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Russian Baptists Visit White House; See Photos, Not Nixon

By Jim Newton

WASHINGTON (BP)--Four Russian Baptists, three of them from the Moscow Baptist Church which President Richard M. Nixon visited on Mar 28, took a "red carpet" tour of the White House here, but they weren't able to see President Nixon.

Instead, they saw an exhibit in the White House lobby displaying photographs from the President's trip to Moscow, and the gifts he received while there.

One observer present said that Alexsei Bichkov, general secretary of the All Union Council of Evangelicals Christians-Baptists, "jumped nearly three feet off the ground" with excitement when he saw a photograph of himself in the pulpit of the Moscow church.

Three of the four visitors saw photographs of themselves at the White House. Michael Zhidkov, pastor of the Moscow Baptist Church, and Klaudie Pillipuk, secretary of the Council's international department, were pictured standing with President Nixon outside the Moscow church.

The fourth visitor, Nickolai Melnikov, of Kiev, is superintendent of Baptist work in the Ukraine. All four were traveling through the United States enroute home after attending sessions of the Baptist World Alliance Executive Committee in Kingston, Jamaica.

They made stops in Nashville to visit officials of the Southern Baptist Convention, in Washington to sightsee and visit with the Baptist World Alliance staff; and in Philadelphia to tour the American Baptist Convention headquarters in nearby Valley Forge.

In a news conference in Nashville, the Russian Baptists were asked about the impact of the visit of President Nixon's visit to the church, and the response of the Russian people to the visit.

In carefully chosen words, the pastor of the Moscow Baptist Church said that the response was very good, and that he felt President Nixon had felt the warm hospitality of the Russian people.

Most of the news conference in Nashville was devoted to the Russian Baptists' views on oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union.

"The problem is exaggerated, in our opinion," said Bichkov. "We feel some western newspapers have exaggerated local incidents and made them into international incidents. There is no oppression of Jews in Russia, to our knowledge."

Bichkov added that he was an engineer for 19 years before becoming a Baptist pastor five years ago, and one half of the staff of the department in which he worked was Jewish. He said he never saw any difference in the way they were treated.

Melnikov and Zhidkov agreed. Speaking in Russian, with translation by Mrs. Pillipuk, Melnikov said he knew nothing of oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union, but he did know of specific cases in which Jews were allowed to leave Russia and move to Israel. In his hometown, Kiev, a Baptist pastor bought the home of a Jewish family which had moved to Israel, he said.

Later, in a private interview, Zhidkov said he felt that Christians faced more restrictions than Jews. Jewish people are allowed to leave Russia, but Christians are not.

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Bichkov added later privately that there is little publicity given to such matters in the Soviet Union, and they had no knowledge of any oppression of Jews.

In the same respect, there has been little publicity in Russia to the visit of President Nixon to the Moscow Baptist Church, observed Zhidkov. Most Russians do not know of the President's attending the Sunday morning worship service there, he said. Tass, the official Soviet Union news service, carried only six paragraphs about the matter.

An American religious journalist who attended the worship service, David E. Kucharsky, pointed out in a special report to Christianity Today that even that was more recognition than evangelical Christians had ever before received in Russia. "The Nixon's visit to the church may well have been the best thing that ever happened to it (the church)," wrote Kucharsky, associate editor of Christianity Today.

"The visit gave the Christians of the Soviet Union a measure of recognition they had not had since the start of the Revolution more than 50 years ago," Kucharsky wrote.

The Russian Baptists visiting here, however, had little to say about the long-range effect of the President's visit, except that they were very pleased and happy about the visit "from such a distinguished statesman."

Zhidkov, pastor of the church, said the congregation had only about one week's notice that the President would attend. President Nixon was invited to bring a word of greeting to the church, but he declined, wanting only to worship as any other member of the congregation would. Because of his tight schedule, Mr. Nixon was present for only 30 minutes of the two hour worship service.

About 1,000 persons crowded into the church, the only Protestant congregation in the central part of Moscow, for that worship service, one of three held each Sunday for the 5,000 member church. It was the first time in its 150 year history that a head of state had visited the church.

Bichkov said there are 14 other Baptist churches in the suburban areas of Moscow, and about 5,000 Baptist churches with more than 500,000 members in all the Soviet Union.

