus died in the 1941-1945 period. Membership dropped in all Polesye congregations. At the same time, in the village of Zholkino, near the house owned by Ivan Maksimovich Verbitskiy, was a large cottage in which both Adventists and non-Adventists gathered. Verbitskiy used to say, “God is with you and, therefore, nothing will happen to us!” People sang songs and read the Bible. Between 1943 and 1944, some 20 people were baptized in the village of Zholkino.11

In the Soviet part of Belarus, Christians, including Protestants, enjoyed relative religious freedom until 1927. They held various congresses and conferences and organized outreach and publishing activities.12 Official figures show that in 1926 there were 49 Protestant communities in Belarus, and 89 communities in 1930.

The 4th All-Russian Session of Seventh-day Adventists, convened in Moscow on September 29-30, 1920, organized seven union conferences under the umbrella of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists (ACSDA). As a result, the Adventist churches located in the western Belarusian lands that became part of Poland were included in the Polish Union. The Adventist churches located in the remaining territory of Belarus were included in the newly formed North Russian Union.

On August 25, 1924, the Executive Committee of the All-Ukrainian (Western Ukrainian) Union organized the Upper Dnieper Mission Field, centered in the city of Gomel. In addition to Belarusian governorates, it also included Chernigov Governorate (Ukrainian SSR). E. I. Skorobreshchuk was elected president, and A.F. Auzin the secretary of that new field. From January 1, 1927, Chernigov Region was excluded from the Upper Dnieper Mission Field that now comprised only Belarusian territories, and was renamed Belarusian Mission Field. On October 24-27, 1928, a constituency meeting of the Belarusian Mission Field took place in Gomel. In 1928, that field was served by E. I. Skorobreshchuk, F. Kuzemko, R. Kuplis, and A. Zhakov.13

In 1925 there were ten Adventist churches with 150 members in the BSSR, and in 1930, 13 churches with 164 members.14 In the 1930s, ministers and active lay members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belarus were convicted by authorities and sent to Siberian prison camps. Many lay members moved to remote villages, and some left the church.

After the Western lands merged into the BSSR in 1939, some preachers who had worked in this territory of Belarus were forced to leave for different parts of the world due to Stalin’s terror. For example, Pastor Niewiadomski immigrated with his family to Australia, where his Adventist descendants are still living.

Adventism in Belarus in the Post-War Period

In the 1960s the Soviet government intensified anti-religious propaganda. In December 1960, the All-Union Council of Seventh-Day Adventists was disbanded. Meanwhile, the Adventist Church was experiencing a split that affected most communities in Russia and Ukraine, and echoed in the Adventist Church in Belarus.

State agencies in Minsk, using various methods of influence and destruction, cultivated distrust between ministers and lay members, splitting the church into two groups. However, after a while, thanks to the work of Pastor Mikhail P. Kulakov in Minsk, the church in Belarus achieved mutual understanding and restored its unity.

During the years of communist dominance, Belarusian Adventist churches were patronized by preachers Yakov Yakubchik, Ivan Morza, Nikolay Lebedev, Dmitriy Lukashenko, Yakov Patsukevich, and Iosif Ostrovsky.

In 1978 the Belarusian Mission Field, chaired by Yakov Yakubchik, was newly organized. On February 18, 1981, the Republican session of representatives of the Adventist churches of Belarus (Session of the Belarus Conference) was held in Minsk.15 The delegates elected new leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belarus: Pavel Panchenko as president, Ivan Morza as assistant president, and Vasily Mikhniuk as secretary-treasurer.

In 1984, at the next session of the Belarus Conference (BC), Ivan Morza was elected president, and Iosif Ostrovsky treasurer, while the ministry of the conference secretary was carried out in the years following by various people. The elected administrators served until 1991.

Adventism in Belarus from 1991 to the Present Day

The beginning of the democratic process in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s opened a new page in the activities of the Adventist Church in Belarus.

On May 2, 1991, at the Belarus Conference session, Ivan Ostrovsky was elected president, and Vasily Lozhechnik secretary-treasurer. The latter, however, was replaced, shortly after, for family reasons, by Ivan I. Morza as secretary and Ivan Kostashchuk as treasurer.16 At that time, the number of church members in Belarus was 800, who were united in 15 congregations. The time of aggressive atheism came to an end, and the influence of the state on the church was reduced. As a result, the church began to use the emerging opportunities by working actively in all
directions. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Adventists enthusiastically welcomed the adoption of new legislation governing relations between church and state, which guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, and lifted most prohibitions against religious activities. Believers regained the opportunity to engage in charitable and educational ministry, establish religious institutions, have property rights, perform missionary work, build prayer houses, and organize religious education of children and youth. Relations with the General Conference were restored.

