

By Pastor Adolph Pichaj

SHORT HISTORY OF THE «BETHANY» BAPTIST CHURCH

The records in a summarized version are taken from the anniversary albums and personal memories



1910 is the official beginning of the Russian evangelical missionary work in Los Angeles with Pavel Andreyevich Molokanov as its pioneer. He converted out of the Molokans and was baptized in San Francisco in 1907, and moved to Los Angeles at the end of 1909.

In 1910, the ministry began with Pavel Andreyevich's personal testimony among relatively large group of Molokans (up to 8000) who moved from Russia to California at the beginning of the 20th century and settled on 1st street in Los Angeles. Pavel Andreyevich invited those who were interested into his home where the evangelical discourses began to take place. With the arrival of brother G. Redin, a talented missionary from Latvia, regular church services had begun. This home-based mission located on 168/172 Utah Street continued for over a year, but because of the increasing number of visitors, local brothers and sisters began renting a facility on Rio - also located on 1st Street and called *The New Testament Mexican Chapel*.

These services continued between 1911 and 1914 after which *City Baptist Mission* allowed to hold official Evangelical services in Russian, entrusting this ministry first to Mrs. Murdoch and then to Mr. J. Fox.

The services would continue for about three years with an attendance of up to 20 people and sometimes more. Brother Redin led children's ministry, and in a short period of time, the first Sunday school was about 75 children. First water baptism by faith was held in 1914 of the Gregorian spouses with Fetler Malov, a well-known preacher, preaching at that service.

Seeing the success of the ministry, *City Baptist Mission* decided to build a church building on Pecan Street.

After the departure of Brother Redin, Miss Emma Miller, who was an American missionary, took over the Sunday school ministry. Children's ministry continued to grow and the number of children increased to about 100. Meanwhile, the children's choir was also established.

In 1918 a fire started because of the misconduct of rogue boys, and the building on Pecan was burned down. The "Russian Mission" was left without a home. The Sunday school children took the news especially hard.

It is necessary to note a particular event which testifies of God's gracious care for His children, and the ways in which He shows care through His faithful servants. It happened after the fire on Pecan. Once, walking outside miss Miller, a missionary, met Brother Grigoryan (one of the founding members of the *Russian Baptist Mission*). After hearing her words of grievance and even sorrow about the end of the Russian-speaking ministry because of the fire, Brother Grigoryan took out five dollars and gave it to her for the church building constructions for Russian-speaking population. Miss Miller's heart was moved because Brother Grigoryan's income was so small and he had a family of seven to support.

Walking for about one block further, she met another American believer and told him about what happened with Brother Grigoryan. The sincere and sacrificial act of Brother Grigoryan moved the American brother so much that he wrote her a check for \$2,000 for the same need. With these finances the land on Gless street was purchased. With the help of *City Baptist Mission* a new church building was built and the opening ceremony was held on October 12, 1919.

That is the way that the evangelical ministry took place in Los Angeles in the first nine years.

1919–1923. *City Baptist Mission* invited Artimenko Ivan Efimovich from Seattle to lead the church. There was a solemn assembly with the participation of both Americans and Russians. A special music program was prepared and performed by the children’s choir in the opening. Secretary of *City Baptist Mission* W. Harper and the head of “Russian Mission” J. Fox, as well as many others participated the meeting.

During the ministry of Brother Artimenko, the church attendance grew up to 60 people. On May 1, 1925 *City Baptist Mission* appointed Brother Stepan Efimovich Gromov, a kind and talented preacher who also used to be a Molokan, to lead the Russian church. During his short ministry, the church experienced a revival and a few families moved here from the eastern states. A lively missionary work has begun through home visitations, distribution of Christian literature, as well as meetings at the park.



In September 1925, Peter Pavlovich Pavlyuk from Texas became the head of the church. On November 1, 1925, “Russian Mission” changed its name to “Russian Baptist Church” (Gless street Russian Baptist Church), and in January 1926, *City Baptist Mission* at the request of the church members, elected Brother Pavlyuk to be the pastor.

With the recommendation of a visiting brother, Ivan Neprash, a small association of California’s churches was founded for the purpose of hosting the annual spiritually-edifying conventions. The first Convention was held in Kerman in 1928. This year is considered a year of foundation of the Pacific Coast Association of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches.

