

CAREE Communicator

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By now, you will have received my letter, advising you about changes in leadership in CAREE. This last issue of our newsletter for 2006 is my final duty as executive secretary. Our new executive secretary, Paul Crego, will take on that responsibility as of 2007. After the report below about our conference in Washington, D.C., in November, is an introduction of Paul for those of you who don't know him. He brings unusual skills and special abilities to the position.

The report below is transcribed from the notes I took at the conference. I have not been able to send it to each of the presenters for comment or correction, so I apologize for any omissions of important points they brought forward which I have not included. I trust, though, that this report will give all of you who were unable to attend the conference a good sense of what transpired – some fascinating consideration of and wrestling with the conference theme. I hope, too, that it will inspire you to want to attend our 2007 conference – which will be held early in November at the InterChurch Center in Manhattan. (More details to follow, of course.)

**Report on CAREE Conference:
“Inter-church and Inter-religious Tensions
in Post-Communist Eastern Europe:
Can Americans Serve as Reconcilers?”
Washington, D.C.
November 17, 2006**

Paul Mojzes, the president of CAREE, opened the conference with a review of the history of our organization for those attending who were not familiar with that history.

Paul Crego, a specialist in religion in Georgia, presented a condensed version of a paper he has produced entitled “Living on the Edge.” He pointed out how Georgian society – in its politics, religion, etc. – exists at the border of Europe and Asia. This shapes the Georgians’ ways of understanding and identifying themselves. Georgians see themselves as at many historical and cultural “edges” of the earth: Europe and Asia; Christianity and Islam; the patriarchate of Constantinople and the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Ottoman and Russian Empires. Further, Georgian history and self-understanding have been shaped by Syriac Christian, Persian, and Arab influences. Paul presented many examples of how this could be seen and recognized.

Jim Payton offered a historical background to the theme of the conference. He reviewed the history of American involvement with Eastern Europe, from the isolationism that marked the 19th and early 20th centuries, through the about-face in World War I, with President Woodrow

Wilson's "14 Points," which declared national self-determination for the nations of Eastern Europe as the goal of the allies. Jim pointed out, though, that the Western European allies were also determined to punish those who had caused and lost the war: so, e.g., Hungary was stripped of 70% of its territory and lost some 3 million Magyar-speaking citizens. U.S. involvement in the region only began with the Greek civil war in 1947. The failure of the U.S. (and the U.N.) to live up to promises of support during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, plus the well-meant but ineffectual (and poorly informed) involvements in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s brought ceasefire but little progress toward peace (as recent reports by the United States Institute for Peace demonstrate). However, while the American government's endeavors give little hope for reconciliation, individuals and groups from North America – assuming they are familiar with the history, culture, and interrelationships of the peoples of Eastern Europe – are respected and have made significant contributions. Reviewing what has transpired since 1989, Jim pointed out that this shows how important CAREE is and the valuable role it can play in the pursuit of peace, justice, and reconciliation in Eastern Europe.

Luka Ilić introduced himself. With his wife, Angela (our next speaker), he came to the U.S.A. in the fall of 2006 to embark on Ph.D. studies. Until then, he had served as a Lutheran pastor in Belgrade. Luka reported that earlier in the year (on April 20, 2006), a vote was taken on a new law on religious communities in the country. Seven communities are recognized: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and one Jewish organization. A month later, a law on return of nationalized and confiscated religious properties was passed, but this has been extremely slow in implementation and has proven difficult to achieve. Luka noted that more dialogue is taking place recently within Serbia among the different religious communities than has been the case in the past. This is a hopeful sign.

Angela Ilić (a Hungarian by heritage) discussed ecumenical relationships within Hungary. She noted that Hungary has been extensively involved since 1990 in peace-seeking. Its long history of recognizing religious plurality has been one of the country's greatest religious strengths. Hungary has also been extensively involved in ecumenism and the ecumenical movement (since 1943). She pointed out that different Hungarian churches have had different traditions of political involvement. She noted that recently the Hungarian Reformed Church had supported a proposal to grant Hungarian citizenship to the Hungarian minorities in Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia; however, that proposal failed. The churches are now trying to figure out their roles in society – in the realms of education, social work, counseling, hygiene instruction and support, orphanages, and care for the elderly.

Walter Sawatsky's presentation focused on evangelical Protestants in the former Soviet Union. He noted that the relationships between American evangelical Christians and their counterparts in Russia have long been strained: different histories and different cultures have led them to different expectations and instincts, which have resulted in misunderstandings. He described how Slavic evangelicalism had emerged out of a Bible-studying and Bible-centered Orthodoxy, owing to the initiatives of many individual leaders and in various centers. He then presented an overview of developments among evangelical Christians in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Charles West reminded us that, until 16 years ago, the world found itself in one of two blocks: those who were Communist and those who were not (ranging from the capitalism of the U.S.A. to the socialism of Sweden). Now, he pointed out, we are in a very changed situation: we have a fragmented world, in which many factors play significant roles – the European Union, the U.S.A., corporate finance and technology, ethnic nationalism, etc. Ideologies have faded into the

background, giving way to something less clear, harder to identify. So, he asked, what is the relationship of Christian faith to our current situation? He urged three points: (1) that most Christians have worked through and with ecumenical organizations and fellowships in the past, but that ecumenical organizations are weakening; (2) the confusion in social and economic policy into which Eastern Europe has fallen since the collapse of Communism, raising the question what the role of Christian ethics should be in guiding the direction of these states (and of our own in the West); (3) the role of Christian faith in reconciliation, in transcending and speaking to cultures (both relativizing and legitimizing them). He then invited us to continue to ponder the question, what is Christian witness in the confusion of contemporary and secular cultures?

