

Bulgarian Churches in America
Preliminary Contextual Assessment
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Contextual Assessment: Network of Bulgarian Church in America

After awaking in the morning of the 21st century, the world was rapidly introduced to a new postmodern movement called globalization. At a top political and economic level, globalization is the process of denationalization of markets, politics and legal systems purposing the implementation of a global economy. However, globalization is much more than an economic event as it affects social status and human rights of people worldwide. For the world community the process of globalization is a process of internationalization describing cross-border relations between countries, growth in international exchange and interdependence. It is also viewed as a liberalization process of removing government-imposed restrictions on movements between countries in order to create a borderless world. Globalization further implements spreading various objects and experiences to people at all corners of the earth creating universalization. In a cultural context, globalization is often seen as Westernization of the world. Finally, globalization carries the meaning of deterritorialization - reconfiguration of geography reforming any social place in new terms of independent territory, distance and borders.¹

Since the church is a global event, inevitably this process affects the community of believers. The “global believer” seeks to connect with people of similar nature independent of race, location and social status. Thus, church mission and church ministry reclaim its original Biblical global perspective. In this process, the church of

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/globalization>, <http://www.gvnews.net>, <http://www.ifg.org>.

postmodernity is liberated from its nationality and reaches toward internationalization establishing a new multicultural identity with a global perspective and mission. As a result multicultural churches gain a contextual new function serving as identity sources.

Such is the case with the network of Bulgarian churches in North America. Established to unite all Protestant Bulgarian churches in North America, it reaffirms the participation of Bulgarian immigrant communities in the global multicultural ministry. This present contextual assessment will explore the process of establishing a network of Bulgarian churches in Northern America.

Demographic Assessment

To address the community of relative new Bulgarian immigrants who relocated recently, this overview will first examine the demographics of origin (Bulgaria) in order to establish cultural background, historical presuppositions and cause of immigration. It will then move to the demographics of immigration, and finally it will summarize the local demographics (North America) which will describe the present context of ministry.

Demographics of Origin: Bulgaria

1. Demography: Population: 8,280,000 (1999). Annual growth: -0.2 % (1975/97).
Estimates for year 2015 (million): 7.5 (1999). Annual growth to year 2015: -0.6 % (1997/2015). Urban population: 69.0 % (1997). Urban Growth: 0.6 % (1980/95).
Children per woman: 1.2 (1998).
2. Health: Life expectancy at birth: 71 years (1998), male: 68 years (1998), female: 75 years (1998). Maternal mortality: 15 per 100,000 live births (1990-98). Infant mortality: 14 per 1,000 (1998). Under-5 child mortality: 17 per 1,000 (1998).

- Daily calorie supply: 2,756 per capita (1996) 333 doctors per 100,000 people (1993).
3. Education Literacy: 98 % (1995) male: 99 % (1995) female: 97 % (1995). School enrollment: Primary total: 99 % (1990/96) male: 100 % (1990/97) female: 98 % (1990/97). Secondary: male: 77 % (1990/96) female: 76 % (1990/96). Tertiary: 41 % (1996). Primary school teachers: one for every 17 (1996).
 4. Communications 257 newspapers (1996), 543 radios (1997), 361 TV sets (1996) and 313 main telephone lines (1996) per 1,000 people. Books: 69 new titles per 100,000 people (1992/94). Wide use of computers and internet. More than 1.2 million cell phone users.
 5. Economy Per capita, GNP: \$ 1,220 (1998). Annual growth, GNP: 4.4 % (1998). Annual inflation: 116.9 % (1990/98). Consumer price index: 3,224.3 (1998). Currency: 2,011 leva = \$ 1 (2002). Cereal imports: 54,646 metric tons (1998). Fertilizer use: 440 kg per ha (1997). Exports: \$ 5,542 million (1998). Imports: \$ 5,671 million (1998). External debt: \$ 9,907 million (1998); \$ 1,188 per capita (1998). Debt service: 22.1 % of exports (1998). Development aid received: \$ 206 million (1997); \$ 23.9 per capita (1997); 2.10 % of GNP (1997).
 6. Workers Unemployment: 13.7 % (1997). Female (as % of labor force): 48 % (1998) Male (as % of labor force): 52 % (1998). Agriculture: 13.5 % (1990) Industry: 48.3 % (1990). Services: 38.3 % (1990).²