Asked about published reports that there are more than 3 million Baptists in Russia Zhidkov responded: "Only God knows how many Baptists there are. We have no exact statistics. He estimated there are about 3 million sympathizers with the Baptist faith, including children of members.

It was the first visit to the United States for Bichkov, who only last December became at the age of 42 the general secretary for the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians--Baptists. Asked about his impressions, he responded:

"Of course, I had read much about the United States, and about the work of Southern Baptists. But it is better to one time see than to 100 times hear."

He said in an opening statement that he appreciated "the tremendous work you do here in the name of Jesus Christ. We as Baptists in our country, too, do our best in the name of reconciliation for Jesus Christ."

Asked if she knew about the so-called "women's liberation movement" in America, Mrs. Pillipuk said she had never heard of it, but that in Russia, women already have equal rights and opportunities. She pointed out that her husband was "doing the housekeeping" while she was on the trip. Her role, she said in fluent English, was to "help my brothers" in translation. "She is equal to us all," quipped Zhidkov.

The Moscow pastor also pointed out that there are four women preachers among the 27 ordained ministers who are members of the Moscow Baptist Church. "Some of them do a better job (of preaching) than the men," he added.

Bichkov said there is a great revival among Baptists in the southern part of Russia. Near Kiev, he said, 37 atheists, including doctors and influential professional people, have been converted.

Zhidkov said that Russian Baptists have two forms of evangelism--an invitation for persons to come to Jesus Christ; and education, or "the explanation of the Bible and the gospel."

He said Christians have no oppression in the Soviet Union, only restrictions. Freedom of religion is granted in the country's constitution, he added, even though there are restrictions.

He said he loved both his country, and his God, adding that it is difficult to divide love of Christianity and love of country.

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BP PHOTO mailed to Baptist state papers

Southern Baptist Gifts Continue Upward Climb

NASHVILLE (BP)--Contributions to world missions through the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program unified budget continued to spiral upward, increasing by more than \$1 million during the first seven months of 1972 compared to the same period in 1971.

With two months remaining in the denomination's fiscal year, SBC officials here said they were "encouraged and optimistic" about chances of meeting the 1972 budget.

Contributions through the SBC Cooperative Program for the first seven months of 1972 totalled \$18,725,332, an increase of 5.79 per cent over the \$17.7 million received for the same period in 1971. This is an increase of \$1,024,803.

SBC Financial Planning Secretary John H. Williams said it would require increases of 6.39 per cent for each of the two remaining months in the fiscal year in order to go beyond the total SBC budget of \$23.7 million.

Williams said he feels certain the convention will surpass the \$21.8 million operating budget for the 19 SBC agencies, and that receipts will enable payment of much, if not all, of the capital needs section. He said he expects increases of about six per cent for each of the two remaining months of the fiscal year, if current trends are followed.

In addition to the \$21.8 million in operating needs, the budget includes \$97,360 in capital needs originally scheduled for payment in 1970; \$1,050,000 in unmet 1971 capital needs; and \$787,500 in 1972 capital needs.

In addition to the \$18.7 million in Cooperative Program (budget) contributions, Southern Baptists have also given \$24.5 million to designated, specific mission causes (mostly home and foreign missions) during the first seven months of the year.

Designated gifts have increased by \$2.1 million, or 9.62 per cent, over designations for the same period in 1971, the report indicated.

The combined world missions contributions, including both Cooperative Program plus designated gifts, totalled \$43.2 million for the seven month period, up \$3.1 million over the \$40 million total for 1971. Percentage wise, it is an increase of 7.93 per cent.

During the month of July, monthly Cooperative Program contributions increased 3.27 per cent, or \$86,247 to a total of \$2.7 million for the month, compared to July, 1971.

Designated contributions during July, however, decreased by 5.7 per cent, or \$32,204, to a total of \$532,671 for July, 1972.

The increase in Cooperative Program gifts offset the decrease in designated contributions in the total gifts category, so that the \$3.2 million total received in July amounted to an increase of \$54,042, or 1.69 per cent, for the month.

Figures reported in the monthly tabulation prepared by the SBC Executive Committee here reflect only amounts given to world and nation-wide Southern Baptist mission causes, and do not include amounts given to state and local Baptist mission efforts.

