

latter's response, as quoted, is merely a restatement of the church's involvement in the peace campaign, and the two former repeat what the functions of the monastery are intended to be. One interesting point, however, is that Metropolitan Alexi denies an allegation said to have been made in the

western press that the return of the Danilov Monastery to the church might mean that it would have to return the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergius at Zagorsk to the state.

JANE ELLIS

The British Council of Churches Delegation to the Churches of the USSR, 17-28 May 1986

What was one to expect from such a visit? The question must have presented itself to our hosts as well as to ourselves. In an attempt to dispel at least some of the doubts, the nineteen-member delegation was early presented with an address by the ailing (therefore absent) Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia. This urged that interdenominational questions be left to one side since existing bilateral discussions could best concern themselves with questions of faith and order. Rather should we turn to problems of the utmost urgency for the welfare of mankind, problems of peace and nuclear disarmament. The statement was clearly drawn up in the awareness that discussions on the previous exchange visit of Christians from the USSR to the British Council of Churches (BCC) in 1983 had indeed concerned itself with such things in the aftermath of the Church of England's *The Church and the Bomb* and the BCC's own *On Making Peace in the Nuclear World*. And it was probably in the same awareness that a non-committal passage was drafted for a possible joint communiqué, which clearly anticipated that these discussions would continue unabated. However, the passage was to be redrafted and the expectations were not to be fulfilled. This was to the credit of both sides in the formal discussions and, one would hope, to the benefit of both.

Instead, and on the prompting of the "home" team (a passage in the Patriarch's address of welcome, elaborated in a heartfelt speech by Protopresbyter Vitali

Borovoi), valuable time was spent on the question of mutual trust, the presupposition for any dialogue or exchange. This involved more than the expression of pious thoughts about openness: it brought actual openness into play. In the furtherance of it both sides were assisted by the absence of prepared papers; and while the first of our two discussions may have lacked a sense of direction, it provided ample fuel for the often vital and forthright discussions which were held when the two parties reconvened towards the end of the visit. The joint statement, which was freshly drawn up on the following day, the penultimate day of the visit, had reason to speak of "frank exchanges in the spirit of mutual good will". The thoughtful chairmanship of our principal host, Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Belorussia, had certainly helped to produce this kind of exchange, and he was ably supported by those who flanked him on either side, Alexei Bychkov, the general secretary of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, and the joint leaders of the BCC delegation, John Habgood, Archbishop of York, and David Coffey, President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland.

By this stage of the visit, mutual good will had been firmly established in the course of the BCC delegates' experiences beyond the conventional boundaries of the conference chamber. For this was not the flimsy kind of good will which feeds on window-dressing and circumlocution. The delegation as a whole had its rich programme of services

and encounters. Furthermore, in order to deepen as well as to widen the experience of the delegation, subdivisions of it were to spend the best part of a week in the separate exploration of several different regions of the Soviet Union. This also meant the exploration of church bodies which are peculiar to specific regions. Thus, the Armenian Apostolic Church was naturally best encountered on its native ground. A journey to Latvia facilitated contacts with some of the Lutherans and Catholics of the USSR. But all the subdivisions of the party — there were three in all — were able to further their understanding of Baptists and other Evangelicals and of Orthodox Christians wherever they went.

Such widening of experience was not equally easy for all, hence the more valuable when achieved. For many there were linguistic limitations. This meant that only the occasional sermon could be communicated to them in the course of various and lengthy services, the rest of which could not necessarily involve them as more than sympathetic but frustratingly detached observers. All the more welcome were the opportunities given to members of the delegation to respond with sermons or addresses of their own.

Another limitation resulted from the delegation being its own self, ecumenical and widely-based. As such it was imbued with positive concern for fellow-Christians of alternative persuasions. Even so, it was not easy for every western nonconformist to come to terms with the demands of Orthodox worship, to choose but one (albeit obvious) example. What to me, an Orthodox, seemed glorious and natural, could sometimes come across as alien or even (as was once forcibly brought home to me) distressing for someone with limited experience of such ways.

There were occasions also when a different kind of limitation could inhibit due appreciation of the straitened circumstances in which the churches of the Soviet Union have their being: and this despite the careful preparations which were made before the visit.