² World Guide 2001/2002, New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 55 Rectory Road, Oxford, OX4 1BW, U.K. CPH-L-149. Selected Characteristics for Persons of Bulgarian Ancestry: 1990 Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census Internet Release date: February 18, 1998. Also, *Human Development Report 2002* United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002. These are the latest complete official statistics on the country of Bulgaria. Partial updates have been published by private agencies; however, their reliability has not been yet confirmed by the Bulgarian government or any other official organization.

7. Religion – Christianity has been Bulgaria’s official religion since 864 A.D., when the Bulgarian King Boris I under the influence of the Byzantine Empire accepted Eastern Orthodoxy. Today the Bulgarian culture is formed by a variety of religious groups:

Orthodox	84.9%
Muslim	13.1%
Jewish	0.8%
Roman Catholic	0.7%
Protestant	0.3%
Other	0.2%

Bulgaria is an 8.5 million population Slavic country located on the Black Sea. Strategically located in the Balkans, Bulgaria is a multiethnic country where the possibility of unrest is always simmering just below the surface. Bulgarians, Turks, and Gypsies (a marginalized ethnic group conservatively estimated at over 3 million) rub shoulders every day and the clash between Christianity and the Muslim religion is barely contained.

Several democratically elected governments have attempted to lead the Bulgarian people through the difficult road of recovery from the deep economical crises and poverty. Through the past 12 years both Democrats (decedents) and Socialists (descendents of the former Bulgarian Communist Party a.k.a. BKP) have led the Bulgarian Parliament, yet have been unsuccessful in bringing the nation to the progress promised prior to the elections. This unfruitfulness of the political leaders has brought much frustration in the common Bulgarian and in January 1997 this almost led to a civil

war. As a result of the civil riots, the Socialist Party was forced to give up authority and the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) again headed the Bulgarian government. Unfortunately, their 4-year rule did not accomplish the promised acceptance of Bulgaria in the European Union and NATO.

In the summer of 2001 as the Democratic Party lost the elections, a newly formed movement led by the son of the ex-Bulgarian King whose family was expelled by the communists in 1944, headed the Bulgarian political life. The royal descendant, Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha, became the Prime Minister of the Bulgarian Government. Furthermore the Presidential elections that followed shortly were won by a socialist, George Parvanov, who entered the office of President of the Republic of Bulgaria in January 2002.

Demographics of Immigration

The political changes reflected significantly on the economic situation of Bulgaria. Considerable changes took place in the already high tax laws in parallel with significant increases in the cost of fuel (\$2.49 per gallon), electricity, central heat, water and services. Yet, the drastic changes were unable to satisfy the 10 billion U.S. dollars external debt and the three times higher internal debt of the Bulgarian economy.

At the end of 2002 the social and economical situation in the country is, the least to say, uneasy. Up to 64% live under the poverty level, 30% belong to the middle class and only 6% are wealthy. Most of the general population is not able to afford basic medical insurance or to cover the school expenses of their children. The official statistics

show that some 700,000 people have left the country in the past 12 years to find jobs and better life outside Bulgaria.³

The changes in the socio-economical situation in Bulgaria have brought new factors and conditions which have stimulated growing migration among the Bulgarian population. Having almost no opportunity to leave the country in the past 45 years of Communist regime, many Bulgarians have used the present opportunity to leave their motherland to live and work in better social conditions. About 25% of them will never return to Bulgaria. Their plans are to seek a better future for their children and professional realization for themselves. Among them 12% will be involved in crafts, 7% with hotels and trade, 9% will look for agricultural jobs, and 6% will continue their education. The rest are unsure how they will make a living. The largest group of Bulgarian immigrants lives in Germany (23%), while another 20% are in North America.⁴

