
Pentecostal Revival in Post-Communist Bulgaria

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The Bulgarian Protestant movement today claims over 100,000 members. This number is almost ten times higher than a 1975 German study which gave a figure of approximately 13,000 “known” Protestants in Bulgaria.¹ In the 1980s, with many Western missionaries visiting Bulgaria and gathering information about underground churches outlawed by the Communist regime, this number grew to 55,000.²

Although international reports confirmed the existence of over 100,000 Protestants in Bulgaria as early as 1994,³ the Bulgarian National Statistical

Institute counted only 42,000 Protestant believers in Bulgaria in the 2002-2003 national census. This number was challenged in 2004 by Dr. Stephen Penov, a Sofia University professor and member of the Bulgarian Academy of Science. According to Dr. Penov, who is also a parliamentary expert on human rights and religious confessions, members of traditional Protestant denominations in Bulgaria exceed 100,000; in addition, membership in new Protestant denominations totals approximately 50,000.⁴ Since 1989, Bulgaria has experienced a

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sustained Pentecostal revival, claiming over 100,000 new believers. Therefore, it is not surprising that over 80 percent of Bulgarian Protestants are Pentecostal or claim Pentecostal experience.

Protestant Beginnings

Protestant work in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire began in the 1800s when the Sultan granted permission for British and American missionaries to work there. In the 1820s, the British Bible Society developed a Protestant translation of the Bulgarian Bible, which was completed and published in Constantinople in 1871. During this same period, various Protestant denominations began mission work in Bulgaria, including Congregationalists (1856), Methodists (1857), Baptists (1865), and Seventh-day Adventists (1891). In 1871, the first Bulgarian Protestant Church was founded in the town of Bansko. By the time Bulgaria gained its independence in 1878, Protestantism was well established in Bulgarian culture.

Pentecostal Origins

Ukrainian immigrants Zaplishny and Ivan Voronaeff first introduced Pentecostalism to Bulgaria in 1920, preaching in the Methodist Church in the Black Sea port of Bourgas, where several were baptized with the Holy Spirit. This event marks the beginning of Bulgarian Pentecostalism. In the 1920s, the movement spread throughout the country under the leadership of Nikolai Nikolov. On 28-31 March 1928 at a national assembly, a new denomination formally emerged in Bulgaria under the name Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches. The organization, also known as the Pentecostal Union, affiliated with the U.S. Assemblies of God.

Pentecostal Division

The Bulgarian government required the newly formed denomination to secure legal registration, which caused a great deal of controversy and division. A conservative Pentecostal group, with congregations located mainly in Northern Bulgaria, left the union and adopted the name Tinchevists after the name of its leader, Stoyan Tintchev. The Tinchevists, who are also called Northern Brothers because of their location, later became known as the Bulgarian Church of God. Unstable leadership and disagreements over internal organization were the main factors behind the split between the Pentecostal Union and the Church of God. Unfortunately, even after the replacement of the original leaders, reunion proved impossible because of the crisis related to Communist rule.

In 1944, with Red Army backing, a Communist government came to power in Bulgaria. In 1949, Communist authorities tried and convicted 15 Protestant leaders on false charges of treason and espionage. The division among Bulgarian Pentecostals continued during the Communist regime. The Pentecostal Union secured legal existence by registering with the Communist state. This action, however, led to government interference in church life and the planting of secret agents within the denomination's administration. The Bulgarian Church of God, on the other hand, chose to remain underground and suffered severe persecution as a result. According to archival sources, the Bulgarian Church of God had only 600 members nationwide in 1974. By 1981, however, this number grew to 2,000, with congregations in 25 cities. Membership totaled 4,000 by 1986 when the denomination affiliated with the U.S. Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee).

Pentecostal Growth

In 1986, the Bulgarian Pentecostal Union had approximately 10,000 members. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the denomination participated in a Pentecostal revival that swept the country. In the decade that followed, the Pentecostal Union multiplied its congregations to 500, with over 50,000 members and adherents. However, Ivan Ivanov, student pastor of the Pentecostal College in Sofia, indicated in a recent interview that membership in the Pentecostal Union may have experienced a decline since 2002.

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian Church of God has continued to grow, reporting over 32,000 members, with close to 400 congregations in 2001. Its work among Bulgaria's ethnic minorities has resulted in the emergence of large Roma congregations, such as the church in Samokov with 1,700 members, and the church in Razlog with 450 members.

Bulgarian Protestant Profile

It is reasonable to ask why Pentecostalism is so attractive in Bulgaria today: What has enabled it to respond so well to the need for faith in post-Communist Bulgarian society? Is Pentecostalism simply filling a spiritual gap, or is it successfully responding to postmodern thinking? The answers to the above questions may be found in Pentecostal theology. In a recent survey 100 randomly selected Bulgarian Protestants answered questions about their faith which are summarized in the accompanying table.

Bulgarian Protestant Profile

	Percentages	
	YES	NO
Does a person have free will?	78	22
Can a person choose to be saved or not?	75	25
Must a person accept Jesus Christ as a personal Savior in order to be saved?	97	3
Can a person lose his/her salvation?	75	25
Is the use of alcohol sin?	60	40
Can a person be saved without being baptized in the Holy Spirit?	72	28
Are you baptized with the Holy Spirit?	63	37
Have the spiritual gifts described in the Bible ceased?	10	90
Are there apostles today?	64	36
Do you go to church each week?	73	27
Do you pray daily?	88	12
Do you read the Bible daily?	77	23
Do you fast more than once a week?	35	65

According to survey results, the profile of the average Bulgarian Protestant is as follows: 1) basically evangelical in doctrine; 2) more Arminian than Calvinist; 3) Pentecostal/Charismatic in experience; and 4) more theologically conservative than liberal. Bulgarian Protestants are in almost complete agreement on issues such as the person and work of Jesus Christ in salvation and the importance of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the church. Perhaps these are the points of agreement which future Bulgarian Protestants should use to build unity

and construct strategies for the future development of the movement. Because these also serve as the cornerstone of Pentecostal doctrine and practice, a movement toward unity within the Bulgarian Protestant movement should be initiated by Bulgarian Pentecostals. ♦

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Notes:

¹Klaus-Detlev Grothusen, ed., *Bulgarien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990), 564.

²<http://www.gospelcom.net/lcwe/LOP/lop19.htm>.

³GCN - EP: Sofia, Bulgaria, 8 June 1994.

⁴Religia BG, 31 July 2004, <http://www.religiabg.com/?p=oldnews&id=1514>.