

BENEFICIARIES OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

A brief history of the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Union, USA

The Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Union, USA (RUEBU) was organized during a conference initiated by Rev. Platon I. Daviduk and held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on April 3-5, 1919. Present were 60 delegates from 20 Russian-speaking churches, mainly from the East Coast. The conference was held in the Fourth Baptist Church, located on the corner of Buttonwood and Fifth Street. The birthplace of the American republic also became the birthplace of RUEBU.

Rev. Daviduk began his ministry among the Russian-speaking immigrants in New England as a missionary of the Connecticut Baptist Convention in 1914. This allowed him to become acquainted with many Russian-speaking Baptist churches in the USA and helped lay the groundwork for the formation of RUEBU.

In 1916, three years before RUEBU was organized, Rev. Daviduk began publishing "The Sower of Truth," a Russian-language Christian magazine. This ministry was made possible by the gift of a printing press from the First Baptist Church of Hartford, today the Central Baptist Church of Hartford. The magazine provided much-needed spiritual nurture for the Russian speaking Baptist churches in the USA and information about their ministries. This contributed to the formation of RUEBU in 1919. The "Sower of Truth" has been published without interruption for one hundred three years! It is the oldest Russian Christian magazine in the world and the official voice of RUEBU. Today, it also contains a Ukrainian section.

By 1920, RUEBU grew to 31 churches, three of which were in Canada. Altogether, by 1920, there were some 50 Russian-speaking Baptist congregations and mission stations, ministering to Russian-speaking immigrants in the USA. By 1923, RUEBU churches had a total of 651 members. Most of these churches were led by laymen, many of whom were semi-literate. Only a few pastors had any theological preparation. Most of their members were immigrants from Czarist Russia, mainly

Belorussian, Russians and Ukrainians. There was also a small number of Carpathians, Czechs and Slovaks.

Situated mainly in the Northeast and the Midwest, Russian-speaking Baptist churches received the support of the Northern Baptist Convention (today the American Baptist Churches, USA). The American Baptist Home Mission Society sponsored the Russian Bible Institute (RBI) in New York City and the International Bible Baptist Seminary in East Orange, New Jersey of which RBI later became a department. The Society also supplemented the meager wages of RUEBU pastors, many of whom were ordained to the Christian ministry with the cooperation of the ABC/USA.

Rev. Platon I. Daviduk was elected as the first president of RUEBU during its formation and served in that capacity for thirty-eight years (1919-1957). Until his death, he also served as the Chief Editor of the "Sower of Truth" He was followed by Ivan A. Kmeta (1957-1974), Alex P. Leonovich (1974-1978 and 1994-1998), Nicholas 1. Sylwesiuk (1978-1982), John Mentus (1982-1986), wasilij V. Shachov (1986-1990), George G. Boltnew (1990-1994 and 1998-2002), Vitaly V. Korchevski (2002-2003), Peter P. Pleshko (2004-2008 and 2014-2016) and George Harlov (2008-2014, 2016-2018 and in 2018 elected for four more years).

The founders of RUEBU represent the third wave of Slavic immigrants who came to America from Czarist Russia prior to World War I. As a rule, they were poor and lacked formal education. Most of them were of the Orthodox faith. Their dream was to earn money in America, return home to their families and die, as they put it, on the soil of "Holy Mother Russia." (Almost nothing is known about the first two waves of Slavic immigrants who came to America from Czarist Russia in 1870 and at the end of the 1890s from territories, which today are part of Belarus and Ukraine. Some left Russia because of religious persecution.)

The eruption of World War I in 1914 and, subsequently, the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, prevented their return to their homeland. Many of those who were

forced to remain in the USA became believers and organized themselves into Russian-speaking Baptist churches.

It was this third wave of Slavic immigrants to America that became the main force behind the creation of RUEBU in 1919. In turn, their children, who were born in America, became the backbone of RUEBU and its many ministries. They built houses of worship for their congregations, put in motion a missionary program and helped to develop a small summer camp, bought by RUEBU in Ashford, Connecticut in 1952, into our Evangelical Christian Center.

In the 1940s, during World War II, most RUEBU churches were on the verge of switching from Russian to English, as their main language of worship. The reason was obvious. English became the mother tongue of their children and grandchildren. Some congregations conducted bilingual services. Others switched fully to English.

