The Methodist Question in the Russian Context
(Final version)

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In this presentation I would like to invite you to consider the situation that the United Methodist Church presently faces in Russia. This is not an academic paper but a brief reflection on the issues of Ecumenism and Evangelism and their place in the vision for the future of the Russia United Methodist Church. There are two major issues that make the Russian case a unique area of ministry for the United Methodist Church. The first is the cultural and ideological inheritance of the seventy years of the socialist system, and the second is the thousand-year-old Russian Orthodox Church with its unique tradition, culture, and claims. Although the United Methodist Church has been quite successful in dealing with the first issue in its ministry in the Russian context, the challenges that are posed to it by the Russian Orthodox Church still remain to be tackled.

The ten years of ministry of the Methodist church in Russia since its re-emergence in 1992 have generated some controversial opinions especially when considered in the wider cultural and ecumenical context. In the cultural context there is the question of how justified it is to establish a United Methodist Church in Russia and what culture and values this church propagates. In the ecumenical realm there is the question of whether is it possible that in a country with a thousand-year-old Christian Church and tradition there is a genuine and justifiable need for the ministry of the United Methodist Church. In this paper I will share some reflections on the latter issue from the point of view of a Russian United Methodist. Then I will propose a direction in which United Methodist commitments to ecumenism and evangelization might find a dynamic balance in relation to the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. Finally I will ask some questions that have to be answered by the Russia United Methodist Church in relation to the Russian Orthodox Church and to which I hope to hear your input.

Specifically I would like to focus on the criticism that the ministry of the United Methodist Church in Russia has brought about. Professor Edward Roslof, an Associate Professor of Church History at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, is one of the leading critics of the official United Methodist policy in Russia, as he understands it. He has a degree in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and is able to present skillfully the arguments of a certain group in the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to the ministry of the United Methodist Church in Russia. Roslof joins his "Russian Orthodox friends and acquaintances" in interpreting the ministry of the United Methodist Church in Russia as part of the "aggressive Protestant and Catholic moves to undermine the [Russian Orthodox] Church" and as "unwelcome, foreign invaders who do not respect Orthodox traditions" (Roslof, 19). He insists that the best way to effectively help Russians to come to Christ is for the United Methodist Church to put all of its financial resources and any other help it can provide behind the Russian Orthodox Church, which "is best able to reach most Russians with the message of Christ" (Roslof, 36). He calls the present policy of the United Methodist Church in Russia "counterproductive, if not foolish" (Roslof, 36).

Now, there is a certain truth in Roslof's interpretation of Protestant evangelization programs in Russia. Some groups were very blatant about "converting communists to Christ" and "winning atheist Russia for Christ" without any understanding of the Russian

religious and cultural roots. Especially right after the fall of the Soviet system in Russia these groups flocked by the hundreds to Russia with their own framework of doing evangelism, their own understanding of Christianity, and no consideration for the long Orthodox Tradition in Russia. However, I would argue that such a description while not incorrect concerning the situation ten to fifteen years ago does not reflect the present reality in Russia. With time, many groups have stopped coming to Russia, and those who still come, even if they had previously practiced an approach similar to that which Roslof criticizes, have by now changed their position. With regard to the United Methodist Church, Roslof's criticism may possibly be fair in relation to some early cases, if at all, but certainly not to the present attitudes and dynamics.

Roslof certainly gives a unique interpretation of the ministry of the United Methodist Church in Russia. One element of his account, which he just touched on, but for which he did not give further elaboration, makes it even more interesting. It is the existence of the Russia United Methodist Church with over six thousand indigenous Russian United Methodist Christians. Roslof starts his article with a reference to the students and leaders of the Russia Untied Methodist Theological Seminary and their "deep faith in Christ and desire to evangelize Russia in His name" (Roslof, 19). However, the subsequent nineteen pages of the article presented by Roslof are about the Russian Orthodox Church and "American" United Methodism. Russian United Methodists are somehow completely absent from Roslof's proposal for the future ministry of the United Methodist Church in Russia. What does Roslof propose to do with the six thousand Russian United Methodists: have them join the Russian Orthodox Church? Leave Russia? Cease being Christians? It is by no mean clear from his proposal. Having taken Roslof's proposal in all seriousness, an important question arises: Is the Russia United Methodist Church a genuine product of the work of the Holy Spirit or just a result of human effort and fallen nature. Again it is not clear what Roslof's answer to this question is.