After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Germany delivered hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid, organized as food parcels, to the territory contaminated with radiation in the Republic of Belarus." The Adventist church took an active part in this project. In 1993, ADRA was registered in Belarus, thus opening an additional door for the church.

In the early 1990s the Belarus Conference saw a series of active evangelistic programs involving foreign preachers. The first evangelistic program was conducted in Gomel in August 1991, led by evangelist Victor Collins from the United States. Many similar evangelistic programs were successfully conducted in other cities of Belarus. Local pastors were also actively involved in the gospel ministry by reaching the vast majority of the major cities of Belarus. Meanwhile, prayer houses were purchased or built in the cities of Minsk, Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Grodno, Mogilev, Borisov, Kobrin, Polotsk, Novopolotsk, Orsha, Rechitsa, Tolochin, Mozyr, Slutsk, Soligorsk, and Baranovichi, and in the villages Ovsemirovo, Rubel, Vyz, Novy Dvor, Berezovichi, etc.

In 1994, at the next session of the Belarus Conference held in a new prayer house in the city of Gomel, Ivan I. Ostrovsky was reelected as president, Vasily Nichik was elected secretary, and Olga Lebedeva treasurer. Until 1989, the Belarus Conference belonged to the USSR Union. Between 1989 and 1993, the Belarus Conference was a part of the Baltic Union, and in 1994 it was granted the status of an attached field of the Euro-Asia Division. In 2000, at the next session of the Belarus Conference, Moisey Ostrovsky was elected president, Vasily Lozhechnik secretary, and Vasily Nichik treasurer.

One of the most important tasks of Belarus Conference officers was to provide all congregations in Belarus with their own prayer houses. Due to the rapid increase in the number of members, the second prayer houses were built in the cities of Vitebsk, Gomel, Pinsk, and Brest. In addition, 24 prayer houses for newly organized churches were purchased in various regions of Belarus within a year under the ESD “300-300-300” program. The church membership in Belarus increased manifold.

The Belarus Conference administration prioritized the development of the Adventist church in Minsk in a fitting way. Some experienced ministers were invited to serve in that city. An unfinished building at 28 Annaeva Street was purchased and rebuilt as the conference headquarters, with a hall for worship services. A few years after, two more buildings were purchased and rebuilt as prayer houses at 44 Olshevkogo Street and at 56 Okrestina Street. Finally, the fifth house of worship was constructed at 42 Knorina Street and dedicated as the Church celebrated the centennial of its work in the Republic of Belarus. The correspondence department of the Zaoksky Theological Seminary opened in Minsk. After a while, all Belarusian pastors received the Bachelor of Theology degree. On February 1, 2005, the Minsk Theological Institute was established.

In 2008, by decision of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Belarus Conference was reorganized into the Belarus Union of Churches Conference (BUC). The necessity for such reorganization was caused by the following facts: (1) Belarus was a small separate country; (2) the Belarus Conference had no subsidiary conference/mission organizations; (3) there was no possibility that two or more viable subsidiary field organizations could be established within the BC territory in the foreseeable future; and (4) there was no viable possibility of being incorporated into an existing or projected union organization in the foreseeable future. Moisey Ostrovsky was re-elected as president, Vyacheslav Buchnev became secretary, and Nikolay Patsukevich treasurer. In September 2015 Vyacheslav Buchnev was elected president, Nikolay Gun’ko secretary, and Nikolay Patsukevich treasurer of the Belarus Union Conference. The development and expansion of Children’s and Youth Ministries became the principal direction of church activities in Belarus.

Today the Belarus Union Conference is a well-functioning and well-structured organism. Every year a variety of programs, including children’s, music, and choral festivals, are conducted with the support of all church departments. The Pathfinder Club ministry increases at a rapid rate. Vacation schools and camps are organized for children and teenagers. In September 2017, the recreation center Mir near the city of Bobruisk was purchased to host medical missionary activities, various youth programs, and Pathfinder camps.

Education is a valuable constituent of spiritual growth and development in the Belarus Union Conference. Over 90 percent of its pastors hold a Master of Theology degree, and five pastors a Doctor of Theology. Today there are 29 ordained and 12 licensed ministers in the conference. At present, all conference churches are provided with prayer houses.

Executive Officers Chronology


Sources


Kuzemko, Filipp Nikonovich. Criminal Charge Pursuant to Article 54-10, Part. 2. State Archives of the Odessa Region. Fund ?-8065, Inventory 2, File 12230.


NOTES


3. “Ibid”?

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