

STRATEGY FOR REACHING RUSSIANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

12/1/04

PROFILE OF RUSSIANS

General Background

Though somewhat of a misnomer, the designation of “Russian” as a national entity and the language as a cross-cultural ministry vehicle, can be easily confused.

Russians, precisely, are those people derived from the nation of Russia, the largest geographic nation on earth almost twice the size of the United States and extending almost halfway around the world. Formerly, for 70 years under the communist hegemony, it was the center of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with 15 affiliate republics. In 1991, with the collapse of communism and the assertion of nationalism in each of these states, Russia was left standing alone with its 150 million or so inhabitants and sorting out its own civil order.

Because of the dominant position of the USSR throughout the 20th century, many of these nations were acculturated into Russian-language educational systems that extended not only throughout the USSR, but into aspiring communist nations of the world, such as Cuba, and revolutionary newly independent countries in Africa, and among intellectuals who sought political harbor in communism. Therefore, the Russian language for many years had great political and cultural priority. Perhaps 200 million people still use the Russian language as either first or second form of expression.

Because of the breakup of the Soviet Union, many of the republics have reverted to their indigenous languages. Only Belarus and Russia still officially use Russian. However, 17 million Ukrainians, and 8 million Kazaks, and varying numbers over one million from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova still indicate that Russian is their first language.

It needs to be remembered also that not all people in Russia are ethnic Russians—only 81% are, and there are many inhabitants in Russia whose first language may not be Russians. On the other hand, many Russians have migrated to these other nations and now are identified as citizens elsewhere. Further more, the nations of the Warsaw pact in Eastern Europe, though not part of the USSR, frequently used Russian as a means of communication.

Therefore, the story of Russian migration becomes more complex in the light of this reality.

Immigration Patterns

North America has long had a history of Russian migration. Alaska, it ought to be remembered, part of Russia throughout the 18th and part of the 19th century, until “Seward’s Folly” turned it over to U.S. sovereignty. All along the coastline of British Columbia and Alaska are the remnants of Russian influence, including the prominent Russian Orthodox religion marked by chapels and churches.

However, there have been three major immigrations since that time. At the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917, many Russians escaped the convulsing changes in their society by moving across Eastern Europe to the West, many of these settling in the Eastern seaboard cities and Chicago. A second migration was again caused by serious social dislocation resulting from the Second World War. Russia, at that time, had aligned itself with the Allied nations and so the military convergences brought together the Western nations into uneasy contact. Subsequent to the War, Russia’s land grab of the Eastern European nations resulted in many displaced people, especially Russian Jews and Mennonites who fled to the West in large numbers.

Many of these came to the United States and Canada.

In the 1980s, further migrations took place, this time, less for political asylum and more for economic advantage, though the steady stream of Russian Jews continued. Since the collapse of communism, the trickle continues and there perhaps currently one million Russian-speakers in the United States and perhaps as many as five million people who claim Russian ancestry.

Recent Religious History

In 1988, the U.S. opened her “golden doors” to Soviet Evangelicals, other Christian groups, Jews, and Armenians who desired to leave the Soviet Union. Since then, hundreds of thousands of refugees have come to North American shores; most coming in the last ten years.

About 80% of the refugees have been Jews. A great majority applied to leave because of mounting anti-Semitism. In the restructuring of the country, the Jews were neither a part of the former Soviet Union nor the new republics. They were not considered Russian or Jew. Many have resettled in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Because the Soviet Jew has been cut off from religious training, most know little about Scripture, God and Jewish rituals. Many are spiritually hungry and open to learning about God and reading the Old Testament.

Other Russians have come to reunite with family and are looking for opportunity in their new homeland. They are educated and desire educational opportunities. Many are ready to enter the American workplace.

The largest concentration of Russian-speaking people is in New York City where almost 200,000 have been identified. Other lesser concentrations are in San Francisco (20,000), Chicago (12,000), and Philadelphia (14,000). Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, New Jersey and Washington State, all have substantial communities.

The Church of the Nazarene began its missionary enterprise to Russia and the CIS states after the fall of communism. Currently there are ministries in five of these nations, with a growing presence in Russia itself. Because of the late incursion of the Church into these countries, there has not been a history of Nazarene Russian leadership already developed for ministries in North America. This may change as Russians and Russian speakers are now being evangelized in their homelands. The fact that most Russian immigrants come already religiously committed as Jews, Mennonites and Russian Orthodox, makes it difficult to access evangelical faith because of the pull of social and familial communities with long religious traditions. Yet in most of these instances, there are poorly defined understandings of the faith which is more energized by culture than by personal choice.

Currently, there are only two ministries of the Church of the Nazarene to Russian-speaking people. These are in Chicago and Northeastern Indiana. It is noteworthy that where the mass of Russians live, in New York City, there are no Russian ministries.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Russians

General Suggestions:

Recognize the diversity of Russian and Russian-speaking peoples, realizing that their histories and reasons for migration vary depending on time frames, place of origin and political settings.

Understand that, in many instances, the history is one of rejection, displacement and alienation not only from the country of origin but also within the new country which historically has felt great awkwardness and even a lack of hospitality to those coming from an “enemy” nation. Many came hoping for a welcome only to find hostility and prejudice from uninformed hosts.

Realize that many Russians and Russian-speakers have come from controlled societies and often from rural contexts where, to confront urban and consumer societies is overwhelming. In their state of confusion, there has been not only great opportunities to be manipulated, but also to manipulate for survival reasons.

Give high recognition to the international contributions that the Russians have made to the world as a great world-class culture, offering literature, music, ballet, and high arts to the world, despite censorship and isolation. The language itself is one of the most nuanced and elegant languages.

Acknowledge the great heroism of many immigrants who have stood up to persecution and journeyed under extraordinary circumstance to find freedom and hope. Their stories need to be told to the larger North American audience.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE DISTRICT IS TO:

- Consult with our Nazarene Russian leadership, and express support for the existing ministries, perhaps with financial support for literature development. Disperse the Nazarene publication in Russian entitled, What is a Nazarene? by Wes Tracy and Stan Ingersol. The denominational Manual is also translated in reduced form for use.
- Plan a strategy for the city and region of New York City where there are such large concentrations of Russian-speaking people and no Nazarene witness.
- Send “Work and Witness” teams to Moscow and the Ukraine to facilitate and excite encouragement to minister to local Russian-speaking people.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:

- Get acquainted with community personnel of Russian backgrounds. Discover if they have assimilated or desire to do so. Seek to find what they need to make that assimilation complete without abandoned their historic cultures. Use them as “bridge-builders” to more recent generations of immigrants.
- Locate Russian communities and institutions in the area. Learn something about their histories and context.
- Celebrate their festivities, both national and cultural.
- Avoid political discussions about old national enmities both between the West and the USSR and between the former Soviet Republics and Eastern European nations. Listen carefully to what their aspirations are, always seeking to find an entrée for ministry.
- Organize ESL classes and Bible studies that especially invite Russian speakers. Because many Russians many be bi- or tri-lingual, use them as bridge-builders to more recent immigrants.
- Open up local church facilities to Russian religious and cultural events. Get to know the local Russian Orthodox priest and express interest without intention in the local Russian population.
- Pray that there may be genuine reconciliation between formerly hostile parties where there may be lingering hurts and suspicions. As a citizen of the host nation, offer a spirit of service and humility.
- Seek opportunities to bring non-Nazarene Russians into contact with Nazarenes to further create imagination and leverage for what can be rather than what is.
- Identify and meet practical needs of the Russian-speaking population with food, clothing, medical service.
- Seek to connect with international Russian-speaking students both those who are North American and those who have immigrated to North America.