Most of the RUEBU churches sorely lacked trained leadership. The adults failed to understand the need for English in worship and spiritual nurture of their children and grandchildren. To prevent the loss of young people, some RUEBU churches began inviting American pastors. Inevitably, some of the American pastors severed all ties with RUEBU. Happily, many of these churches continued their ministries as independent Baptist churches. They focused on reaching the people in their neighborhoods. Praise God, a number of these churches still exist and continue to strengthen the spiritual foundation of America.

RUEBU's Slavic ministry received a strong boost with the arrival of the fourth Slavic immigration wave from Europe. They were known as "displaced persons." They represented Soviet prisoners of war, those whom the Germans brought from the Soviet Union and other East European countries to Germany as "slave labor" and those who fled from the Red Terror. After the war, they were forced to remain in West Germany. Returning to their homes in Eastern Europe would have jeopardized their very lives. They lived in West Germany for four years in camps specially

organized for them by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, better known as UNRRA. During their four brief years in West Germany, they managed to organize a Slavic Baptist Union, numbering more than 4000 members. They established a Bible School in the town of Frille. Many of the students later served as pastors in Slavic Baptist churches in the USA and in other western countries.

RUEBU was involved in missionary work in Eastern Europe even before World War II. Following the war, our missionaries worked not only in West Germany, but also in Austria, Belgium and Italy. Among them was Mary Selody, RUEBU's missionary in Carpathia. Following the war, she and Rev. Alex Leonovich ministered to Slavic immigrants in West Germany and Belgium.

Unable to return home and not wanting to live in Displaced Persons' camps in West Germany, beginning in 1946, some of the Slavic immigrants began emigrating to Australia, Belgium and England. A smaller number emigrated to Brazil and Venezuela.

Most Slavic believers among the "Displaced Persons" tried to move away as far as possible from the Soviet Union. In 1948, some began emigrating to Canada. However, most of them preferred to emigrate to the United States of America, where they felt more secure.

And so, beginning in 1949, RUEBU congregations were flooded by Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking members. This revived the Slavic ministry in America for many years. The fourth wave of Slavic immigrants also provided experienced pastors for many of the RUEBU churches in dire need of theologically trained leaders.

In 1952, Mary Selody, who had served as a RUEBU missionary in both Eastern and Western Europe, was appointed as director of the summer camp that RUEBU bought in Ashford, Connecticut and entrusted with its development. Under her dedicated leadership, a small summer camp became the hub of RUEBU's activity.

The Evangelical Christian Center, as it is called today, became home to our annual conferences, summer camping programs for children, Youth and Family Week and Slavic Week for Russian-speaking members of the RUEBU churches. One of our Center's most memorable events was the dedication of the Home for the Aged, on September 20, 1962. It continues to provide care not only for elderly people from our RUEBU churches, but to all who need it.

The Center hosted conferences for leaders of the various Slavic Baptist conventions and missionary organizations in the USA and Canada. Those were memorable days of good will and cooperation.

Reflecting our Center's motto: "Where God's Handiwork Is Seen and His Voice Heard," all summer long — eight weeks — one could hear the happy voices of children, young people and the elderly, who came to Ashford to rest in the beautiful outdoors and study the Word of God. Baptismal services were held on the lake. One of our young counsellors put it best: "Our Center in Ashford is a 'piece of heaven on earth.'"

We could hardly wait for summer to arrive so that, once again, we could meet with our brothers and sisters from our RUEBU churches and see our dear Miss Selody, who became a spiritual mother to many. (Yes, RUEBU had its very own "Mary!") The Evangelical Christian Center, as it is called today, became our spiritual home. Even today, still amazed by the spirit of genuine love and unity that prevailed in RUEBU for so many years. No one sought power. RUEBU was truly a community of servants.

