

This week, we had the privilege of worshiping at the Evangelical Christian Center (ECC), where we used to rent a room for our Bible study class. We'd been invited by members of our group, who now live on the ECC campus.

For those of us old enough to remember, the ECC is the old Russian, Ukrainian, Evangelical Baptist Union (RUEBU). That organization, founded and led spiritually by men and women who were born into the Soviet Union (one or another of its various "satellite" nations) and/or pre-Bolshevik revolution Russia. Today, its beautiful grounds and dorm style buildings, exist as a retreat center, not only for church groups to retreat, gather and refresh themselves spiritually, but for missionaries to come and retreat, fellowship and get prepared for return to battle "in the field". In addition to that mission, there are still residents/ministers there who work with missionaries in the former Soviet nations, supporting their work. In previous years, servants/residents there broadcast via Trans-World Radio into the Soviet Union for decades, and were quite instrumental in feeding and nourishing the remnant of God's church there, even during times of great spiritual persecution by an oppressive and godless government.

Worshiping there this past Sunday was an interesting experience. It was homey. It was warm. It was followed by a time of breaking bread and talk and laughter. It was almost, "normal".

But there was one piece of this "normalcy" that sticks with me today. It was a conversation with one of the missionaries. He lives at the ECC when he's not "in the field". We have had the pleasure and privilege of knowing him and supporting his work for 5 or 6 years now. He works mostly in Belarus, and supports indigenous ministers and seminary teachers there. In addition, he has been bringing Bibles and Christian teaching materials into Soviet block nations for many years, and so supports the church there. It was from one of the seminary teachers to whom he introduced us, and who came to speak at our group, that I learned that in most Soviet block nations, when someone comes to Christ for salvation, it is described not as "having made Jesus Christ their personal Savior" – though they have – but the manner of describing their salvation is "when I made my repentance". People would sometimes stand up in church services and call out, "I am making my repentance!".

Theirs was not a "Western" spiritual experience, but one born within the context of godless persecution against Christ and His church. Indeed, salvation is a turning, not only from personal sin, but from complicity with a government bent to destroy the Kingdom of God and God's mission here in this Earth. The missionary and I had an interesting conversation about the present state of the church there and the church here. The most memorable thing he said to me was, "I'm really surprised that the churches here in America didn't rise up and say no to mandates that they could not gather.".

His experience in Soviet block nations has been that the government says, "No, you cannot gather for your religious services", as a matter of course! They gather anyway. Sometimes they are arrested for doing so; sometimes worse.

One fellow there, a caretaker of buildings and grounds, saw his father imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, and his grandfather had been imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, for 18 years!

Radio broadcasters from the RUEBU would fly regularly to Central America to preach the Gospel via Trans-World Radio, into the Soviet Union, where believers would gather in secret to hear God's Word

preached and expounded on radio. They could not gather in church buildings, and ministers were imprisoned, or killed, but the saints gathered *somewhere* to hear the Word of God, frequently at great expense. If found out, they'd move their location; but they would gather.

I ask myself the question – probably too frequently – why did the American church, with very few exceptions, comply with the orders of a godless government, to stop gathering? Was it fear of disease, fear of setting a “bad example”, fear of community reprisal, fear of government punishments, or perhaps it was genuine belief in what the government was telling people about the present situation... or perhaps it was something we will never know, or perhaps it was whatever had to be believed in order for the church to stop doing what it does... gathering...?

Whatever it is/was, we can be sure of this. God intends His people to gather. Those who tell God's people that they cannot gather, are not doing God's work. Rather, they are interfering with it; and the source of that interference is not a matter for any serious, spiritual discussion, is it?

Pastor