

*Analytical Overview and Church Planting Proposal for
Bulgarian American Congregations Considering Cultural,
Economical and Leadership Dimensions*

Chapter I: Statement of Problem

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the world has witnessed a miracle. In the corner of Europe, coming out from the severe Communist persecution and surrounded by the Balkan religious wars, one growing group of Christians is making a difference for the Kingdom of God. Placed on the crossroad of three world religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and three continents (Europe, Africa and Asia), the country of Bulgaria has experienced an on-going spiritual revival in which hundreds of thousands of people have been touched by the power of God.

In the midst of extreme poverty due to prolonged economical crises, revival has become an answer for many. Yet, in the fifteen years of democratic post-Communism, more than one million Bulgarians have left their homeland in search of a better life and a better future. Receiving better economic opportunities, approximately 200,000 Bulgarians have established communities throughout the larger United States cities.

Having witnessed this remarkable act of God, some of them have brought the spirit of revival to their new land. Driven by the struggles of the immigration life, cultural adjustments and economic survival, these Bulgarians have been able to establish churches which serve not only as religious meetings, but also as communities of support.

Regardless of the vital integration and social functions for the Bulgarian communities, the resources of the Bulgarian Protestant churches in the United States remain unexplored. Their home churches are too far away and too poor to help, while the local cross-cultural ministries are either are occupied with much larger ethnic groups or

lack the training and tools for effective ministry among Bulgarians. As a result, in the midst of the present context of post-modernity and cultural re-imagination, the stories of these Christian pilgrims remain unheard. The reason for this is a threefold problem that focuses on the cultural, economical and organizational dilemmas with which the Bulgarian communities in North America struggle daily. Therefore, the problem involves finding a way to empower the network of Bulgarian Protestant churches in North America to overcome these cultural, economical and organizational dilemmas. This ambition postulates the enhancement of vision and quality of ministry among the Bulgarian immigrant communities.

Cultural Dilemma (Understanding Bulgarian Communities)

The solving of the cultural dilemma includes the actual understanding of these communities: their appearance, structural organization, internal and external function and the relationship between their members and the outside world. This includes cultural factors that cannot be taken under general consideration, but must be focused on specifically for this particular ethnic group. Only a system that deals with the details and dynamics of the ethnic group can understand and learn its culture in order to be able to respond to its needs. This is a task that should be addressed by cross-cultural ministries.

The Bulgarian communities, on the other hand, should search for a model of adjustment to the assimilating culture in which they exist. This can be accomplished by adopting a strategy of incorporating the postmodern setting of worship, theology and praxis within the Bulgarian Christian community. It should be accompanied by an intentional process of liberation from the dysfunctional model through which the Bulgarian Protestant Church operated during the Communist Regime (1944-1989). This

process should purpose to liberate the believers from an oppression mentality and transform them toward the mind of Christ, in order to minister effectively in the present context of existence. Failure to address this present dilemma will result in an inability of the Bulgarian Christian community to communicate its faith and to minister to the younger, faster-adjusting generation of Bulgarian-Americans, whose religious belongingness remains unexplored and often even unknown to them.

Economical Dilemma (Supporting Bulgarian Communities)

After withstanding 45 years of severe Communist persecution, the Bulgarian Protestant community is making its first steps toward creating a solid infrastructure. Being aware of the constant threats of police searches, only a few have kept records, statistics and history of their church activities. Years of sacrificial ministry remain silent to modern research since they must rely exclusively on oral stories.

Bulgarians find themselves in a similar situation when it comes to the area of finances. While many of the Bulgarian Protestants have given their life for the Gospel, they have been taught and, therefore, teach very little concerning tithes and church economics. The fifteen years of economical crises, political disorder and the high rate of unemployment in Bulgaria have not helped the church plan for the future or find alternative ways for support. Thus, the Bulgarian Protestant Church remains a poor church. Moving to a land of greater prosperity (viz., North America), however, has not brought much improvement to the situation. The financial blessings enjoyed by individual Bulgarian believers are not always reflected in the financial ability of the church. Even within the American context, the Bulgarian church remains a beggar in a land of plenty. The solution to this problem must involve the following strategy:

1. Liberating the Bulgarian mentality toward a mentality of giving
2. Organizing of finances and church economics toward strategic financial planning for the future
3. Implementing a more dependable system of accountability

Finally, this strategy must exceed a simple plan for economic survival and must progress into a future strategy for investment in missions targeting the homeland. Historically, such a posture has never been a characteristic of the Bulgarian Protestantism.

Organizational Dilemma (Empowering Bulgarian Communities)

Not only is there a need to understand the Bulgarian culture and train Bulgarian churches for better economical opportunities, but such strategy must find a solution to the organizational dilemma by empowering its vision. The Bulgarian communities exist with a very limited purpose and vision. This often serves as a tool to protect their faith and identity. This model strongly resembles the one used by the Underground Church in Bulgaria for survival during the Communist Regime; however, in the beginning of the twenty-first century a paradigm of “circling the wagons” seems inapplicable. The vision of the Bulgarian church in the United States must expand and include a mission toward the Bulgarian community across America with its present and future generations and the Bulgarian Protestant movement. This can only be accomplished with fresh leaders who are willing to create a balanced reformation from the old atheistic structures toward the new contemporary, nontraditional styles of ministry.

This course of action involves several important factors which must be taken into consideration, each of which concerns typical Bulgarian Protestant leadership.

1. Good and skillful Bulgarian leaders are attached and minister in growing Bulgarian churches and generally are not inclined toward emigration. Therefore, it is very rare that they become leaders of churches outside Bulgaria.
2. Good and skillful Bulgarian leaders may not be good leaders in a North American context.
3. Bulgarian leaders can become good and skillful leaders of Bulgarian churches outside of Bulgaria only after receiving a systematic and strategic training, specifically designed to address the problems of such leadership and the needs of the Bulgarian communities.

The reformation, which Bulgarian church leadership within the United States must undergo, should address three basic dynamic aspects. First, it should purpose to find, train, and use people who recognize the problem within the Bulgarian church in America. These leaders should be passionate about finding a solution and be capable of bringing it to reality. Second, the reformation process should address the transformation of one's mentality toward a vision liberated from the oppression of Communist ideas and actions. Only after such transformation occurs can the persecuted leaders serve as leaders of a free and liberated Bulgarian church community aligned within the American context. This process must be intergenerational, since such change is practically impossible to accomplish in first generation leaders.

Third, the reformation of Bulgarian church leadership within the United States should include a transition from the Eastern toward the Western style of worship. Only then will the leadership of the Bulgarian church throughout the United States be able to

focus on empowering its communities with a vision for the future, to minister to the present needs of the Bulgarians across America, and reach the younger generation of American-Bulgarians.

The Plan of This Work

This project is divided into six chapters. The first chapter presents the problem to be analyzed. Chapter two places the problem into a Biblical context in order to examine its philosophical, cultural and practical trends within the available literature. A detailed contextual assessment of the problem follows in chapter three. This includes historical background, present demographics as well as the structure and symbolism of the communities where the problem exists. Chapter four presents the project model design which is then applied into the context of ministry. The results are reported and analytically interpreted in chapter six. The final chapter of this research is a church planting proposal for Bulgarian Evangelical Churches in North America. This is based on the results obtained from the project and provides solution to the problem of ministry.

Map of Bulgarian Protestant Churches in the United States (2002)

