

RUSSIA

By David Wilson

The most unlikely place for an open-air ministry to develop and continue would be Russia. An open door for missions in Russia developed after the fall of the old Soviet Union. Now, with new repression and a seeming return to the cold war, that door may be closing, except perhaps for Russians themselves to minister. The timing of pioneering a branch in Russia could only have been from God. Here's the story on how that all happened.

In 2002, I sponsored three young men to come from Russia to join our seminar at Kiev Christian University (a Bible college) in Ukraine. One of them was David Gabrielyan. From the very first open-air meeting, he felt God's call to frontline evangelism. David went back to Russia to complete his studies at Bible school.

He began preaching in the open air and training church teams and in 2003 was accepted onto OAC staff. We held our first meeting together in the Volga River area, where college-age people were drinking and dancing. David played music from the Titanic movie and translated while I preached on eternity using the Titanic story. Although they had been taught atheism and communism for about half their lives, many quietly gathered and listened as the Gospel was unfolded. Russia has the second-highest suicide rate in the world. There was tremendous interest and openness to the message of Christ, and most of them asked for New Testaments. Then a man dressed in black asked David to come with him and speak privately. The man turned out to be a member of the mafia, and he demanded money, threatening to break all our equipment and hurt us if we did not pay. "Everybody who does something here pays," he said. We didn't pay, but later found other places to preach where the mafia was not in control, like at a detention school, orphanage, young people's hangouts, etc. Everywhere we went they wanted us to come back.

In 2004, I made a second trip to Russia, but this time in the winter. The temperature was 4 degrees F (-20



DAVID WILSON PREACHING IN A RUSSIAN CHURCH



DAVID GABRIELIAN PREACHING IN ANAPA



DAVID GABRIELIAN IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL

Centigrade), plus a wind chill. David was driving an old, borrowed Russian car. The roads were sheets of ice and the car often had to follow in the tracks of the trolley buses. Each morning, the gear lever had to be pumped back and forth to free the frozen oil, the heater didn't work, the windshield wipers would freeze on the windshield at night if left on the glass, and the brakes were leaking fluid. But, none of these things stopped David from doing his ministry.

We went out to the country where we stayed in a home. There was no running water, a wood fire was burning continuously to keep us warm, and fish were caught through holes cut into the ice. The 85-year-old church where I preached had been taken over by the KGB during the communist era, and some of the church members were taken away, never to be seen again. Church members told me how they would meet at midnight and be baptized in the forest after breaking the ice on the river. The church, however, grew under the persecution and there were no hypocrites. Now, they went out with David in the summer for open-air evangelism. We held film meetings and preached inside the Cultural Center, which was once used to indoctrinate people in communism. The director of the center lit a fire, and people trudged through the snow to come. There was great interest in the Gospel, and they took our literature. A local pastor was with us. Although religion was not permitted in public schools, doors opened for us to show Christian films on the danger of drugs. The students always applauded the message we preached at the end. We also went to orphanages and a school for the deaf. The children didn't want us to leave, but when we had to go, they gladly helped push our car out of a snowdrift. God confirmed that this ministry would work, both in the winter and in the summer.

In 2005, David Gabrielyan, along with the Baptist Union, helped OAC register with the government as "Worldwide Proclamation," as the words "Open Air Campaigners" would not translate. God also provided a Volkswagen van for the ministry.

David and I preached together each summer in the open air with church teams. In Smolensk, people gathered in Lenin Square to hear us proclaim Christ, which 15 years before would have put us in prison. Sometimes, people cried as God's Word went forth. All listened well except the "skinheads" who came and



MISHA AND DAVID GABRIELYAN



COUNSELING AFTER AN OPEN-AIR MEETING



DAVID GABRIELYAN PREACHING BY THE SEA

cursed me to my face as I preached. Our team could not believe how well I took their insults, not realizing I didn't understand a word!