“Russian Mission” steadily grew. A few families from Caucasus but living in Mexico moved to Los Angeles: Kuzei, Kalinichenko, Kushnerov, Pluzhnik, Urazov, and others. Brother Ivan Grigoryevich Kalinichenko was chosen as the choir conductor.

The most important event in the life of the church during the time of ministry of Brother Peter Pavlyuk was the founding and sustaining the independent Russian Baptist Church on Gless Street which before over the course of 23 years was called as “the Russian Mission”. The church operated under auspices and guidance of *City Baptist Mission*, Los Angeles, and at the same time, it was accepted into the *City Association of Baptist Churches*. Commemoration of the “foundation” took place on September 23, 1934 with the involvement of the representatives of fourteen American churches of Los Angeles. According to Pastor Pavlyuk's report the church numbered 42 members with a Sunday school of 160.

In 1934, the church developed its bylaws. An official registration of the Church took place in Sacramento, California, on October 25, 1938.

Under the editorial leadership of Brother Pavlyuk, a missionary flyer “Visitor” has been printed over the course of seven years and has “visited” many Russian homes. Under leadership of Sister Pavlyuk, a women small group was established, and a men group was established under the leadership of Ivan Kalinichenko. At the beginning of 1940, the membership of the church grew to 80 people. The ministry of Brother Pavlyuk continued for fifteen years; due to his poor health, he passed it on in 1940.

1940–1947. Brother Ivan Aksentyevich Kmeta from Canada was invited to be the church pastor. There were blessed church services, and new people were turning to the Lord. The membership grew to about 100. Evangelistic services were held in Hollywood and Mexico. The ministry of Brother I. Kmeta took place over the course of seven years until the end of 1947 when he was called to a new ministry and moved to Philadelphia, PA.

June 1, 1948 was the beginning of Yuriy Kirilovich Urban’s service. The church invited him from France. One of the more important events in the period of Brother Urban’s ministry was the building of a new church building. November 24, 1949 was the day of the grand opening of the convention and the dedication of the church building. The total construction cost was \$46,000. On March 22, 1951, the Russian Baptist Church officially changed its name to “Bethany Baptist Church”. The membership at this time was about 100 people.

The ministry of Brother Urban was characterized by spiritually deep sermons in a discipleship style. Besides pastoral ministry, Brother Urban translated many valuable books and brochures (especially books by Dr. Oswald Smidt, Dr. DeHaan, and others). He also recorded about 600 evangelical radio programs to be broadcast in Quito, Ecuador.

This was also a period of successful work among teens and youth. The Sunday school attendance and youth group reached 200 people.

With Pastor Urban's efforts, a Church-based library was established. It had substantial resources both in Russian and English, as well as a “functional” pastoral library. A huge amount of books were his personal gift. Pastoral ministry of Brother Urban lasted for nine years after which he returned to France to work with the “Slavic Missions”.

With the departure of Brother Urban, the church entrusted the ministry to a few brothers: A. King, M. Grigoryuk, S. Fedynich from Canada, V. Dubovskiy and I. Parfenov. Despite various challenges, the church was encouraged by the baptism of seven people from the youth group, paid off the remaining financial obligations, and purchased an organ for \$2,600.

In November 1958, the church invited Vladimir Ignatyevich Gusaruk, a pastor from Montreal in Canada to host evangelism services, after which they offered him to become their pastor. He was officially appointed to this ministry on the March 13, 1960 service. The representatives from *City Baptist Mission* and Pacific Coast Slavic Baptist Association attended this service.



With the change of a pastor, the church made some organizational changes as well. The church began to plan church ministries in all areas including the evangelistic work among the Slavic people of Los Angeles. An outreach tracts and brochures was published and evangelistic radio programs were established. Besides various church organizations, Russian Grammar School was opened at the church for 50 students consisting predominantly from the Molokan families.

Church services were both in Russian and in English with the participation of American preachers. In partnership with Slavic Baptist Church of Hollywood, there were spiritual literary church services, along with the breaking of bread on Good Friday with the participation of both churches. Church membership totaled 120 with a Sunday school of 90 children, and a youth group of 20. The choir consisted of 27 people under the leadership of Brother P. Denisiu and I. Sirota. Brother Gusaruk was a pastor until March 1962 when he was called to a missionary ministry in *City Baptist Mission* of Los Angeles.

