

Rooted in CHRIST in RUSSIA

Story by Carmel Palmer
Photos by Pavel Mayorov

Calvary Chapel Vladimir began in 1992 with a team of missionaries led by Jeff and Christina Fadness of CC Downey, CA. Eighteen years later, CC Vladimir is led by Russians and has planted six churches. The fellowship continues to proclaim the Gospel and host an annual leaders conference in Vladimir, a small city 100 miles east of Moscow.

On Pasha Baranov's first visit to church in 1992, "He was a punk kid with a live rat poking out of his leather jacket," remembered Jeff Fadness, who had just relocated his family from California to Vladimir to plant a church. As Jeff, Bible in hand, looked out over the handful of Russians gathered to hear him expound God's Word, he realized he had options. He could say, "Get out—no rats in here." Or, according to 1 Thessalonians 2:7b, he could be "gentle among you [them], just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children." He chose to accept Pasha.

Pasha's first encounter with Christians had been a few weeks prior, when he saw a flier on the ground. In broken Russian, it announced a concert. Hoping to clear his head of what he called his "miserable situation" and recent run-ins with police, Pasha headed over. The event was hosted by a team from CC Downey. "The music was all right," Pasha reflected, "but the Gospel got my heart."



Pastor Pasha

The Soviet Union's collapse had opened Russia for evangelism, and the summer team had come

to prepare Vladimir for the new church plant. As the Fadnesses stood on their hotel steps waving good-bye to this group, Jeff and Christina looked at each other. "We were thinking, *What do we do now?*" Jeff remembered. "We didn't know the language; we didn't know anything." Over the following months, while preaching sermons to their few attendees and attempting to start a Bible study in their hotel lobby, the couple often questioned whether God wanted them there. Yet Jeff also saw how ministry experiences in California, from leading Bible studies to teaching junior high, had prepared him. Three weeks before departure, disquieted by the thought of pastoring in a foreign land and caring for his three children overseas, Jeff felt prompted to read 1 Thessalonians 2. There he discovered the family's operating instructions for Russia: the exhortation to gentleness that inspired him to welcome Pasha—in spite of his pet rat.

Strengthening Leaders

Seventeen years later, this past November, 300 Russian pastors and church leaders gathered near Vladimir. After a year apart, pressured by challenges spiritual and political, they had returned to the Vladimir Regional Conference. Some had traveled



More than 300 pastors and leaders worship together at the 12th annual Vladimir Regional Conference in November 2009.



During praise and prayer time, Pastor Pasha Baranov, left, of CC Vladimir translates as Pastor Craig Hall of CC Fortuna, CA, encourages Pastor Ilya Korshunov, right, of CC Sobinka.



During a return visit, Pastor Jeff Fadness, right, of CC Pocatello, ID, laughs with old friend Pastor Igor Tarasov of CC Kovrov. Jeff and his wife began CC Vladimir in 1992.



As they study the Books of 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, conference attendees enjoy the teaching of both Russians and Americans.

days in the winter's first snow to attend, but their joy at being together was unmistakable. "The conference takes a lot of preparation," said Pasha—today the senior pastor of CC Vladimir, the host church. "But when the family gathers, it's great to see all the faces, familiar and new."

The conference grew from a retreat Jeff conducted at a hotel for about 20 Bible College students. Attendees eventually filled every bed and ate in shifts in the cafeteria; Pasha recently moved the event to a new facility, which is already overflowing. Along with worship, prayer, fellowship, and breakout sessions, participants conquer a book of the

Bible during the conference's four days. Jeff said that the impact on isolated evangelical pastors is tremendous, adding, "It's like a tank of gas to get you through the next year."

A Russian Church Takes Root

A year after CC Vladimir's beginning, more missionaries had joined the Fadnesses and the team sensed that the fellowship was strong. Jeff approached several Russian men in whom he saw character and leadership traits about planting churches in nearby cities. One man felt called to Murom, a large town two hours from Vladimir. There CC Vladimir initiated what would become their church-planting strategy—after establishing



Pastors Maxim Gorbunov of CC Omsk and Anatoly Luzhin of CC Aleksandrov pray.

contact with the area's local authorities, they advertised a free outreach event. Then each Sunday for months, they sent Russian believers to evangelize on the streets. Before long, the fellowship in Murom was growing. By 2002, CC Vladimir had planted six churches in nearby towns.

The missionary team, however, consistently battled the perception that CC Vladimir was an "American church." U.S.-Russian political relations impacted everyone, and tense times such as the Kosovo crisis brought challenges. Church windows were smashed with rocks, and local newspapers claimed the missionaries were spies. Once, a new law almost closed the church. The Westerners were eager to see Russian leadership emerge.

Passing the Mantle

After 12 years in Vladimir, Jeff was invited to pastor CC Pocatello, ID, in 2004. The Fadnesses had only two months in Russia to transition; but with multiple successors in mind, Jeff was sure finding a Russian pastor would be easy. When both men he had considered turned him down, he panicked and prayed.