Demographics of Ministry: United States

For the potential Bulgarian immigrant, the United States (25%) is the most preferred country to immigrate to, yet the immigration laws and regulations contain higher standards than other countries. The largest group immigrates on their own (25%), 22% through their jobs and professional affiliation, 12% through their families and 10% through the Green Card lottery. The usual age of immigration is 20-39. More men (57%) than women (43%) immigrate. Among all, 18% have a college/university degree and 56% have a high school education; however, only 14% of the long terms immigrants

³ Geshakova, Julia. "Bulgaria: Population Declines Sharply As Young Seek Future Abroad." Radio Free Europe (<http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2002/08/27082002142636.asp>), August, 2002.

⁴ Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (<http://www.nsi.bg/statistika/Statistics.htm>). Data as of summer 2002 (in Bulgarian).

have formal education. The ethnic structure of the Bulgarian immigration corresponds with the ethnic ratio within the Bulgaria nation: Bulgarians 80%, Turks 12% and Roma/Gypsy 6%. Among them 60% have lived in a city in Bulgaria, 28% in a village, and 12% are from the capital Sofia.⁵

The past 12 years of democracy in Bulgaria have created a relatively balanced atmosphere of religious tolerance. Although the Orthodox Church is still the official religious denomination, and that single anti-Protestant actions still exist, the evangelical churches in Bulgaria are experiencing a time of freedom and revival. As a result, the Protestant churches have grown tremendously. While a prime political reason for immigration, immigration based on religious conflict is now seldom. The religious ratio among Bulgarian immigrants in the United States is similar to the ratio of religious groups in the country of Bulgaria. Members of Protestant denominations, who through churches have had more connection with people and organizations in the United States than the average Bulgarian, may be an exception to the above statistics. These are the people that form the Bulgarian community of protestant believers in Northern America.

In the bringing of the 21st century America has become a sea of change. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, the major part of immigrants has come from countries they rarely came from before. Before, most immigrants came from western European nations; now they come from Asia, Latin America and Africa. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 many come from the former Communist block as well. However, while before immigrants were expected to forget their culture and language, now they are more and more encouraged to preserve them. As a result, one of every six Americans speaks at

⁵ Ibid.

home language other than English and the diverse ethnic communities are growing not only in the large metropolises but in “small-town” America as well.⁶

Similar to the Bulgarian Orthodox churches present in Northern America since the beginning of the 20th century, the Bulgarian Protestant churches exist in large metropolitan areas with a greater concentration of Bulgarian immigrants. Immigration growth in such centers is usually established based on previous relationships (relative, friend, etc.), job opportunity or educational orientation. As a result in the 1990s several large Bulgarian communities have emerged. The city of Chicago with close to 60, 000 Bulgarians is followed by New York and the Washington, D.C. – Maryland area. On the West Coast, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas have been choices for immigration for several years. Besides these cities Bulgarian communities have grown in less expected places like deep-south Atlanta, northern Seattle, coastal Miami and deep in the heart of Texas (Dallas, Huston), etc.

Respectfully, the Bulgarian protestant churches have appeared in these centers of concentration of Bulgarian immigrants. They have begun their existence as a home prayer group, cross-cultural outreach of a large local church, or even as independent ethnic works under the umbrella of an established denomination.

Their size varies between 10 and 100, depending on the organizational structure that has been integrated. The members are predominantly people who have been protestant. The new converts are a major part of the congregation; however, many of the members were believers before their immigration. Some of them have witnessed the Communist Regime and have been a part of the persecuted Church; others have

⁶ Moore, David. “America in a Sea of Change” (interview) *Pentecostal Evangel*. http://ag.org/pentecostal-evangel/articles/conversations/4497_moore.cfm. April 4, 1997.

experienced only the revival after the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. But all of them have committed themselves to the vision of winning the Bulgarian community in North America for the Kingdom of God

In the beginning of the 21st century this vision is progressively becoming a reality. At this present time the Bulgarian protestant churches in America are represented by 12 churches and groups in nine states. They have become the forming historical factor for the Network of Bulgarian Churches in America.

