

## Early History

Members of the USCC share a rich heritage and eventful history spanning centuries and continents. They are descendants of Russian peasants, derisively named Doukhobors, or “Spirit Wrestlers”, for their rejection of icon worship and other church rituals. They adopted the name, stating they wrestled with, not against the Holy Spirit, using the power of love to live in harmony with the Law of God and the Teachings of Jesus Christ.

Doukhobors saw no value in the pomp and ceremony of organized religion, or the need for intermediaries between themselves and God. Instead, they sought guidance from the voice of God within, and from those in their midst whose spiritual enlightenment was reflected in their daily lives. As Christians, they believed in an all-powerful God whose earthly manifestation was selfless, unconditional love inherent in every person.



Two centuries of persecution by church and state only strengthened the faith of the Doukhobors. They secured their material needs through a lifestyle based on Christian principles and mutual aid, at times achieving prosperity, as under the leadership of Lukeria Kalmikova, during their exile in Transcaucasia. Always, they struggled to attain a higher consciousness anchored in real life experience, striving for a balance between their spiritual unity and material well-being.



By the late 1800s, many Doukhobors grew concerned that their manner of living did not reflect their spiritual values. On the advice of Kalmikova’s chosen successor, Peter V. Verigin, they adopted a simple communal lifestyle, renounced alcohol and tobacco as impediments to one’s health and spiritual development, and embraced vegetarianism and pacifism out of respect for the sanctity of life. When several thousand Doukhobors refused military service and burned their firearms on June 29, 1895, to demonstrate their unconditional adherence to the Commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill”, Tsarist authorities launched a wave of persecution that almost decimated them. Assisted by their benefactor Leo N. Tolstoy and his colleagues, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and others, almost 8000 Doukhobors migrated to Canada between 1899 and 1905.

Settled on the Canadian prairies with assurances that they would be allowed to live according to their beliefs, the Doukhobors felt betrayed when Canadian authorities later demanded they swear the Oath of Allegiance and take out individual land titles. When most refused to comply, the government seized, without compensation, some 260,000 acres of land developed through communal effort. As a result, between 1908 and 1911, almost 6000 Doukhobors followed Peter V. Verigin to British Columbia, where they established the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood, the largest experiment in communal living ever attempted in North America.



Guided by Verigin and his slogan “Toil and Peaceful Life”, they built villages, sawmills, brick and jam factories, irrigation systems, roads and bridges, and cultivated crops, gardens and orchards. During its peak, the CCUB fulfilled the spiritual, social, cultural and material needs of its membership and had assets totalling several million dollars. However, the death of Peter V. Verigin in a mysterious train explosion in 1924, efforts by the government to assimilate the Doukhobors, the Great Depression, and depredations by fanatics and others undermined the CCUB.

Not even the dedicated efforts of P.V. Verigin’s son, Peter P. Verigin, chosen to succeed his father, were able to prevent foreclosure. So, in 1938, this inspirational leader organized the USCC, with a program of action focusing on youth, and left his followers guidance in letters, speeches, and the slogans: “Sons of Freedom Cannot Be Slaves of Corruption” and “The Welfare of the World is Not Worth the Life of One Child”.



In 1960, after a 32 year separation, John J. Verigin was reunited with his mother, Anna P. Markova, following her release from Siberian labour camps. Until her death in 1978, Anna Markova dedicated herself to USCC Children’s Sunday Schools and Ladies Organizations and is fondly remembered as a shining symbol of true Doukhobor dedication and faith.





Through John J. Verigin's efforts the Doukhobors have become better understood and their spiritual and cultural heritage has gained worldwide respect and recognition. Under his guidance the USCC has continued the Slavic tradition of hospitality, symbolized by the Bread, Salt and Water that grace all Doukhobor functions, and has become well known for its a cappella choirs with their message of peace and love. In recognition of his efforts to integrate the Doukhobors into Canada's multicultural mosaic, to promote better relations between Canada and Russia, and to focus on citizen diplomacy to build a better world, John J. Verigin has been awarded the Order of Canada, the Soviet Order of Peoples' Friendship, and the Order of British Columbia. He has accepted these honours in the name of the people he represents. John J. Verigin passed away on October 26, 2008. Following Doukhobor tradition of designating the leadership role the USCC membership expressed its unanimous wish to have his son, John J. Verigin, Jr., continue in the traditional role of Honorary Chairman. John Verigin, Jr. responded with an explanation that he would do his best to serve the people as they requested, as the Executive Director, a role he had been asked earlier to fulfill by the membership and had been serving for many years.

As Executive Director of an organization devoted to a way of life, or a life concept that has overcome persecution by church and state on two continents, withstood three centuries of stigmatization and misrepresentation, and is currently engaged in reconciling the differences that have historically divided Doukhobors living in Canada, Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine, it is my pleasure to welcome you into our Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ.



I hope you will find your membership rewarding as together we deepen our spiritual understanding, broaden our cultural perspectives, and strengthen our sense of community. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the many opportunities available to you for spiritual and cultural enlightenment. Perhaps your interests may be lie in working with others to create lessons, programs and opportunities for children, youth, adults, and elders. Maybe you are interested in the development of our organizational assets, to benefit our membership and the wider communities in which we live. Or you may wish to work with other people of good will to improve the human condition, to sustain the integrity of creation, and to contribute to the

construct of a more peaceful and just world locally and globally.

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of those on whose shoulders we now stand, our Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ has established mutually beneficial partnerships with many organizations spiritual and secular, with different levels of government, and with international organizations that can provide our membership with opportunities for personal and professional growth. We encourage you to contact me or our administration to make sure that your membership in our organizational family will indeed be enjoyable and fulfilling.

### **Doukhobors Today**

Today, recognizing that they live in a global village, USCC members are actively engaged, at home and abroad, in the nonviolent pursuit of peace, human rights, social justice, respect for the environment, and in the provision of aid to those in need. They commonly own facilities and heritage sites, administer and provide a wide range of services, and publish a bilingual journal. They are also stewards of properties which offer potential for a return to a lifestyle more consistent with their Doukhobor "Life Concept".

In 1995 the USCC, together with other Doukhobors and friends, commemorated the Centennial of their forebears' burning of firearms, and in 1999, marked the Centennial of their arrival in Canada. As they enter the new millennium, members of the USCC take pride in their history and heritage, and look to the future with optimism, confident that the power of love will triumph over the love of power