

Equipping Reliable Leaders in
Sound Doctrine
in

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NEWSITEMS

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*Serving Christ by equipping pastors,
teachers and lay leaders in Reformed,
Biblical doctrine in Central and
Eastern Europe and the former Soviet
Union*

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Winter Edition

HEARTS IN MISSIONS

*By Dr. R. David Ludwick, ITEM
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Ten years!!! Ten years almost to the day, when I made my first visit to the "lake effect" region of Michigan. Borculo, Byron Center, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Dutch Bingo, Rusk and Tea.

It was a delightful cross-cultural experience. I was being toured by Dr. and Mrs. George (and Harriet) Van Groningen. We stopped at Byron Center to meet with some folks. George spoke, telling the people about the need for sound theological education of the Reformed type! When he had finished, he turned to me, newly employed Executive Director and invited me to tell those gathered there about the organization and mission. I confess (again!) that I had never seen the files of the organization or had opportunity to discuss with those who had served before me. Christ for Russia (as it was then called) had its mission mandate. George knew this and that by God's grace we would not only exist but grow, that first year. I thank him again for it now. There were twelve people gathered there, each with their own agenda; most asked several questions, except the man sitting at the end of the row with his white beard and his arms crossed over his chest, looking very much like a Bruegel. His face was attentive, but serious, and his folded arms completed his image and caused an engaging picture. He raised his left hand and said, "David, how much do you want?" and with the twenty years of southern gentility experience that preceded this call, I thought "how consummately crude." Then I looked at his face again and it said, "my heart brought me here, now tell me what to do with it;" I had met one of the thousands of truly Dutch men, whose hearts are in missions.

Ten years. Hundreds of faces, but now the faces are those who joyfully share God's grace with others. They are the faces of those who are the beneficiaries of His generosity that have experienced first hand His grace in either the sending or the going, and which they would, otherwise, never have known.



A generosity expressed not merely in dollars but in the gifts given of time and heart. Invaluable gifts, the benefits of which can be and which are being passed down from generation to generation, as the shackles of communism increasingly fall off day by day. Professors come and teach the Truths of the Word of God to men and women who will become preachers and teachers respectively, and handling the Word of God in conscious reliance on it and its awesome power to transform lives and accomplish its purposes. It never returns void!

Ten years. Dutchmen, Germans, British, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Romanians, Siberians, Russians, and Hungarians, have all been exposed to the Truths of Scripture because of a single meeting just a few miles down the road from Borculo, Michigan. Because you are reading this article, I know that I am speaking to you. He makes no mistakes; His hand is not stayed in timidity. He is God and we claim His promises, not just for ourselves, but for those whom we serve, because we serve Him.

If I have been speaking to your heart and I have been, please respond with your heart. If your head only, then make His mission mandate the subject of your thoughts. If both, and I have, then respond with both!

But in any case please let us know who you are and what are your interests. We would like to share God's mission mandate to us with you or share yours with us.

How long, oh Lord?... not long!

David Ludwick, December 2006

THE DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY WILL NOT STAY OPEN FOREVER

By Andre Bouravnev, M.Div,
ITEM Media Director

This Christmas season we are delighted to know that for the most countries of the former Soviet Union are still open to the Gospel and theological education. ITEM has seen such tremendous growth in its 10+ years of existence and it has sought to make the most of the opportunities to theological education there. We are very thankful to the Lord Jesus Christ for allowing us to be used as a tool for setting up and supporting Christian schools providing sound biblical teaching and finances.

It is imperative, however, to recognize that the doors of opportunity most probably will not stay open forever. In fact, in several countries of the former Soviet Union it has already become increasingly more difficult for Christian missions both to work and to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Be mindful of the events that transpired there in the last decade and how it affects the Church in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe and our ministry.

History Bits

Russia was originally a pagan nation, but adopted Christianity under Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988. Russia's baptism laid the foundations for the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1448, the Council of the Russian higher clergy elevated Bishop Iona of Ryazan to the cathedra of the Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia, independently of Constantinople, making the Russian Orthodox Church autocephalous. Since then the Russian national identity was so deeply rooted in Orthodox Christianity that the Reformation was never able to fully reach and take its root in Russia.