In one park, college-aged people gathered to drink at night, and about 100 watched at 10 p.m. as David preached a message in blacklight. Our church team witnessed to them until about midnight. The police came to check us out and were amazed at what they saw. They welcomed us to stay as long as we liked. Even in old-age homes, with people who had spent up to 70 years of their lives under communism, some wept when they heard of God's love and His free gift of salvation.

David was led to go to the Black Sea for outreaches, where many tourists came from the North each summer. People swam in the warm, salty water, sunbathed on the beaches, and walked at night on the promenades and streets closed to traffic. Immediately, they gathered to watch a sketchboard message. Most knew nothing about the Bible. At one beach, the crowd gathered and thought they were hearing a recent report from a Russian city when I preached on the Prodigal Son. This timeless story, told by Christ, is still relevant today because human nature has not changed, nor has the way of salvation. Many asked for New Testaments. Local pastors and Christians worked alongside us.

David Gabrielyan reported, "I just returned from a mission trip to a little town in the Moscow area. During three days with the local Baptist church, we organized film meetings in a Culture Center built under communism for indoctrinating people in the community. I arrived there, put up posters, and distributed fliers. God made a miracle. On the first day, we had 100 people, and in the next two days, we had 250. The video projector worked perfectly. After each film, I preached a sketchboard message. Also, by God's grace, the director of a local college allowed me to show films to her students about drugs and morality. After the films, I preached gospel messages."

David found Mikhail Tsvirinko and trained him. Soon, he joined our staff, and the base for OAC was moved from near Moscow to the Black Sea where he lived. In one park where young people in their late teens and early twenties had gathered to drink, we walked in and set up our sketchboard and blacklight. Soon, all came and were listening to the Good News. They were very open, and when we walked in again the following week, some shouted "Hello, David!" One girl, who had gone to church when she was younger, had been drawn away by the drinking youth, cried in repentance. Two



MISHA PREACHING



PRISON MINISTRY TO THE LADIES



PRISON MINISTRY TO MEN

Christian brothers from a nearby church promised to return every week to follow up. The same thing happened in other parks, where even blaring rock music was turned off so Mikhail could preach! God was clearly showing us that now was the time to reach Russia, while hearts were still open to Him.

Sadly, David Gabrielyan felt led to leave OAC, but he continues on in another ministry that receives mission teams from the US. From time-to-time he arranges for Mikhail to help him with these teams as they do evangelism in new places. Graciously, David agreed to be our Board Chairman, and so he still has a vital part in OAC Russia. Mikhail continues on faithfully and has even taken church teams above the Arctic Circle for ministry in prisons.

One day, while I was visiting Mikhail, I went to a park alone to pray. A young man came and sat down on the bench beside me. He could not speak English, and in one minute, I had exhausted all my Russian. I could see that he had a spiritual need and was not on drugs or alcohol. How could I communicate God's wonderful plan of salvation to him without an interpreter? Then I remembered my 3x5 index sketchboard message cards in Russian that I used when preaching. Taking one out, I pointed to the word in Russian at the top of the card: FAITH. He read it aloud. Then I pointed to the opposite word on the bottom: LIES. He nodded. After communism failed, many were promised prosperity, but the reverse happened to the majority. Then I pointed to HOPE at the top and FEAR at the bottom, pausing to give him time to ponder. Then LOVE and EMPTINESS. I could see tears welling up in his eyes, as he read those words aloud. Then I pointed to GOD at the top in the center, and the picture of the cross bridging the gap between sinful man and the holy God. Finally, I pointed to the two hearts showing our choice; one to be filled with sin and SELF, or the other to have pardon and be filled with the risen CHRIST. He began to cry. Turning to me, he looked into my eyes and then hugged me, kissing me on both cheeks, as Russians do. We sat for a few more minutes as he stared at the message and as I kept saying 'Praise God' in Russian. Then he asked me if he could keep the card, thanked me many times, shook my hand firmly, and walked slowly away holding the message card. Truly, a divine appointment! Alone again on the bench in prayer, I thought of how many Russians are like this man ...seeking but never finding unless someone shows them the Good News of Salvation... and that is the ministry of OAC.



CANADIAN MISSION TEAM WITH CHIP WELTON