Historical Background

In the spring of 2000 several Bulgarian Christian communities came together in the city of Chicago to establish the Bulgarian Alliance – network of Bulgarian churches in Northern America. By the end of 2002 eight churches and four home groups have joined as follows:

Local Churches

Bulgarian Christian Church - Baltimore, MD

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Dallas, TX

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Minneapolis, MN

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - New York, NY

Bulgarian Church of Christ - Toronto, Canada

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Houston, TX

Bulgarian Evangelical Church "New Life" - Chicago, IL

Bulgarian Evangelical Church "Word, Faith and Life" - Des Plains, IL

Home Groups

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Seattle, WA

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Miami, FL

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Chicago, IL

Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Los Angeles, CA

Seven of the above were chosen for the purposes of this survey based on their longer active history, geographical location, leadership and membership as well as their connection to local multicultural ministers and church organizations/denominations. They are:

1. Bulgarian Evangelical Church of God – Chicago, IL (est. 1995)

The Church was established in Chicago in the summer of 1995 as a Bulgarian outreach of the Narragansett Church of God. The Bulgarian church grew from 10 to 65 in two months. Several changes in the leadership led to a split in the congregation and stoppage of the work. In 1997 when the church was relocated as an independent Bulgarian church, as the new approach brought together almost 100 Bulgarians in a Christian community. As the Bulgarian community in Chicago grew from 13,000 (1995) to 60,000 (2002), two other local Bulgarian congregations in the Chicago area emerged as well.

2. Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Minneapolis, MN (est. 1999)

The church in Minneapolis was established in 1999 and registered with Spiritual Life Ministry as an independent Pentecostal congregation. Membership is about 20. The pastor is Inj. Angel I. Totev born in Yambol, Bulgaria in 1950.

3. Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Los Angeles, CA (est. 2002)

The church is the second Bulgarian congregation in Los Angeles.⁷ Pastor is Stoytcho Stoytchev, a third generation Pentecostal believer from Bulgaria. The first church was established in the early 1990s by the Bulgarian pastor Iliya Apostolov. The second congregation established independent home group meetings in 2001 and on October 12, 2002, they held their first service as a separate local church. Approximately 100 were present, as The Church on the Way hosted the meeting in their building. The Bulgarian church meets every Sunday at 6:00 p.m.

4. Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Dallas, TX (est. 2000)

Pastor Hrsito Hristov began the work in Dallas, TX in December, 2000 with approximately 25 members. The official opening of the church was on September 2, 2001. The meetings are held in the building of an American Baptist church. Pastor Hristo K. Hristov was born in 1974 in Sofia and accepted Christ at the age of 17. He is a graduate of the Bulgarian Bible Institute in Rousse (now B.E.T.I.) and for seven years has worked as youth pastor in the Second Assemblies of God Church in Sofia.

5. Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Miami, FL (est. 1999)

The Miami church is in a home meeting stage. Leader is Alexander Petrunov from the previously famous Bulgarian music band – Sreburnite Grivni (The Silver Bracelets). His conversion during the Communist Regime is a well-known event for the Bulgarian believers from that time. The group meets every Sunday at 10 a.m.

⁷ Approximately 3,000 Bulgarian immigrants live in the Los Angeles area.
<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/languagesofla/lolalangs.htm> October, 2002.

6. Bulgarian Christian Church - Baltimore, MD (est. 1998)

The church was established as a non-denominational organization on April 14, 1998 in the Baltimore-D.C. area where more than 100,000 Slavic immigrants reside. Pastor Rumen Borimetchkov is a graduate of the Bulgarian Musical Conservatory and has worked in the Shtralzung Opera in Germany. He was saved Christmas Day, 1990 after watching the Jesus Film. He holds a Master's of Church Music degree from the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. The meetings are hosted by the Slavic Baptist Church in Cockeysville on Sundays at 4 p.m.