The early years of the Soviet regime were particularly trying for the Church in Russia. A decree of 1918 separated the church from the state and school. As a result, all church organizations lost the powers of legal entity and the right to own property. Many church buildings and relics were destroyed. The Church also suffered atheistic infiltration as the newly uncovered KGB archives indicate: many bishops and high church officials were



The Warrior at the Crossroads, by a renowned Russian painter Victor Vasnetsov (1882). When Olga died in 962 her son Sviatoslav took the throne. She had begged him to accept Christianity and to follow her program of peaceful development. But Sviatoslav, like most other Kievites, continued to worship Perun and the other Slavic deities. He said he was afraid that if he accepted Christianity his soldiers would laugh at him.

commissioned agents of the state. Sadly, many of them remain in power even today.

In the late 1980s, with attempts launched to restructure the country's economic and political system, major changes were made in the relationship between the state and the Church in the hope of revival. The millennium of Christianity in Russia in 1988 was celebrated on a grand scale. 1,610 new religious communities, most of them of the Orthodox belief, were registered in the country that year.

In 1990, a series of laws were passed on the freedom of religion, under which many of the existing restrictions were removed from religious communities, allowing them to step up their activities.

Today

Religion plays a prominent role in the public and spiritual life of today's Russia. It always has. The culture is permeated with Christian sayings and aphorisms. For example, the word Sunday literally means "Resurrection" and "Thank You" in Russian is derived from an old phrase "May God Save You". After the fall of Communism the spiritual void in people's hearts needed to be filled. The social and political conditions, such as collapse of the Communist ideals, newly found freedoms of democracy and globalization, appealing Western lifestyle and ideas, including Western evangelicalism – all contributed to the openness to the Gospel and theological education. Russia was welcoming outsiders who could help them establish churches and teach them theology.

Yet this is no longer the case. Socially, Russia has moved further away from the Center of Europe and is now becoming a Moscow-centered system, just like in the imperial czarist Russia. Politically, it has become a power to reckon with again, especially

after Sep 11 and the oil crisis, which allowed Russia to gain power and influence it has not had since 1970's. Religious freedoms have been slowly but steadily restricted for all religious groups, except the Russian Orthodox Church, which is heavily favored by the state. For example, as of September 1, a new subject has been introduced in public schools, the Fundamentals of the Orthodox Culture, often taught by an Orthodox priest, yet Commission and other religious organizations can no longer work in public institutions, including schools, as before.

Some members of Russian Duma (Parliament) openly state that "sects are extremist groups which create mechanisms of psychological influence on people." They say that it is in the interest of national security to make laws stricter in the area of religious and non-profit activity. A recent law now impedes the foreign sponsorship of religious non-profit organizations and church groups. Literally this means that non-profits' bank accounts are now monitored by the state and must be independent from the Western influence. The work of foreign missionaries is getting more and more difficult. Fewer and fewer are able to get their religious worker visas. Some are being accused of being instigators or spies. Another law of 1997 dictates that a religious organization can legally register only after it has existed for 15 years. In many cases, the local authorities interpret this law in a very particular way that prohibits many legitimate organizations from registering. One prime example is the Salvation Army which is centrally registered with the Russian Federation, and yet in many regions it has not been permitted to function because it is viewed as a para-military organization. A recent addendum to the law of 1997 would even further restrict religious

freedoms and the work of missionaries, if it is signed into law.

But even socially, Western-style Christianity has become much less attractive. People are getting tired of easy believism coupled with little follow-up and discipleship. They need someone who is there to stay long haul and invest their lives in the culture. Commitment is the key word here.