Nevertheless, as in all church life, so also in this delegation, the individual not only contributed constantly to the corporate experience, but gained as constantly from it. The delegation as a whole had an impressive integrity of purpose and perception.

Part of its purpose was to learn about the

life of local Christians, and at several levels. It was best of all placed to record and to rejoice in the positive achievements of the established church bodies. That it met repeatedly in the bustling setting of that great building site which is the Danilov Monastery complex, so recently returned to the Orthodox Church, provided a constant reminder of the vitality of church life at the centre. But this vitality was also to be perceived in less prominent and less publicised places. One of the three groups was particularly struck by its expression in popular piety when it attended a patronal feast of a provincial parish on its tour of the Tula diocese. Another was able to gather prayerfully at the dilapidated (and at present still barricaded) church of the Blessed Xenia in Leningrad and to ponder the touching graffiti addressed to her. All the delegation joined in prayer at the secluded tomb of Metropolitan Nikolai (Yarushevich). Thus it marked his contribution to the ecumenical movement, while being reminded of a particularly sombre period in recent Russian church history. A visit to the grave of the martyred Archbishop Ilarion (Troitsky) (1886-1929) was to have been undertaken by the Leningrad group. It was important that such a visit was planned even if it could not be realised for lack of time.

"As part of the growth in mutual understanding the British and Irish visitors felt it right to express the concern felt in many of their churches on matters related to human rights and religious liberty": so notes the joint agreed statement. This expression of concern repeatedly involved the mention of known Christian dissenters and prisoners, both in the course of the church discussions and during an important visit (requested by the BCC) to the chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA). At times, it should be noted, such names were also introduced into our plenary discussions by individual local speakers, if only to anticipate and parry the pleading of their cases by members of the British delegation. For obvious reasons it could not be part of the delegation's officially-arranged programme to meet with peripheralised, unrecognised or harried Christians. Any incidental contact with their world was the responsibility of individuals, and entirely at their own discretion.

It was a delegation representing British and Irish Churches, not research institutions. Even so, it was hoped that a past

editor of *Religion in Communist Lands* might take part in one capacity or another. When she withdrew, every effort was made to include the present editor, and for several days after the party arrived in Moscow the likelihood of a visa being granted even at so late a stage was not to be discounted. In the end there was no visa. Nevertheless the work of Keston-like institutions was discussed, as well as Keston College itself.

On at least two occasions, and in the course of formal discussions, Keston's approach was questioned. The first of these involved a local churchman, the second a representative of the state. Each time the BCC response was firm. As Canon Paul Oestreicher, the Secretary of the Division of International Affairs of the BCC, pointed out, the BCC and Keston College are distinct institutions, and their work is different. Even when they do cover the same ground there are differences of emphasis and, at times, disagreements between them. But the BCC represents the British and Irish Churches, and the concerns of Keston are shared by many of their members. The BCC, for its part, would wish to testify to the respect which Keston has generated and deserved.

Such a response was not calculated to appeal to K. M. Kharchev, the Chairman of the CRA. Nonetheless it was he who had received the delegation and who was willing

to devote the best part of two hours to a discussion with it. He himself spoke with such vigour and with some emotion in answer to the questions which were posed. But he was anxious not to be quoted out of context, and his statements deserve extended treatment in a separate place. In general, he seemed to think in terms of an achieved and lasting *status quo* in church-state relations, and thus cast doubt on the feasibility, let alone the necessity, of any reforms which may have been mooted or rumoured.

But whatever their likelihood or range, the ordinary Christian, whose piety and dedication had made a lasting impression on the BCC delegation, is likely to be less concerned with the vagaries of legislation than with Him who is the fulfilment of the Law. An eminent preacher of the Russian Orthodox Church included a challenging quotation from Vladimir Solovyov in a recent paschal sermon: "Evil is powerless. We are eternal. God is with us." In like manner a lonely pre-revolutionary inscription on a Moscow building still proclaims — it has remained untouched since little understood in Latin — *In Deo spes mea*. It is a slogan which speaks the mind of those many millions of believers on whose behalf we were so generously welcomed on our all-too-brief but haunting and for some, transforming visit.

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