American preachers have been invited to work with the children and youth for many years. When the question arose about the pastoral candidate, the church was looking for someone who would be able to serve both the English and the Russian audience. Brother Leon Chehovich was such a person who happened to come back from his missionary trip to Australia. Missionary ministry was the distinguishing mark of Brother Chehovich. The church held annual three day "Missionary Conferences". Different missionaries were invited and evangelistic films and new believers' testimonies were presented during such conferences. They served as a good testimony and moved the people of the church to consider the work of missions. The church supported five foreign missionaries at that time.

Brother Chehovich preached both in Russian and in English, and dedicated a lot of attention to discipleship among the youth. Summer youth camps yielded favorable results. Fifteen people were baptized, and the church membership grew to 127 with Sunday school having 80 children, and 40 people in the youth group. In May of 1969 Brother Chehovich moved to minister in Detroit.

The church elected Brother Avdey Vorobei as a new pastor. This period of his ministry marked as a time of active service of church members. Almost monthly, Brother A. Voznyuk organized spiritually- literary services with involvement of other churches. These services were exceptionally well-attended. Brother Daniel Yasko, who was a church pastor in New York but moved to Los Angeles in 1974, helped in the preaching ministry. American pastors Fred Kelne and Norman Johnson had

effectively worked with the youth. The membership grew to 133 and the choir consisted of 38 people. Brother M. Bagdanov organized a Bible Study group.

On September 27, 1971 a spiteful husband who disapproved of his wife's baptism threw fire through the window and set the sanctuary ablaze. This was the second fire in the history of the church. The cost of reconstruction was \$20,000 . On March 26, 1972, there was the solemn dedication of the reconstructed church building. During the period of reconstruction, church services took place in the Sunday school area. The church continued to support three missionaries, two orphanages, and an "Our Days" newspaper.

On August 9, 1975 after a period of sickness, Brother Avdey Vorobei died. The church had lost a good, and an unusually peaceful in character, meek and faithful servant of God.

1975 — 1981. After the death of Brother A. Vorobei, on August 23 1975, the church officially elected Brother Ivan Alekseyevich Vlasyuk to be the new pastor who already fulfilled the duties during the sickness of Brother A. Vorobei.

The ministry of Brother Vlasyuk had overall been a continuation of the ministry of Brother A. Vorobei with the ministries and activities following the same course.

Brother Daniel Yasko helped in the preaching ministry. There were a number of spiritual, literary, services as well as evangelistic services with guest preachers. American preachers were invited to preach in English. There was a baptism of sixteen people, and the number of members totaled 117 people with 75 children in Sunday school.

The question of youth ministry pressed them once again. They needed a pastor who would be able to dedicate more time to work with the youth and preach in English, while at the same time investing sufficient time for work with the Russian-speaking church members.

In 1980 the church invited Brother Adolf Andreyevich Pichaj - a pastor from Eire, Pennsylvania to lead an evangelistic services. After hearing his sermon, the church asked Brother Pichaj to become their pastor. On March 15, 1981, Brother A. Pichaj began his ministry. He preached both in English and in Russian during the morning and evening services, invested time in the Sunday school, and tried to dedicate a lot of time to the youth group.

In addition to his pastoral work, Brother A. Pichaj with the help of I. Vlasyuk, G. Altuhov, V. Bahor, Mihail Katkov, and the youth choir under the oversight of Brother Leonid Voznyuk, was preparing radio programs for broadcasting in the Soviet Union. Children's flute orchestra was also organized to teach children to serve in the music ministry. By doing so the elders invested in the future and encouraged the next generation to become involved in church ministry.

In 1985, Brother A. Pichaj prepared a gift to the church for their 75th anniversary - an album of 48 pages.

A sound system was installed and finalized for improvement of the pulpit ministry. Radio and headphones were used for some time for synchronized translation. Ruth Pichaj sometimes translated Brother A. Pichaj's sermons into English.



