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Peacemaking
in Moscow

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Russian Orthodox Patriarch Pimen (left), evangelist Billy Graham on dias



India delegates listen intently

Moscow journey:

BY EDGAR R. TREXLER

When 31 North American church leaders stepped off airplanes last month in Moscow, they knew they were taking a risk. They were among 588 delegates and observers from eight world religions and 90 countries who traveled to the Soviet city of 8 million for the "World Conference of Religious Workers for Saving the Sacred Gift of Life from Nuclear Catastrophe."

The risk was whether the conference sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church could be kept evenhanded in its views about current world tensions, or whether it would deteriorate into criticism of the West and praise of the Soviets. At the same time, North Americans needed to be temperate in their criticism so that they would not place their Russian Orthodox hosts in a difficult situation with the Soviet government. Still further, if North Americans did not attend the conference, they could be criticized for not being willing to talk peace with the Soviets.

The U.S. Department of State urged U.S. representatives, including evangelist Billy Graham, not to attend, fearing that the gathering would become a propaganda vehicle for the Soviet government. These state department views were shared with other governments that requested them, notably Canada, Norway and the Netherlands.

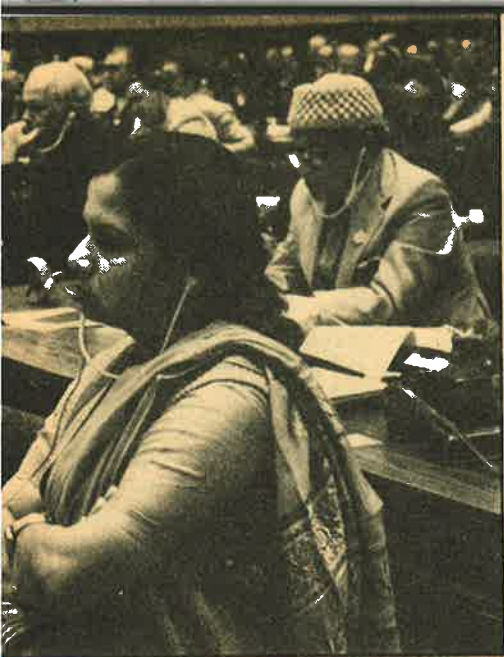
The May 10-14 conference was clearly held with the blessing of the Soviet government and timed to produce documents for this month's U.N. Second Special Session

Western religious leaders gambled that attending a church conference in the Soviet Union would promote peace rather than propaganda

on Disarmament. Costs for housing and meals of participants were paid by the Russian Orthodox Church, along with travel costs for many Third World participants. Agents of the KGB, the Soviet secret police and intelligence agency, were frequently spotted during the sessions.

Dr. Paul Brndjar, director of the Lutheran Church in America's department of church and society, opted for observer status as the personal representative to the conference for Bishop James R. Crumley Jr. A former

The author was one of three U.S. church journalists invited to the conference.



ALC Presiding Bishop David W. Preus (center) chaired the conference

a risk for peace



LCA observer Brndjar (right) concentrates on proceedings

bishop of the Slovak Zion Synod, Brndjar has observed church conditions in Eastern European countries on several visits, and had counseled against the LCA sending a delegate to the meeting.

Presiding Bishop David W. Preus of the American Lutheran Church chose to be a delegate. He noted on the plane to Moscow that "this is a time for initiatives. The chances of something bad happening are remote, and even if you're not optimistic about something good, you have to take the opportunities as they come." Hours

after his arrival Preus was surprised to learn that he was one of the nine vice-chairmen of the conference.

When the conference was over six days later, nearly all the Americans left Moscow feeling that the conference's four documents were basically balanced in content, and that the week had been worth the risk. Staff members of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow admitted that the gathering was more evenhanded than they had predicted.

Four U.S. church executives, including Preus, and a seminary professor from Chicago had been instrumental in shaping an "Appeal to all Governments of the World" which called on the Soviet Union and the United States, along with other nuclear powers, to "hasten the pace of implementing programs of disarmament." Discarded was a draft of the document written before the meeting by the international preparatory committee. The draft had lauded the Soviets for peacemaking but made no mention of U.S. efforts. Many European church leaders not particularly vocal during the conference privately credited the Americans with preventing the gathering from becoming a Soviet "party."