A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 16:9

Then Jeff remembered Samuel's search for a successor to Israel's throne. "God rejected all the promising candidates, then pointed toward David—this unknown kid in the field," Jeff said. "That's how it transpired for me. I was looking for someone like Eliab [1 Samuel 16:6-13], and all along, there was Pasha." Passionate from the beginning, Pasha had grown in experience and godliness. During his mandatory military service, he read his Bible daily and, with free time too scarce to allow walking, sometimes jogged the distance from base to take communion. Many noticed his new faith, from the sergeants who secretly questioned him about the Scriptures to fellow soldiers he invited to outreaches. When he brought an entire platoon to an evangelistic event, many accepted Christ. Once out of the military, Pasha devoted more time to ministry—leading youth, doing church building maintenance, translating Jeff's sermons. He married Lena, who also attended CC Vladimir and had come to Christ a few months after he had. Jeff remembered when Pasha had pointed to the leadership qualities in 1 Timothy 2 and said, "I want to be that man."

Jeff asked Pasha. He answered after a few weeks of prayer, saying, "I can't do this; I'm not ready to do it—but I can't not do it." In this response, Jeff saw the humble shepherd



Calvary Chapel Vladimir emphasizes teaching God's Word to children as well as their parents. Above, youngsters enjoy a skit.

CC Vladimir needed. At Pasha's ordination at the Vladimir Regional Conference, the other pastors prayed and laid hands on Pasha, his wife Lena, and their two children. They then gave them the charge from 1 Timothy 2 that Pasha had pointed to years before. One of the regular conference speakers, Pastor Craig Hall of CC Fortuna, CA, felt deep emotion as he watched church leadership pass from American to Russian. "I don't cry a lot," said Craig, "but I teared up when I heard the announcement."

Recently, Jeff pulled out a worn manila envelope stuffed with many years of prayers. Stumbling upon one from May 1992, he stared in amazement. It said, "Lord, send us a guy who can show us the ropes of the city, become my interpreter, then pastor the church." Pasha was its exact answer.



The conference gives Yulia Ivankova, left, and a friend from another church opportunity to fellowship.



Kids dance during Sunday school at CC Vladimir, where they participate in various activities that illustrate Bible lessons.



Tatiana Schigaryova helps Olessia Hudaidatova with her craft.

Carrying the Torch

Pasha's role did come with challenges. Restrictions have tightened over the last five years, making it increasingly difficult to share the Gospel in public places. The traditional church warns Russians against evangelicals, and Islam is growing rapidly. Yet Pasha holds hope—hearing of regions where openness to Christ is growing. He dreams of taking the Gospel to all areas of Russia where it hasn't been preached clearly. "It's heavy on my heart to evangelize more, to make some noise," he said. "A whole generation hasn't heard the truth."

CC Vladimir continues to partner with Americans, including summer teams from CC Fortuna. Pastor Craig said sports evangelism is powerful among young men, whose opposition to the Gospel softens after friendships are forged during an intense game. The teams also evangelize door-to-door in villages near Vladimir. On one trip, Craig, his 16-year-old son Riley, and Sasha, a translator from CC Vladimir, slogged through rain carrying stacks of Bibles. They were turned down more than 30 times and were near giving up when someone finally took a Bible. Encouraged, they persevered. They then met Anna, an older woman walking to the post office, and told her about Jesus. Beaming, she prayed to receive Him.



At the conference, Pastor Dave Gonzales, right, of CC Cerritos, CA, prays for a Russian sister in Christ while Sasha Stepanov of CC Vladimir interprets.

Afterward she said that, though she had been reluctant to leave her house that day, God had brought her there to meet them.

Pasha said his greatest joy as a pastor is his congregation's love and unity. One member is Ksusha, who, like Pasha, encountered CC Vladimir as a teenager through an outreach concert. Quickly becoming involved at the fellowship, "I met people who loved God and loved me. It was very special for me," Ksusha said. "People served me and invited me to their homes. I saw Jesus' love in them, and I wanted to know Jesus more," she continued. Hungry to know the Bible better, Ksusha attended nearly every church gathering and began serving in several ministries. Within a few years, she attended CC Vladimir's Bible College and then became a missionary in another church plant. Ksusha is currently thrilled to be back in Vladimir, serving as the church secretary. "I'm so happy to work for God in this family," she added.

Craig was struck by the believers' unity during the last conference. After sessions ended at 9:30 p.m., he was invited from room to room to drink tea with the Russians—who routinely fellowshiped past midnight and still punctually attended 7 a.m. sessions. As Craig entered each room, someone automatically began interpreting for him. There

among his Russian brothers, Craig sat in awe of what God had done. Two decades ago, the Gospel was nearly unknown in the region. Now he sat among followers of Christ eager to proclaim Him in their nation. 🙌

CC Vladimir's Bible College, which operated for three years during the 1990s, reopened in January. The church also recently sent out their first international missionary. She serves in Nairobi, Kenya.



The city of Vladimir is in eastern Russia.

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