In 1988 Brother A. Pichaj, on behalf of the Committees of Baptist Unions of America and Canada, organized the first Congress of Evangelical Christian Baptists of America and Canada. Ruth Pyatnochka and Raisa Dubrovskaya helped him with this project. Fourteen organizations from different association and unions participated in the Congress, and the main service was held at the Chrystal Cathedral, Los Angeles. A choir under the direction of I. Vlasyuk and L. Voznyuk performed at the Congress, as well as the "Balalaika" orchestra with the direction of Brother Yefimovich from New Jersey. Two hundred hymn books were prepared for the Congress: 59 Russian, Ukrainian, and English songs; 19 Polish and 16 Czech.

Church members were active as always. The deacons during this period were I. Vlasyuk, G. Altuhov, V. Bahor, M. Bagdanov and P. Miller. The women group under the leadership of Vera Vlasyuk, in addition to its philanthropic work, took an active part in the life of the church. The membership at this time was 119 people with Sunday school having 80 children. Brother Daniel Yasko led educational and edifying lessons in the Russian Sunday school. About twenty people were in the youth group. Brother Anton Voznyuk showed special interest in the mission's work (distribution of Christian literature and cassettes with radio programs).

On February 8, 1992 at the annual members' meeting, the church elected Brother Yuriy Konstantinovich Ovcharenko to be the church's pastor, and on August 6, 1992, he was officially ordained for this ministry. The following were the participants of this action: A. Kuzichev, G. Altuhov, A. Pichaj, V. Zhakevich, P. Kulishov, N. Martynchuk, N. Kramarenko, and A. Yefimov, the Chairman of the Pacific Coast Slavic Baptist Association.

During the time of Brother Ovcharenko's ministry, the church, in addition to Christmas, New Year, and Easter, began to celebrate the Day of Trinity and a Harvest Day, along with all the other Christian holidays. The church also held solemn church services with the participation of guests from other churches dedicated to 130 years of Russian-Ukrainian Baptist Brotherhood and 120 years of Russian translation of the Bible.

Due to the church bylaws being outdated, there was a decision to develop a new one which was approved by the church on November 5, 1995 service, and was translated into English by Brother A. Pichaj.

A string orchestra under the leadership of Brother I. Vlasyuk accompanied congregational singing. It was encouraging to see the whole Ovcharenko's family participating in the church ministry. Children's choir was organized under the direction of Galya Dovgun.

On January 24, 2002, Brother Y. Ovcharenko moved to *Evangelical Church* in Santa Anna where after a short period of time he was elected to be a pastor. In March 2002, the church elected Brother Moses Bagdanov to lead the church services and was trying to find a person for permanent pastoral ministry.

Sad news: On March 27, 2002 after prolonged sickness, Brother Daniel Aleksandrovich Yasko went to be with the Lord. Shortly before that, the church

celebrated his 95th birthday. During his ministry at the church, he was active in preaching and was a Sunday school teacher. His lessons were interesting and very edifying. He had labored a lot in the publishing of Christian literature. It is important to note at least a brief summary of his ministry: publishing of 5 hymnals with notes, a few books, a lot of radio programs, and first volume of Bible dictionary (unfortunately only for the first 9 books of Gospel).

On January 12, 2003 , the church elected Brother Nicolai Ivanovich Larshin to be the church's pastor. He finished a seminary and had experience in church ministry. His sermons had educationally-spiritual style. His wife Tatyana sang very well and played on the piano, and he also had an amazing tenor voice. Both of them were active in the choir ministry.

During this time, a lot has been shifted in the main sanctuary. To accommodate the choir and orchestra, there was significant reconstruction with M. Bagdanov, P. Tokarets and others being active in the work. Vasiliy Alperov, an author of many choir songs, was the conductor during this time. Masterful performance of the choir was especially noticeable during a special church service of the “Music and Singing” celebration.