The documents are "clearly evenhanded," Preus said. "They can be transmitted to any of our churches for study and action without apology." Dr. Avery Post, president of the United Church of Christ, said the proceedings had been "more open, more balanced than I expected." Dr. William P. Thompson, stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, concurred that North Americans felt they had input in the final documents.

Brndjar demurred with the U.S. majority view, giving

Preus:

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a "significantly negative assessment of the conference." He found it "unfortunate and disappointing that a significant and urgent concern for world peace and nuclear disarmament" was "so often submerged in overtly uneven political consideration. The conference was thus diverted from a balanced and credible expression of that shared concern and urgency."

Brndjar noted that the conference was highly controlled with each day's agenda tightly packed. The result was a series of presentations with no time for rebuttal by the gathering of 401 Christians, 106 Muslims, 57 Buddhists, eight Jews, four each of Hindus and Sikhs, one Shinto and six others, including Zoroastrians. Australia and the Indian and Pacific Ocean areas had six representatives, Asia 103, Africa 63, the Middle East 33, Europe 156, South America and the Caribbean 24, North America 31 and the Soviet Union 175. The most notable absence was the American Jewish community. Thirty Lutherans were present from 11 countries.

On the opening day Patriarch Pimen of Moscow and All Russia read an 11-page address which, like all presentations, was simultaneously translated into the conference's six working languages — Russian, English, German, French, Spanish and Arabic. U.S. and European participants considered the address remarkably balanced in its concern for the sacredness of life, the role of sin in the world and the duty to protect life. Except for several sentences near the end where Pimen deplored that "certain powerful circles of the West, pursuing their own political, economic and other interests ... blacken the honest and open peace-loving policy of our fatherland," the speech was essentially theological.

Then some speeches became political. The chairman of the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs, V.A. Kuroedov, read a message that spoke of Western "warmongers" and decried policies of "limited nuclear war," "neutron bombs" and "first strike," code words for criticism of U.S. administration plans. Later a Buddhist delegate from Sri Lanka and a Muslim delegate from the Central Asian Republic of the U.S.S.R. repeated the charges.

On the conference's second day Dr. Carl Mau, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation and an observer, quietly told some Russian Orthodox Church officials that some Western delegates might leave if the harangues continued. Later that morning three Americans — Billy Graham, Preus and Dr. Arie Brouwer, general secretary of the Reformed Church of America — addressed the conference in succession.

Graham received resounding applause after his address in which he called the nations and leaders of the world to repentance and prayer and to a "new and radical com-

mitment to peace and justice." He urged "all governments to respect the rights of religious leaders as outlined in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights," and quoted a section of the Helsinki agreement, signed by 35 nations including the Soviet Union, in which governments are directed to respect the freedom of religious and other beliefs.

While in Moscow Graham also preached at Baptist and Orthodox churches and made controversial statements that he had not directly seen religious oppression in the country (see *Editor's opinion*, page 34).

Following Graham's address Preus chaired the plenary session, telling participants that he came to Moscow "because I believed it possible that we could gather here as a religious people ... whose highest loyalty is to Almighty God, people who could rise above national, ideological, political and religious differences." But the conference, he continued, "is in danger of becoming a political forum heavily tilted against the West.... We have been treated mainly to a series of political speeches better suited for the United Nations. If we make this conference a series of political charges and countercharges against West and East, we will go home with no great summons to the nations to rise above enmity and nuclear confrontation."

Brouwer followed Preus, departing from his prepared text to say that "although the primary focus of the American churches is on the policies of our own government, we of course also lament the participation in the arms race of the Soviet Union and other countries."

In the minds of many participants, the three U.S. speeches helped moderate some of the presentations that followed. Preus felt that speaking out strengthened the hands of Brouwer and Dr. Bruce Rigdon, a United Presbyterian professor at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, who were two of 18 members of the drafting committee for the conference documents.

Brouwer and Rigdon earlier had won the confidence of church officials in socialist countries through East-West dialogues. Post, Thompson and Preus labored behind the scenes with Eastern European and Soviet leaders with whom they have worked in the World Council of Churches.

Rigdon said the negotiations were not especially difficult. A private meeting between Russian Orthodox and



Buddhists use earphones made in Hamden, Conn.



U.S. huddle: From left, Post, Thompson, Brouwer, Rigdon, Preus (foreground).