Mary Selody was followed by David DeJong, Walter Novak, Amos Overton and Alexander Henkel, who served as directors of the Center. Dr. Peter Pleshko has been serving as its General Director and treasurer since 2006. In 2009, Bill Smyrnov assumed the responsibilities of Director of Operations of ECC

Today the RUEBU Center in Ashford continues to be a hub of activity all year long. The Home for the Aged, under the dedicated leadership of Elena Ionkin, ministers to

the needs of the elderly. The Center is home to the "Sower of Truth" Publications Department, supervised by Rev. Basilio Sapoval, its Chief editor since 1999. ECC also houses the office of the Slavic Missionary Service, directed by Rob Zapotoski, its Interim Director. In the course of the year, many Christian groups hold their retreats and conferences at ECC. This includes university students, ethnic and American churches. A number of churches hold their summer camps in our Center. Our RUEBU annual conferences, pastor's retreats and youth conferences are also held in the Center every year.

I see the Evangelical Christian Center in Ashford as our "thank you" to America for opening its doors to us. By providing facilities for a broad range of Christian ministries, we strengthen the spiritual foundation of America — the only hope for its future survival.

From the late 1950s to the late 1960s, a sizeable Slavic immigration made its way from South America to the USA and Canada, mainly from Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. A few families came from Venezuela. It represents the fifth Slavic wave of immigrants to the USA. It, too, played an important role in renewing the Slavic ministry in the USA and Canada.

The Youth Department of RUEBU was organized in 1928. From 1928 to 1966 it sponsored English-speaking conferences and retreats for young people whose mother tongue was now English. It supported RUEBU in all of its missionary endeavors. As the young people in the RUEBU churches matured and became adults with their own families, it was decided to transform the Youth Department into the English branch - an entity that would include adults. Therefore, in 1966 the English Branch was born. It became a Department of RUEBU with its own Executive Committee and program.

History attests to the fact that it was the right decision and very timely. For many years, the English Branch had an amazing ministry and made the overall ministry of RUEBU much more effective and relevant to its local churches. Four times a year, it

organized missionary banquets in various local churches of RUEBU. The funds, donated during the banquets, were used to support our missionaries, radio programs beamed into the Soviet Union and many other important ministries. During the summers, the English Branch conducted a Youth and Family Week in our Center in Ashford. It also published the "Herald" magazine, which was a continuation of "The Pilot," and English-language magazine previously published by the Youth Department.

The Youth Department of RUEBU was brought back to life in 1996 as "Youth for Jesus." In 2008, it was renamed as "Destination 3:16." Under the capable leadership of John Kostenko, as its president since 2013, it holds bi-annual conferences for young people at our Evangelical Christian Center in Ashford, which bring together young people even from churches outside of RUEBU. The purpose of Destination 3:16 is "to help young adults grow in their relationship with Christ and live out the Gospel in their day-to-day lives.

The Women's Department was always very active in supporting RUEBU's many ministries. Today, under the dedicated leadership of Yelena Goponov, who, since 2006, serves as its president, the women of our Union are involved in many projects. They provide help for children's camps in Ashford and Uruguay (helped build Sunday School rooms in Uruguay), assist families that adopt orphans, minister to the elderly in our Home for the Aged in Ashford, conduct women's conferences in RUEBU churches, decorate our Center for the annual conferences and conduct a spring conference for the women of our RUEBU churches.

From 1953-1963, Leon and Ann Chechowich worked in Australia as missionaries of RUEBU. They ministered in Russian-speaking churches in Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide, which were part of the Slavic Evangelical Christian Baptist Union of Australia. Rev. Chechowich also served as its president.

RUEBU also participated in ministry to the Polish people both in the USA and in Poland. In April 1960, Rev. Nicholas A. Sylwesiuk, pastor of the Evangelical Baptist Church in Buffalo, began a Polish radio broadcast called "The Polish Gospel Hour."

Its ministry continued for many years and reached large audiences both in the USA and Poland..

In 1964, I began my missionary trips to Poland as a representative of RUEBU. We supported Polish pastors and helped build churches. Until the 1980s, RUEBU provided much-needed help to Baptists in Poland. In turn, Poland served as a channel for our support of Baptists in the former Soviet Union. At the time, it was extremely difficult to visit the Soviet Union.

In 1964, RUEBU and the Pacific Coast Slavic Baptist Association officially merged into one Union. The decision was made during the Annual Conference in Ashford, Connecticut. However, due to the large distance, that separates us from one another, it was decided that each body would conduct its ministry independently, but the presidents of both bodies would be considered as official members of their Executive Committees. This very close partnership between the two Unions continues until this day.

