

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING...

Story and Photos by Keith McGregor.

...to Christ!

Calvary Chapel Old Bridge in New Jersey, pastored by Lloyd Pulley, sent their youth team for the third summer of youth missions. Youth pastor Keith McGregor felt as if he were journeying into Sodom on this recent mission trip to Russia.

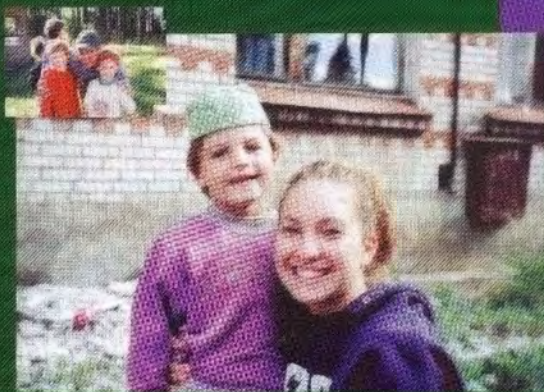
This team, with prayer and support from their fellowship in New Jersey, would bring the light of the Gospel to some of the youngest citizens of the country. Orphanage number nine in Viritzza, close to St. Petersburg, was their destination.

"A dismal sense of hopelessness surrounded us," he recalled. Evidence of the people's defeat and fear could be seen in the wrought iron bars protecting the windows of every home and business. Despair blanketed a nation recovering from the material and spiritual poverty which resulted from years of Communist rule.

Gospel for Russia, a ministry founded by Alex Ertel*, had coordinated the trip for the team of high school students and their group leaders. For twelve days, they would be delivering a Bible school program to the young residents of the orphanage. Horizon Christian Fellowship and a group of translators from Pushkin joined efforts with the Old Bridge youth group. It was also exciting for the team to see former Russian exchange students Natasha and

Kate, who had become Christians while in Old Bridge.

They were joined by the preschool children for dinner that first night. The team instantly fell in love with the little ones and desired to serve them in a tangible way.



"So with the cold of winter approaching, they realized that the children were in desperate need of shoes, and we asked the teachers for sizes." The teachers responded by tracing each child's foot on a piece of paper. Within a week, the team had purchased shoes for all the children.

During the Bible school, the Gospel was presented through craft lessons, Bible stories, worship music, and games.

"The greatest thing for me was to watch the children praise the Lord through the music," related 15-year-old Jill Chimenti. "I was really thankful that the language barrier was not a big problem."

One girl, Nastya, told of two adults who had deceived her with candy

and flowers. They wanted her to lead them to her mother, who was immediately arrested for drug use. Nastya was informed that she would be going to the orphanage.

"The Lord has touched my heart with these kids," Dave Lawrence, 17, shared. "I thought that I had a rough year, but after I heard what they had been through; that really hit me."

During the evenings, the team went out into the village. Since it did not get dark until around midnight, they had more opportunities to reach out to the young people in the town. Camp fires attracted many teens who joined in singing worship songs. Some responded with great interest to the Gospel. The youth team shared the love of Christ by listening to those who wanted to talk.



"One boy from the village, Vova, was moved to attend the

Bible school program for the rest of the mission, accepted Jesus, was baptized and continues to stay in touch by e-mail," says Keith. "Please pray for him."

Seizing every opportunity to serve, the teens used the afternoons to do renovations. Desperately needing a fresh look, the dining hall was painted. Youth team member





Will Lecorchick created his own work of art to replace an old painting. The group also

added sparkle to the weathered playground equipment with a fresh coat of paint.

"God has shown me through this trip that I'm so selfish," says Marissa Franz, a high school senior.

"I have so much, but yet it's never enough. These kids in Russia had nothing, but what they did have, they wanted to give away. They didn't think of themselves as poor."

One powerful display of God's hand involved a break-in that occurred while the group attended a baptism with Horizon Christian Fellowship in Pushkin. Some boys, knowing the group would be away, broke into the room where all of the supplies, equipment, and even the children's new shoes were kept. Miraculously, nothing was taken!



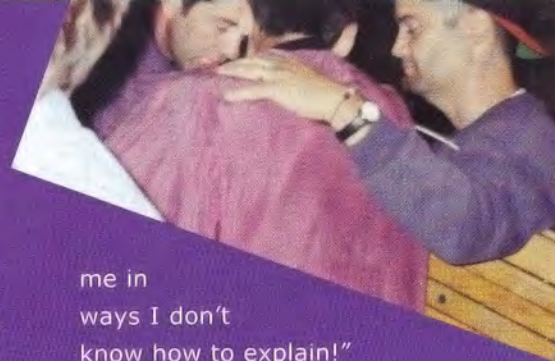
The director of the orphanage, an atheist, was clearly amazed, and agreed saying, "Indeed the Lord did protect you, Russian thieves leave nothing behind". Horizon continues to share the love of Jesus with this man.

Before departing, the group prepared gifts for all of the children in the orphanage. Backpacks were stuffed with Russian Bibles, bracelets, bubbles, toys, toothbrushes, candy, socks, and underwear. The love and prayers of everyone on the team went with the children as well. "I wish I could get into a suitcase and go with you," said one of the teachers, perfectly expressing the intensity of their new friendships.

"I was so sad as I sat and watched the children receive their gifts," said Barbara Dwyer, 15. "Then this little Russian girl named Marina told me through a translator, 'Barbara, don't be sad. I prayed for you last night that you would be all right. Don't cry! I know I will see you again because God told me.'" This was such an encouragement for Barbara, since she is praying about returning for the entire summer next year.

Easing the pain of saying goodbye, was the knowledge that many had given their lives to Christ and now held His hope in their hearts.

In consideration of their powerful experience, some of the members of the team shared their thoughts: "This was a trip of a lifetime," said Dave Lawrence. "It has impacted



me in ways I don't know how to explain!"

Taking the truth of Jesus Christ and the promise of salvation to those who have never heard this news is transforming. "We're believing His word that says, 'He who has begun a good work in you will be faithful to complete it,'" says Keith.

High school sophomore, Mike Casey discovered that it "actually felt like I was living the words of James when he said, 'True religion is this: to visit widows and orphans in their distress.'"



Marissa Franz made this humble discovery: "I realized that my desire was

to be more like them! It's ironic to think that I went to Russia planning to change the lives of others, when in reality, my life was the one that was changed!"

*For the summer of 2000, groups may contact Alex Ertel, who is the founder of Gospel for Russia (GFR). Funded by Calvary Chapel Old Bridge (NJ), the ministry is primarily dedicated to the translation of Pastor Chuck Smith's teaching tapes into the Russian language. There are plenty of opportunities for the mission-minded.

TO REACH/SUPPORT THIS MISSION

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