It can be argued that hundreds and even thousands of changed lives, with a deep love of God, sincere faith, and desire to lead a Christian life, testify to the fact that the Russia United Methodist Church is a product of the work of the Holy Spirit among the Russian people. If this is so, then Prof. Roslof omitted an essential component for the construction of his vision of the United Methodist Church's involvement in Russia and a proposal for the most effective way to help Russians to find Christ. However, there is a deep truth in his argument that the United Methodist Church in Russia should give proper recognition to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. It is true that Orthodox culture is deeply engraved in the indigenousness Russian mentality. Moreover, it is also true that any church that exists in Russia, be it Baptist, Adventist, or Orthodox, bears a powerful Orthodox influence on it. However, does this mean that non-Orthodox churches should cease to exist institutionally and join the Orthodox Church for the more effective evangelization of the Russian people? These are the questions that the Russian United Methodist Church struggles with. It will certainly take more than one generation of Russian United Methodists to clarify these questions for themselves and for others.

Meanwhile, the Russia United Methodist Church faces the question of reflecting on its own ministry and self-identity. The central issue in this, and here I agree with the remark that Prof. Wainwright made at the Consultation on Wesleyan and Orthodox Spirituality two weeks ago, is that Russian Methodists will most likely find themselves in a two-way relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. On one hand, one might hope

that the commitment of Methodists to evangelism, ethical Christian living, and social work will play a positive role in influencing the Russian Orthodox Church to improve in those areas, perhaps looking to some parts of its own tradition that typically did not receive much attention. On the other hand, it is clear that elements of Russian Orthodox influence will find their way into the Methodist Church in Russia and this can provide positive dynamics.

Some of the most obvious Orthodox influences that Methodist ministers in Russia discover are that some members of their congregations have a desire to light a candle in the Methodist service, or to have an icon, or to bless *kulich* (traditional Orthodox Easter cake) for Easter, or to have a bell tower with a bell on it in Methodist church buildings in Russia. Other influences that can develop with time are a deeper appreciation for the larger Christian tradition, especially the Fathers and patristic theology, and wider use of them in the United Methodist Church in Russia. This line of interpretation and direction for understanding the Russia United Methodist Church combines both the ecumenical and evangelistic commitments of the United Methodist Church and suggests a healthy dynamic balance between the two. However, this is different from the Russia United Methodist Church joining the Russian Orthodox Church institutionally, which perhaps Roslof suggests through his article. His proposal demands the Methodist commitment to evangelization be sacrificed in the name of ecumenism. Nor is it focused only on the traditional Methodist commitment to evangelism while leaving aside an ecumenical perspective, as in the case of focusing on evangelization proper without seriously taking into account the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia.

Because Roslof does not address the existence of the Russian United Methodist Christians as a viable entity in Russia, his entire thesis is weak and outdated. He is not concerned with ecumenical issues, because his article is intended to argue that the Russian Orthodox Church has the right to exclusive control over Christianity in Russia. This argument does not reflect the current reality that exists in Russia. Ignoring the existence of Russian United Methodists will not make them go away, nor will it advance the conversation that sooner or later must take place between the Russian Orthodox and Russia United Methodist churches.

We are still left with the question of Ecumenism and Evangelism. How do different churches with a commitment to ecumenism find a respectable way to discuss evangelism? Can evangelism be actively pursued by churches committed to ecumenism if they exist in the same geographical area? Does a commitment to ecumenism mean an acceptance of other churches as "as good as" one's own? Does ecumenism mean that the churches involved are happy to see a person enter any church adhering to the basic tenets of Christianity? How can churches with fundamentally different definitions of what it means to be a Christian make a commitment to ecumenism? Does a commitment to ecumenism mean that evangelism must be relegated to second place, or vice versa?

The Russian Orthodox Church claims Russia as its canonical territory; hence, though they be atheist, Russians are Orthodox. Russian United Methodists claim that a Christian is a person who has accepted the salvation offered through Jesus Christ, salvation from sin and death by the forgiveness of sins. Can an ecumenical relationship exist between churches with two such different conceptions of what it means to be a Christian?