In the early 1970s, Soviet Jews began to arrive in large numbers in the USA. After leaving the Soviet Union, most of them headed for Ostia, Italy, which became a transitional point where they were given entrance visas to the USA. RUEBU sent Rev. Peter Gordiejew and his wife Ludmila to Ostia to minister to Russian-speaking Jews, who were in transit. I had the opportunity to visit Ostia and observe their unique ministry. I say "unique," because reaching Jews with the Gospel is a great challenge and requires great patience.

Thanks to RUEBU's ministry in Italy, many of the Soviet Jews, who settled in the New York area, sent their children and young people to our Summer Camping Program in Ashford, Connecticut during the course of many years. I participated in this amazing and unrepeatably ministry, which was directed by Rev. A. J. Overton. Several thousand Jewish children and young people heard about their Messiah in our RUEBU Center! This was the only time, at least in my lifetime, when Jews entrusted

their children to Christians! In my view, this was a great honor bestowed by God upon RUEBU.

In the 1980s, a combined evangelistic outreach was organized in New York City for the Soviet Jews. It was a cooperative venture of "The Message to Israel," Slavic Missionary Service, and the RUEBU churches in the New York area. It included concerts and literary evenings with well-known Russian Christian writers and poets.

From 1980 to 1998, Dr. Peter Pleshko had a very effective ministry to the Soviet Jews in New York City. He organized retreats for them in our Center in Ashford. As a result, approximately one hundred Soviet Jews were baptized in our Center in Ashford and many others in New York City.

In 1969, RUEBU and the Union of Slavic Churches of Evangelical Christians and Slavic Baptists of Canada formed the Slavic Evangelical Baptist Alliance of North America (SEBA). It had two objectives: raise funds for the radio broadcasts beamed into the Soviet Union and publish Russian and Ukrainian Christian literature for believers in the Soviet Union. Every two years conferences were held, alternating between the two countries.

The combination of all the ministries mentioned above, made those years the "golden age" of RUEBU.

Beginning in the second half of the 1980s, a new wave of Slavic immigrants from the Soviet Union began arriving in the USA. This was the sixth and the largest wave of Slavic immigrants ever to come to the USA. They began to arrive, just as English was on the verge of becoming the dominant language in our RUEBU churches. With the arrival of the sixth wave of Slavic immigrants in the USA, the need for Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking ministers once again became apparent. Many of the RUEBU churches experienced significant growth in their membership. New churches were added to our fellowship. Our annual conferences and pastors' retreats experienced great growth in attendance. As many as 1100 young people attended the youth

conferences in our Center in Ashford. The membership of RUEBU churches grew to nearly three thousand people, RUEBU's future looked very bright.

Sadly, the amazing "renewal" of RUEBU's ministry was short-lived. Since the members of the sixth wave came from various regions of the Soviet Union and had their own traditions of worship and church polity, they began leaving the RUEBU churches and organizing their own fellowships.

For eighty-three years, RUEBU enjoyed an amazing spirit of unity among its churches, incarnating its motto: "Christ Jesus is our peace and unity." Sadly, in 2003 and in 2004, the unethical behavior of certain individuals and churches that used lies and even threats to gain control of RUEBU and its ministries, forced the leadership of RUEBU to dismiss them from membership in RUEBU. It was the most difficult decision the RUEBU Executive Committee has ever had to make. As a result of these sad events, the 84th RUEBU Annual Conference had to be cancelled.

The wounds have healed and today RUEBU continues to share the Joyous News of God's love not only with Slavic people in the USA, but also in many other parts of the world.

Members of the sixth Slavic wave to America can be found in most of the fifty states. Many of their churches are autonomous and quite sizeable. Some have organized their own unions. They are providing a very timely and greatly needed spiritual support for America's society. Their missionary outreach includes the republics of the former Soviet Union and many countries of the world. Overall, the relationship between the various Slavic Baptist unions and churches in the USA has greatly improved.