7. Bulgarian Evangelical Church - New York, NY (est. 2000)

Ivan Liskov began the work in Queens, New York in 2000. As the group grew, the meetings were moved to the Brooklyn suburb. Pastor Liskov was born in 1972 in Pazardjik, Bulgaria. After a surgical procedure at the age of five, he lost 100% of his vision. More than 25 years later he accepted the Lord at the Beth Shalom Center (a multicultural Russian church in New York).

Structural Analyses

The following overview will complete a two point structure which will first examine the internal processes and events that form the local church structure (infrastructure), and then the relationship between the different churches within the context of the community of Bulgarian immigrants in North America will be described (interstructure).

Infrastructure: Ethnic Bulgarian Local Congregation in the United States

Constructing a church in a different cultural setting is a rather difficult task that requires not only resources and leadership but a working model. Since such is not widely

available, the Bulgarian churches in North America have followed a blueprint for ministry which they have inherited from their experience as Christians in Bulgaria. This is a recurrent characteristic of all churches examined in this survey.

Such model, although self-tested, is proving itself incompliant with the present context of ministry, therefore creating a rather motionless church structure. The reasons for this result are several.

On one hand, such paradigm carries the signs and characteristics of an ethnic church operating in its original cultural setting. The original context of the Bulgarian churches is a rather difficult one to define since it combines a community that is presently experiencing transformation in its characteristics and is in a constant search for a new identity. This is an underground church that has endured the Communist persecution and then suddenly has been granted the freedom to openly exist in its own fashion. This change has created a vacuum that has been filled by a flood of new converts and has changed the outlook of the original church and has affected some of its practices. The Bulgarian churches in North America then face the difficult task of ministering to people coming from the context described above into a land of liberation and freedom, where the above processes have never been present in the scale experienced by the Bulgarian believers. In an ecclesial context an adjustment that balances these differences can take place only through a supernatural transformation which requires a spiritually transformed leadership.

The Bulgarian churches in North America presently lack such leadership. The leadership rather exists and operates as if it is still under the Communist persecution, which in the present context is replaced by the current context of ministry, lacks cultural

acceptance and the rather difficult process of adjusting to the new environment. This has created severe closed-mindedness and a lack of a sense for a mission. Under such leadership, the Bulgarian churches in their perception of the present de facto remain persecuted in a land of liberty.

However as the churches back in Bulgaria have experience a flood of new converts, the leadership of the Bulgarian churches in North America is constantly facing the opposition of a new generation of leaders who have been liberated by the mentality of the persecuted and have engaged themselves in a quest for a new identity and model for ministry. Unfortunately, since the leadership which has experienced persecution is reluctant to delegate authority, instead of enhancing the Bulgarian churches, the clash between the old and the new have created an environment in which churches with a rather young history have experienced rebellion and split.⁸

Although every church has a pastor, they lack definite pastoral councils, supervision and accountability. This is incompatible with the major local denominational structures and often creates a sense of independency. It must be noted also that most of the pastors of the Bulgarian churches in North America have been trained at one time by an American Pentecostal educational organization. For one reason or another, however, the majority are unwilling to work with the denomination that has invested in their ministerial training. Therefore, most of the Bulgarian churches in North America hold their meetings in locations hosted by Baptist, Four Square, and some independent ministries who count them as outreaches. Thus, the Pentecostal denominations which have invested in the training of these leaders are missing a harvest which is a result of their efforts, planning and strategic investment. At the same time, the ministry of the

⁸ Stan Tanev, Bulgarian Evangelical Church of God – Chicago, IL. Personal Interview, October, 2002.