U.S. leaders made clear that both sides, for different reasons, wanted the document to reflect a balanced view of the activities of each other's governments.

The key to negotiating the appeal to the governments was the pairing of two peace initiatives. The document notes "the unilateral Soviet decision to stop the deployment of new nuclear medium-range missiles in the European part of the U.S.S.R. and to reduce the number of presently deployed missiles." It also welcomes "the expressed readiness of the United States to conduct formal negotiations on the reduction of strategic nuclear arms beginning as early as next month." The latter was a reference to President Reagan's speech at Eureka (Ill.) College just as the conference began.

An 11-point appeal to nuclear weapons states seeks to end "hostile rhetoric." It also asks cooperation rather than confrontation, a freeze on developing and deploying new weapons and an end to testing. Non-nuclear weapons states are asked to remain that way.

A second document, addressed to the U.N. special session, asks for "daring and effective decision to rid the world of the menace of nuclear weapons." Outlawing nuclear, radiological and chemical weapons was urged.

Confession followed by education and advocacy highlight a third document, "Appeal to the Leaders and Followers of All Religions." Religions should "speak humbly," the statement reads, "with awareness of their own complicity in war and violence. But they must speak clearly, audibly and unequivocally," condemning "as a moral evil the development, manufacture, testing, deployment and use of any nuclear weapons ... by anyone."

Two paragraphs in the appeal brought negative reactions from Preus and Bishop Johannes Hanselmann of the Lutheran Church of Bavaria. They noted that the section points to troubled situations in southern Africa and the Middle East but omits any reference to Poland and Afghanistan, which Preus said would be high on his list. In the consensus style of the conference — votes were never taken — the paragraphs were retained.

The balanced nature of the documents suggests that the conference operated on two tracks — a more bombastic tone in the rhetoric of the plenary sessions, and a more

conciliatory approach in the small groups which produced the documents.

Believing that words should prompt action, Preus, Brouwer, Post and Thompson talked extensively with Vladimir Fister, vice chairman of the Soviet Council of Religious Affairs, about two Pentecostal families that have been living in the basement of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow since June 1978. Later the quartet spearheaded a group of Americans who visited the Vashchenko and Chmykhalov families for more than an hour and told them they have interceded in the families' efforts to emigrate to the United States (see page 18).

Reflecting on the conference while flying home, Brndjar emphasized that it must be seen "on two levels. On the spiritual side, a strong and genuine voice was raised against the threat of nuclear war by the vast majority of participants, even though the moral and theological basis for that call was not set out. We also supported the Russian Orthodox Church and Eastern European churches in their difficult and restrictive relationships with their governments.

"On the political level," Brndjar continued, "no program was put forward for the governments of the world to engage seriously in the continuing, arduous and long-term work of negotiation, accommodation, compromise, trust-building and step-taking which is the only realistic avenue open to check and reduce the nuclear arms spiral. Freightened words in the documents such as calls for nuclear freeze, the neutron bomb and a limited nuclear war neatly reflect, from the Eastern bloc viewpoint, the 'correct understanding' of the nuclear question.

"While the final documents have no crude anti-West or anti-U.S. stance, substantive portions reflect very closely current Soviet policy without any significant concession to the Soviet role in the arms race. I fear the calculated and ingenious use to which the documents might be put. The document for the U.N. special assembly, for example, could be used to buttress the Soviet position at that meeting."

Asks to rate the meeting on a scale of 1 to 10, Brndjar replied, "I'd give the moral side a 7 and the political side a 3.5. The ambiguity of this situation extends to me personally," he said. "When I was a synod bishop, I was called a leftist for going to Czechoslovakia and talking with church people there. Now I'm labeled a rightist because of my stance at this conference."

Preus expressed the position shared by nearly all U.S. participants: "The positives clearly outweighed the negatives." He acknowledged the "abundance of blatant Soviet propaganda" and a "preponderance of themes that are part of the ongoing Soviet criticism of the West." But, he went on, "we managed to say that despite the constant temptation to get into divisive issues, there is an overarching nuclear weapons concern that has to take precedence."

It is too early to know what the conference's effect might be. To be sure, its symbolic nature cannot be missed, namely, that religious leaders of the world gathered on Soviet soil and spoke up sharply on behalf of peace. ■