Dr. I. A. Kmeta and Alex Leonovich were first RUEBU representatives to visit the Baptist churches in the Soviet Union. Their visit took place in 1964. Beginning in 1974, RUEBU pastors travelled to the Soviet Union quite often and ministered extensively in Baptist churches in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. In turn, delegations of Baptist

pastors from the former Soviet Union took part in our annual conferences in Ashford and visited our RUEBU churches. Today, we enjoy very close fellowship with Baptists in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

As a RUEBU representative, I had the great joy and honor to help in the founding of the Moscow Baptist Theological Seminary in 1993. In my view, it was the most important event in the life of Baptists in Russia in the past one hundred years. RUEBU continues to provide support for the seminary's program, which has nearly two thousand students. All students are already involved in some kind of Christian ministry.

Since 1946, we have been supporting the missionary outreach of Slavic Baptists who emigrated to Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. I had the privilege of visiting with many of the Slavic Baptist pioneers in South America and witnessing their extensive missionary outreach to Slavic immigrants and the indigenous people among whom they settled. Many of our RUEBU pastors ministered in South America. This tradition continues today. RUEBU helped the Slavic Baptists in Paraguay build a hospital for lepers. We support the Bible Institute in Temperely, Argentina, originally known as the Russian Bible Institute. Today, it trains pastors and missionaries for the countries of Latin America. We supported orphans and missionaries in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. We continue to have strong ties with the Slavic Baptist Union of the La Plata Republics (Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) to this day and our support of their very effective ministry continues.

In my view, the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Union, USA, is not really a convention per se. Rather, we are a missionary society. Missions was always at the heart of RUEBU's ministry. Although we're not a large fellowship, our missionary outreach was always very extensive and today covers the globe. The Slavic Missionary Service (SMS), the Missionary Department of RUEBU, is the outgrowth of the Russian Missionary Service, founded by Ivan Neprash in 1933. Under the dedicated leadership of Rev. Alex Leonovich, SMS sought financial support for our missionary outreach, prepared Christian radio broadcasts beamed into the Soviet

Union for more than three decades, printed Christian literature and helped build churches in the Soviet Union. Since 2013, under the capable and enthusiastic leadership of Rob Zapotoski, SMS provides support for some forty missionaries in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. Its website ministry reaches at least fifteen countries.

The goal of RUEBU has not changed since its inception in 1919. We are doing everything in our power to reach the Slavic world with the Joyous News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Using Slavic believers scattered throughout the world, RUEBU endeavors to carry out Christ's command to take the Gospel to all nations. It is worth noting that RUEBU was founded in 1919, or two years following the October Revolution in Russia. To me this suggests that God not only foresaw the spiritual needs of the Slavic immigrants stranded in America, following the October Revolution of 1917, but also the spiritual needs of Slavic people in Eastern Europe and those scattered throughout the world.

Today RUEBU has twelve churches and is in a close association with several others. We are not large in number, but our ministry has not diminished. On the contrary, we are involved in more missionary projects than ever. Ethnic, or bilingual ministry, is difficult and has many challenges, but it's a ministry that is greatly needed by immigrant families who need a spiritual home during their transition period to a new society. To be effective in our ministry requires an ongoing dialogue between the older generation and their children, who quickly become "Americanized." The eventual goal of any bilingual or ethnic church is two-fold: 1) to have an effective local ministry and 2) to take the Joyous News of God's love to the ends of the earth, as commanded by our Lord.

As members of RUEBU, we are the beneficiaries of God's providence and care. This obligates us to strengthen the unique ministry of RUEBU, so that we may be able to continue meeting the spiritual needs of Slavic people living in the United States and beyond its borders.

We appeal to all the members of our RUEBU churches and to all our Christian friends to help us fulfill the mission entrusted to us as a fellowship of churches. It is our desire to live in peace and unity with all who make up the Body of Christ — His Church.

Christian ministry requires prayerful and financial support. Please pray for RUEBU's many ministries. We also need your continued financial support. Your gifts for RUEBU's missionary outreach, or the needs of our Center in Ashford, should be sent to our RUEBU treasurer:

Irina Serzhantova 2775 West 14¹ Street Apt 4K Brooklyn, NY 11235-4021

May RUEBU's motto — "Christ Jesus is our peace and unity" — encourage us to support one another, as we carry out the command of our Risen Savior and make His redemptive sacrifice known to all the nations of the world.

George Boltnew

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