Religious groups

The majority of Russia's population has no religious affiliation due to the antireligious ideology of the Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox Church has about 60 million adherents; the numbers have grown rapidly since the end of Soviet rule. There are also large communities of Old Believers, a group that broke with the Orthodox Church in the 17th cent. Other religions include other Christian churches, various sects of Islam, Lamaist Buddhism, Judaism, and neopaganism. Partly in reaction to proselytizing by Protestant evangelicals, Mormons, and others, a 1997 Russian law granted superior status to the Russian Orthodox Church (and other older Russian religions). Statistically, the majority of believers belong to the Orthodox Christian denomination. With nearly 5,000 religious associations and over 5,000 churches, the Russian Orthodox Church accounts for over a half of the total number registered in Russia. Next in numbers come Moslem associations, over 1,000, Baptists, 450, Seventh Day Adventists, 120, Evangelicals, 120, Old Believers, over 200, Roman Catholics, 200, Krishnaites, 68, Buddhists, 80, Judaists, 50, and Unified Evangelical Lutherans, 39. Some statisticians estimate the percentage of believers at 40 per cent of the entire Russian Federation. Close to 9,000 communities belonging to over 40 confessions had been officially registered in the country.

The nineteen million Muslims, the second largest religious community in Russia, have over 800 parishes and mosques. Buddhism is widespread in the Far East. The Russian Federation has 42 Jewish communities, with three synagogues in Moscow. The two million Protestants have 1,150 communities; of these about 60% is Charismatic. Around 15,000 religious organizations are currently active in Russia, although only less than two-

thirds of them are registered.

Protestants have gained the most churchgoers since the Iron Curtain fell and they remain the most faithful in attendance of all Russian believers.

Religious Freedom

Believers of Christian confessions other than the Russian Orthodox Church are increasingly discriminated against in Russia. There is also an increase in the negative attitude towards Muslims in Russia.

The government earmarks substantial sums to the Russian Orthodox Church while other confessions are denied financial aid. Money to build religious edifices is allocated from the federal and local budgets overwhelmingly to the Russian Orthodox Church. Today we see that the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church drives around in Mercedes and is provided with a federal security service at the expense of taxpayers. According to the constitution, Russia is a secular state, where all religious groups are equal before the law. Yet the rights of religious groups are regularly violated. The authorities frequently create obstacles for many of these groups to rent out or buy premises to practice their faith. Lately, visas have also been denied to an unusually large number of foreign religious representatives. There has been a tendency to forbid joint prayer with foreigners of the same confession. Only in the past few months, many foreign representatives of various confessions have been denied entry in Russia.

There is also an emerging sign of growing religious intolerance, Baptist churches and synagogues have been vandalized in Russia in recent years. Hate crimes increased and the country now numbers over 50,000 skinheads.

Open Still

Despite of all these reports and setbacks, Russia is still open to Christianity and theological education. The Russian culture holds education in highest esteem and that is precisely what Reformed faith and the mission of ITEM is about: equipping reliable Christian leaders in sound biblical doctrine – this requires high level of education,



The beautiful Orthodox Cathedrals in the Kremlin

theological depth, and long term commitment. It also lays a foundation for the future of the nation because we are investing into the lives of future Christian leaders who will apply it in their lives and will in turn teach others the biblical doctrines of truth.

God is at work in Russia just as He was a thousand years ago. He is involved in the culture with deepest Christian roots. God never fails to be present to His people, with or without our help. Yet, He invites us to join faithfully in His work that will bear its fruit in this generation and in generations to come.

Andre Bouravnev, December 2006

(In researching for this article the following sources were consulted: Library of Congress Country Studies, Open Book Systems, RussianEmbassy.org, www.christianitytoday.com., Nezavisimaya Gazeta., news.bbc.co.uk: country profiles, washingtonpost.com.)

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WHAT DOES AN AVERAGE RUSSIAN STUDENT BELIEVE?

By Andre Bouravnev, M.Div,
ITEM Media Director

While not so long ago atheism seemed to dominate the population, today Russian students are free to choose. One can see various street preachers next to higher educational establishments, such as Mun's sect followers, Moscow's Church of Christ or Krishnaites. They are not welcome anymore on the premises of universities, in lecturing halls themselves, though a Russian Orthodox priest is a welcomed guest lecturer.