Gerald Shenk spoke from his long experience in the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia, and his recent involvement teaching evangelical Christians (from various denominations) in Serbia. He pointed out that current students in Serbia have no recollection of or familiarity with the Communist period of their past. He noted that these students are asking about their evangelical heritage and its interaction with Orthodoxy. They are interested in and open to other minorities and their experiences elsewhere.

Peter Kuzmić noted that he is a native Slovenian (born 2 kilometers from Austria and 6 kilometers from Hungary), who has lived in Serbia and in Bosnia, and is a citizen of Croatia. He spoke to the conference theme question directly and indicated that the verb was important: Americans could *serve* as “reconcilers” – but not “dominate,” “teach how,” etc. He offered an example: in 1991, the Evangelical Faculty of Theology in Osijek (the institution he serves as president) became a seminary in exile, owing to the warfare in and around Osijek. Safety for students, faculty, and staff necessitated this. However, one of the faculty – Christine Hall, an English teacher from the U.S.A. – stayed in Osijek to serve both Serbs and Croats there. She refused to leave, noting that she must serve the needy, whatever their ethnic heritage, in devotion to her Lord. Peter then went on to point out that being involved in ecumenism was easier in Croatia during the last decade of the Communist era than it has been in the nationalistic era since then. He indicated that evangelicals in Croatia are trying to build ecumenical bridges between Croat Roman Catholics and Serbian Orthodox, urging and seeking a culture of dialogue.

Steve Dintaman, formerly a professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and now a professor at Lithuanian Christian College, rehearsed the history of LCC. It now has some 560 students, from 18 countries and a variety of denominational backgrounds (or none at all). Then he described the history of the “Word of Faith” churches which have developed and matured in Lithuania over the last 20 years. Offering upbeat religious services, this group grew to become the largest Protestant group in Lithuania. Through their own study and reflection, some of its leadership became uncomfortable with the “health & wealth” gospel which the movement originally espoused, sensing that it was a manipulation of faith. During this process, most of the group has become more aware of Church history and has begun seeking out ecumenical fellowship. Predictably, this has led to some tension and conflict within the movement.

Ines Murzaku urged that, despite many claims to the contrary, religious division was already present at the beginning of the Albanian national movement. After the fall of communism, faith has revived somewhat in the country. The 4 major religious groups in Albania are the Muslims, the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox, and the Bektashi. She argued that, in order to go forward, Albania must jettison the mythology associated with much of its nationalist historiography. She offered several examples of particular problems.

Tibor Fabiny, a Hungarian Lutheran lay theologian and literary scholar, teaches both at

a Roman Catholic university and a Reformed one in Hungary. He noted that the Hungarian Lutheran Church has some 300,000 members, the Roman Catholics about 5.5 million, and the Hungarian Reformed about 2 million. He pointed out that contemporary Hungary is religiously and politically divided, offering examples to illustrate this point. He also mentioned some renewal movements underway and pointed out the necessity of reconciliation endeavors.

Krystyna Gorniak-Kocikowska pointed out the attempts to engage in Catholic/Jewish dialogue in Poland. With at least 90% of Poland Roman Catholic, there is little opportunity for ecumenical dialogue with other Christian groups; it only exists at the international level. She noted that some old-style, traditional anti-Semitic influence still exists in the country. She urged that, from a Polish Roman Catholic perspective, the great concern is not for inter-church or inter-religious matters, but with the specter of secularism. She noted, as well, uncertainties within the church and the people of Poland as to the place which the Catholic church should play in public life and politics in the country.

Ina Merdjanova spoke about interfaith dialogue in Bosnia-Herzegovina, noting that international groups, especially from North America, have encouraged it. She presented some problems and limitations, as she sees them, in the endeavor: (1) the dialogue has so far remained superficial; (2) the role of religion in society has been overestimated; (3) there has been no attempt among the NGOs to try to work together to develop a common set of goals and strategies; and (4) there is significant difference between how leaders and activists speak inside and outside their communities on these matters. She pointed out that there are hopeful signs, though, in the grass-roots activities, which are going well, noting especially the endeavors by some of the women from the different religious groups.

Paul Mojzes concluded the conference by reminding us that there are serious tensions within each of the religious communities in the Balkans. He rehearsed the endeavors some of us in CAREE have been involved with since 2002 in Macedonia. The Council on Interreligious Cooperation set up then has served the nation and its 5 religious groups well in the pursuit of reconciliation and civil society, noting that the contacts between the Orthodox and Muslim communities (the 2 largest religious bodies in the nation) have born good fruit. He noted, though, that recent developments in the Muslim community cast shadows over what has been accomplished and raise questions about the future of this cooperation.

(In the evening, CAREE held its annual meeting. The draft minutes of the meeting have been posted on the website, www.caree.info.)

Paul Crego, new Executive Secretary of CAREE, has long been interested in Eastern European religious issues. With degrees in Soviet Studies (BA, Syracuse; MA, Harvard) and theology (M.Div, Harvard; Ph.D. Boston College) he has focused attention on the Republic of Georgia. He taught a course on the Orthodox Churches at Boston College. He has published articles on Georgian religious history, including one in *Le Museon*, co-authored with Stephen Rapp of Georgia State University: "The Conversion of K'art'li: The Shatberdi Variant" and in MELANotes (publication of the Middle East Librarians' Association): "An Annotated Bibliography of Georgian Religious Periodical Literature Available in Tbilisi and Mc'xet'a in May-June 2004." He is a cataloger at the Library of Congress with responsibility for Georgian, Armenian, and Amharic material.