Bulgarian churches benefits very little if any at all from the development of the Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria. The above have brought a definite discontinuation with the denomination of origin and training which explains the present search for identity.⁹

The leadership model and the congregation splits have combined with the strong need for discipleship resulting in motionless congregations with irregular attendance, non-paying of tithes, low participation in church activities, lack of prayer life, lack of personal evangelism and even backsliding.¹⁰

Regardless of the tensions and the conflicts, several things are being done to improve the situation. Some of the churches have been able to purchase property thus providing a certain sense of Christian identity, community belongingness and future. To improve their attendance several of the churches have begun bus ministries since many of the new immigrants do not own a vehicle which makes them virtually immobile in the large metropolises. Some of the larger congregations have employed youth pastors with unique approaches to ministry (skate church, coffee ministry, etc.) thus addressing the needs of the immigrants' children as well as the younger generation of Bulgarian immigrants. The Chicago church even holds a regular TV program.¹¹

Cell groups have been established in most of the churches as a main method for midweek services and Bible studies. This model has proven itself quite effective as it resembles the way meetings were held in the underground church, yet it has very little to do with the way cell groups are practiced among Christian communities in the Western World. Sunday School has been adopted as an educational strategy of all local congregations with regular services. This is a rather a new development since Sunday

⁹ Arman Laleyan, Bulgarian Evangelical Church - Los Angeles, CA. Personal Interview, October, 2002.

¹⁰ Tanev.

¹¹ Ibid.

School historically is not present in the underground church. This practice, however, connects the Bulgarian churches with the very active Pentecostal Sunday School movement which took place in pre-Communist Bulgaria in the 1930s.

Furthermore, steps have been made in this direction by local Bulgarian community since this process is getting the churches closer to their mission – to reach the unchurched among the Bulgarian communities in the United States. These, however, have been mainly social activities (picnics, gatherings, etc.). It must be noted that both the Christians and the unchurched Bulgarians in the United States have witnessed the spiritual revival that swept through the land of Bulgaria after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. They remember the effect it had on the Bulgarian nation as many of them have been saved during the same revival, and they want to see the same taking place among the Bulgarian immigrants in the United States. However, in order to do this the Bulgarian churches in North America should subscribe to a mission that reaches the unchurched creating a network of Bulgarian churches.

Interstructure: Network of Bulgarian Churches in the US

In the summer of 2001 the pastors of the Bulgarian churches in North America came together in a meeting in Chicago. As a result of this meeting, an organization called the Alliance of the Bulgarian Evangelical churches in America was established as a first step toward networking between the churches. The Alliance met again in 2002 in Dallas and is planning to meet in Chicago in 2003.

The purpose of the Alliance is cooperation among the Bulgarian Evangelical Churches in America in their spiritual and missionary activity among Bulgarians. Its structure involves the Pastoral Assembly which consists of the pastors of all member-

churches, a president, board of trustees and a secretary treasurer. All positions are elected annually by the Pastoral Assembly with 75% majority. The membership is subject to the following membership requirements as the member-church must:

1. Be in the territory of the United States or Canada.
2. Be registered with the state/province, denomination or has in its possession a protocol of the establishment of the church.
3. Hold services in the Bulgarian language.
4. Accept the “Statement of Faith” (published separately)
5. Be tolerant to other faiths and has desire to work with various protestant denominations and independent churches.¹²

Several important issues have been left unresolved. For example, almost all of the pastors have been at one time or another affiliated with a Pentecostal organization (Church of God, Assemblies of God, etc.). As a result they all hold credentials with a different denomination (some located in North America, others in Bulgaria). In other words, their ministerial origin is and remains undefined since they have been set forth for the ministry by different groups of believers under different circumstances. Yet, today they are attempting to be spiritual leaders in a network as if this very community of believers has set them forth for the ministry. This not only produces a problem with the minister’s identity but it reflects on his/her authority as a spiritual leader as well.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian churches in North America include Christians from all varieties of denominations and religious backgrounds. A large number of the members and almost all of the pastors are second and third generation Protestant Christians. Yet,

¹² Bulgarian Alliance of Evangelical Churches in America. <http://bulgarianalliance.org/bulgarian.htm>. October, 2002. The Statement of Faith was yet unpublished at the time of the completion of this research.

the churches have almost zero connection with the denomination/church of origin since their interest toward the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria is quite limited. This discontinuation with the past, although quite relevant to an immigrant mentality, may serve well for the local adaptation; however, in a church setting it represents a discontinuation with one's spiritual heritage and strongly affects his/her identity as a believer.