Since the Moscow State University (MSU) is the largest and most prestigious university in the country, it is indicative of other institutions of higher education in Russia. It is also under much higher pressure from various religious groups who make a special effort to reach MSU students. Moscow's Church of Christ used to be especially active and, in recent years, the Mun's sect followers: you can hardly find a student who hasn't been approached. The Russian Orthodox Church doesn't ignore the University either. The Orthodox hierarchs visit the University regularly, theological conferences are held on the premises, and the course of lectures by an Orthodox priest at the faculty of Philosophy is constantly held with filled auditoriums.

Many polls ignore the fact that religious views are still in the state of development in the new Russian society, and often are quite syncretistic. The society is permeated by religious superstitious beliefs and a wild mixture of Western and Eastern philosophy. One can believe in the Trinity and in reincarnation at the same time. Many polls offer a limited list of religious preferences: atheist, Orthodox, Muslim, Jew or "other". Such polls show the number of the Russian Orthodox at 80%, which is unrealistic, since it considers "ethnographic" believers.

A recent poll on religious beliefs at MSU revealed a motley crew: Muslims, Roman Catholics, Monophysites, Baptists, followers of Church of Christ, Old Believers, pagans and even Satanists. 24% of the students

consider themselves Orthodox. 25% are supportive of Russian Orthodoxy. 5-10% are atheists and 25-30% classified themselves as theists. 70% believe in the immortal human soul and 62% believe in the Resurrection of Christ, though only half of them believed in the resurrection of the dead before the Day of Judgment.

As a result one can conclude that the students are highly religious but their actual church involvement and regular attendance puts the total number at only about 6%. However even that doesn't prove the "extent" of their religiosity. For many, church is not a part of their daily life, and is remembered only during Lent, Easter, and Christmas. One interesting fact is that the number of smokers in those who identified themselves as Christians irregularly attending church and the rest of the students is the same and very high. They are also more superstitious, atheists or theists alike. And practicing Christians are virtually all non-smokers and are not superstitious.

On the whole the poll shows that among MSU students Orthodox missionary activities cause the greatest response. Most of the students converted during their student years.

It is not a coincidence that every tenth Orthodox priest in Moscow is a graduate of the Moscow State University. What are the Christians of the Reformed confession to say to that? Are we not called to make disciples of all nations and teach them the truths of God's Word?

Russia is and has been very religious, but the quality of Christianity depends on church outreach, missionary work and solid biblical teaching.

Andre Bouravnev, December 2006

(Article based on the recent poll conducted by Vladimir Truchin at MSU.)



Moscow State University

10 YEARS OF GROWTH

By Dr. R. David Ludwick, ITEM
President

It has been an exciting year, while we sustained ten years of growth; this past year has seen the maturing of our supporters.

As with many 501C3 Organizations, ITEM meets the need, the mission mandate, and the giving plans of many individuals. Its unique approach to theology and education gave it opportunity to be one of the first to provide a reformed theological education to the pastors, teachers, lay leaders of the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Numerous models have been tried and tested, but in most instances they have returned to a broad proclamation of the Word. Believing this in principle to be a directional shift and to be unscriptural, we are attempting to re-double our efforts to equip those who are not Reformed with Reformed theological teaching.

As we search for opportunities to grow in number we also search for administrative talent to organize and operate any given school and to provide faculty commensurate to its needs.

As we function in countries formally communistic, and now nationalistic, we find more competition from newly established organizations, whose sole purpose is to do exactly what we are doing! It is thereby depleting the pool of professors in America going to teach and there-by depleting the pool of resources to support them and depleting the pool of students there because they will attend different institutions where they may receive short-term course work, stipends as well as transport and accommodation.

Dr. R. David Ludwick, December 2006

ITEM is moving as of January 1, 2007
After nearly 10 years of occupying offices at Twin Oaks Church, ITEM's main office will reside at: Ste 150, 12015 Manchester Rd. St Louis MO 63131. Mailing address remains the same: P.O. Box 31456 St Louis MO 63131 Our telephone number will remain: (314) 691-0169.

Also, a new addition, Ms. Rebekah Hager, Coordinator of Logistics; Andre Bouravnev, M. Div, continues on as the Media Director; and Margie Hansen as the Book Keeper.