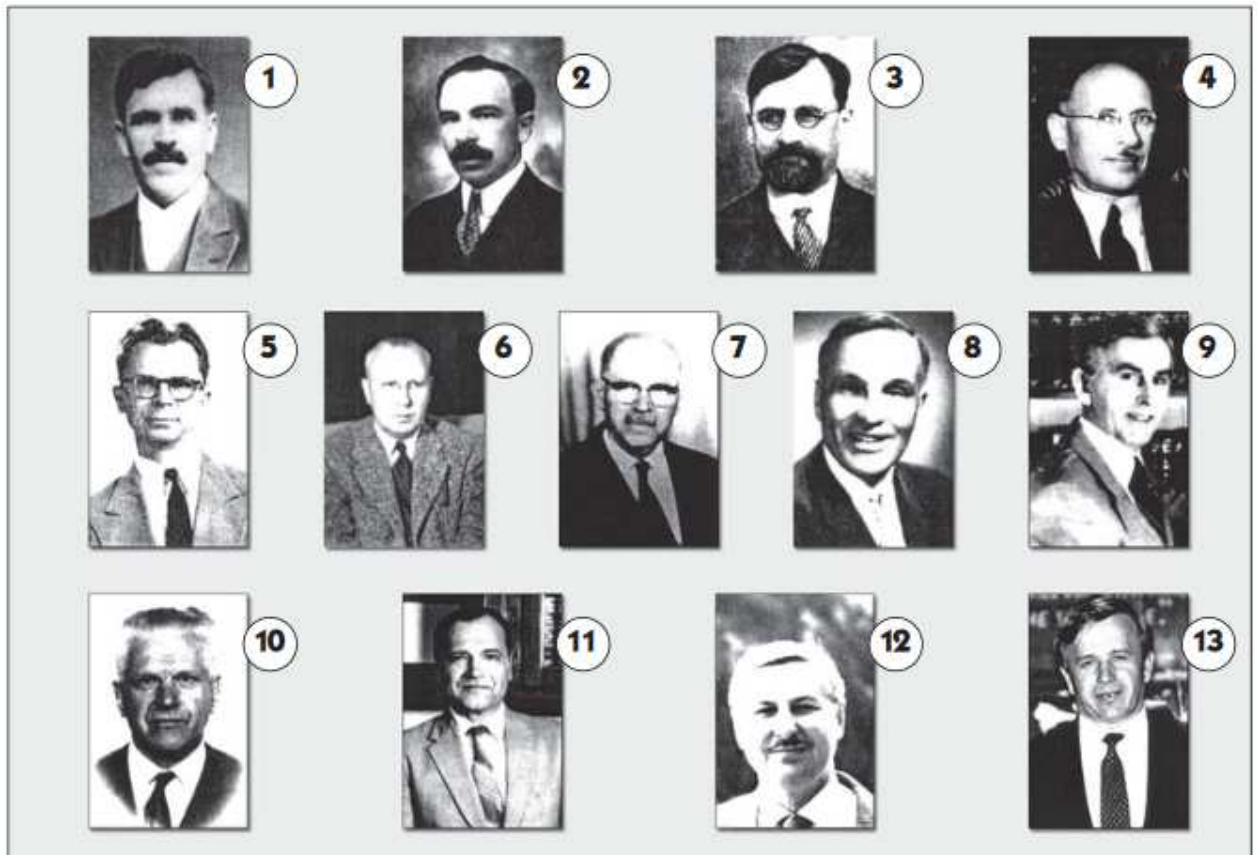
Brother N. Larshin served until November 6, 2008.



First Row, left to right: Ivan Vlasyuk; Vasiliy Alperov-conductor; Vasiliy Rogozyan - treasurer; Olga Rogozyan – treasurer's helper; Yelena Kiseleva – chairman of the sisters' counsel;

Second row, left to right: Boris Kiselev - media; Peter Tokarets - leader; Nicolay Vinnikov - inventory; Sergei Tokarets - chairman; Ivan Kisel - secretary.

When Brother N. Larshin moved to another city, Brother Paul Tokarets became the church pastor.



PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS

1. P. Molokanov (1910-1919);
2. I. Artimenko (1919-1923);
3. S. Gromov (1924-1925);
4. P. Pavlyuk (1925-1940);
5. I. Kmeta (1940-1947);
6. G. Urban (1948-1957);
7. Z. Parfonov (1957-1959);
8. V. Gusaruk (1959-1962);
9. L. Chechovich (1964-1969);
10. A. Vorobei (1962-1964, 1969-1975);
11. I. Vlasyuk (1975-1981);
12. A. Pichaj (1981-1992);
13. Y. Ovcharenko (1992-2002)