The list can continue with failure to recognize the new cultural context and the new needs of the members, failure to identify with local churches/ministries, etc. Overall, the above facts describe a search for independency which may be quite misunderstood by immigrants in the present Western setting of ministry. Perhaps the difficulty in this is that on one hand they must leave their past as Bulgarians and embrace their future as North American residents. In this process of liberation of the self, however, instead of searching for independency, the network of Bulgarian churches should look for dependency on one another.

Symbols

Mission Statement

Most Bulgarian churches in North America lack a definite mission statement. In practice, their mission and ministry have been targeting Christian believers who have immigrated to North America while leaving unchurched Bulgarian immigrants virtually untouched. The mission of the network of the Bulgarian churches should be upgraded to one similar to the following statement:

1. To serve as a spiritual beacon in the Bulgarian community of immigrants in North America reaching and ministering to both Bulgarian Christian believers and unchurched Bulgarians.
2. To serve as a cultural center that empowers collateralization and Christianization of Bulgarians in North America.
3. To serve as a constant initiator and supporter for mission and ministry endeavors which address and serving the needs of denominations and ministries in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Ethnic Belongings

Although many of the immigrants have experienced or are experiencing discontinuation with their Bulgarian past, they have kept their language. This is a common characteristic of first generation immigrants who have been raised using this language and perhaps experience difficulty with the new language spoken around them. In the church setting, the Bulgarian language in the service has become a symbol of the Bulgarian ethnic belongingness which these people experienced in the land of their immigration. As such the language has become a symbol of unity and identity, but may cause a problem in addressing the younger generation which has adopted English as their first language.¹³

Bulgarian Evangelical Identity

Due to the persecution under the Communist regime, in the Bulgarian context the term Evangelical represents all Protestant denominations whether if they are charismatic or not. It also represents the mission to evangelize a country that has been continuously

¹³ Bulgarian Alliance of Evangelical Churches in America. <http://bulgarianalliance.org/bulgarian.htm>. The Bulgarian language is listed as a requirement for membership in the Alliance.

robbed by atheism and nominalism. In the North American context, Bulgarian churches have accepted this term as a statement of inclusiveness, acceptance and tolerance. In the midst of separation it has become means of unity and identity; however, in this context the side of the term which denotes evangelizing and reaching the unchurched remains yet unexplored.

Ministries and Outreaches

The ministries and outreaches of the Bulgarian churches as discussed in the *Structural Analyses* have become symbols of origin and mission. Some represent the original setting of ministry i.e. persecuted and post-Communist contexts (cell groups). Others reflect on the present processes of immigration, adaptation and naturalization (Sunday School, youth, bus and TV ministries).

Within the Bulgarian protestant community in North America, the opposite processes of preservation and transformation are combined in a unique pattern that represents both discontinuation and unity. They reflect on the realization that doing church the same was as in the old country will not work in a North American context.¹⁴ As a result, the quest for a new model for ministry among Bulgarian immigrants in North America has begun.

Epilogue

A closer examination of the network of Bulgarian churches in North America, its ministry and structure, will give answers to essential issues of cross-cultural evangelism and ministry for the Church of God. Unfortunately, the Department of Cross-Cultural ministries has done very little in exploring the ministry opportunities in communities

¹⁴ Sean O'Neil, Personal Interview, October 26, 2002. Rev. O'Neil serves as Church of God State Youth Director of the State of Illinois and has started several multicultural ministries among which is the first Bulgarian Evangelical church in Chicago.

formed by immigrants from post-Communist countries.¹⁵ As a result these communities have remained untouched by the eldership and resources available within the Church of God denomination. They are presently no leaders trained by the Church of God for the needs of these communities. Thus, a great urban harvest in large metropolises, where the Church of God has not been historically present in a strong way, remains ungathered. Yet, through these communities the Church of God has the unique opportunity to experience the post-Communist revival from Eastern Europe in a local Western setting.

¹⁵ <http://www.cogcrosscultural.com/> November, 2002.

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