

Russia:

Challenges for Prayer:

Russia is a proud nation with a great legacy, but it remains a mystery and a contradiction. Some see a bleak future, others a resurgent Russia. Some regard the last decade or two as an economic disaster; others see growth and strength. For centuries, it was systematically plundered by those who held sway, from the Tsars to the Communists to the oligarchs. Most Russians still see a grim outlook. For the nostalgic older generation, the stability of life under the Communists is preferred; for the younger generation, modern life offers little real hope. Pray especially for the following long-term cultural issues:

a) Demographics reveal a civilization caught in a deadly decline. Russia's population drops by over 500,000 each year. Such a rapid numerical decline spells certain doom for populations unable to reverse the trend. Russia's birthrate is among the lowest in the world; even generous incentives to produce children are not effective. Conversely, Russia's abortion rate remains one of the world's highest. Figures indicate more abortions than live births, with an alarmingly high number also resulting in the mother's death.

b) Health issues are spiraling to crisis level. Health care is inefficient, underfunded and costly, making it inaccessible to many – just when it is most urgently needed:

i The alcoholism rate in Russia is one of the world's highest. Increased incidences of disease, homicide and suicide can in large part be attributed to the low prices and wide availability of cheap, illegal and often poisonous vodka; Russia sells over 2 billion liters each year.

ii Drug addiction controls the lives of as many as 2.5 million people. The government claimed at one point that 8% of teens used drugs daily. The increased prevalence of hard drugs has led to mafia involvement and control. Ministry to drug addicts is a fruitful area for Christians – and a necessary one.

iii Russia has Europe's highest and fastest-rising rate of HIV/AIDS. This, combined with tuberculosis, raises mortality rates and drastically reduces life expectancy. HIV claims mostly young people, further robbing Russia of its future.

c) Russian nationalism and its outworking. Strong nationalistic sentiment has existed for centuries, from religious Orthodox Russia to the Soviet era to the modern day. But complex 21st Century trends seem to be leading to irrevocable troubles.

i Racist nationalism is increasing. Nazi-style expressions are growing more popular among Russian Slavs as an expression of identity and "patriotism". This has led to more powerful, far-right political groups, but also thugs against visible minorities and immigrants.

Such racist attacks increased by 30% in 2008 alone, forcing the president to take measures to address this issue.

ii Nationalism in foreign policy and Russification internally, reasserted under Putin's leadership, often led to belligerence, particularly in Chechnya and other Caucasus regions. Pray for good relations with foreign powers and with minority republics within the Russian Federations.

d) Minority groups from within the former Soviet Union face exploitation and rejection by the very ones who colonized them through Russian imperialism and then Communism.

Millions of Central Asian immigrants work in Russian cities, most of them undocumented and uncounted in census figures. The great irony is that without these workers, the Russian economy would violently contract; and without massive-scale immigration in the future, Russia may become a pale shadow of its former self.

The government faces many daunting tasks, present and future. Lift up to the Lord the many threats facing Russia.

a) Pray for political wisdom. Russia is prone to authoritarian rule and admits that in the current climate good governance is more important than democracy and personal freedoms. Current and forecasted troubles would further erode freedoms and entrench a centralized power. Pray for the balancing of strong government with democratic accountability and respect of basic freedoms.

b) Economic stability is threatened by hopelessly inadequate infrastructures – both physical and

legal/financial – including disappearing investment, a huge budget deficit and dwindling cash reserves. The struggles of millions with poverty and general hopelessness raises to alarming heights crime, drug abuse, alcoholism, family breakdown and suicide. Yet, vast natural resources and potential for greater output hold much promise. Pray for wise fiscal policies and for the long-term vision and strength to follow through on them.

c) *Corruption must be rooted out.* The power of oligarchs is being reined in, but criminal networks remain highly influential at home and abroad. They cripple honest business initiative and subvert the bureaucracy. There is no chance of change for the better without confronting these dark forces, a war that will require immense resolve and courage.

The current religious climate of Russia is mixed, both spiritually open and closed at the same time. Orthodoxy is culturally strong yet spiritually weak in the lives of most of its followers. Millions call themselves Russian Orthodox without actually believing in God. Current gloom has not led to high degrees of spirituality, and the surge of religious activity in the 1990s has all but stalled. Cults and sects, both Eastern and Western, and belief in the paranormal are common. Pray that the Russian peoples' hearts will be hungry for and open to promptings of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Christ.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) survived Communism and remains the one major symbol of Russian identity. It regards itself as the preserver of Christian civilization handed down from Rome and Byzantium. Its liturgy and teachings continue to mould Russian culture. The number of openly professing Orthodox increased from 30 million in 1985 to 87 million in 2010 (up to 100 million in some sources). The Church is using every possible means to regain its exclusive spiritual dominance lost nearly a century ago. Pray for:

a) *An emphasis on the many positive elements* of this ancient confession – foremost among them are the beauty and greatness of God, the mystery of Christ and His resurrection. Protestants can learn much from Orthodox theology.

b) *An end to the ROC's intolerance*, which is instead increasing thus far in the 21st Century. The ROC's claims – as the one true apostolic Church and that all other Christian expressions are invalid or sectarian – stimulates repression and bigotry. Inflexibility and heavy-handedness often characterize the ROC's relationship with other groups and even with its own constituents. The ROC is complicit in the laws passed and implemented that discriminate against other Christian groups.

c) *True spiritual life.* The ROC claims to speak for all Russians, and the majority of ethnic Russians confess some sort of affiliation, but only 6-10% are actively involved. Factors contributing to this lack of involvement include Church leaders cozying up to and collaborating with the state, poor education of church leaders, lack of unity (both within the ROC and without) and sincerity, and neglect of the younger generation's unique spiritual needs. Pray for leadership that will address all these issues in a biblical manner.

d) *Renewal movements within the ROC.* Traditionalists are the more powerful but are increasingly out of touch, clinging to a Slavonic Church liturgy which few understand, and grasping for political power. The reformers are often marginalized but are more Bible focused, open for change and tolerant. Pray that future leaders may come from this more spiritual movement.

The windows of opportunity for open ministry and religious freedom appear to be closing. The excesses and insensitivities of Western ministries in the 1990s, the new vigor of Russian nationalism and the entrenched influence of the Orthodox Church have combined to see laws passed that can be (and are being) used to slowly squeeze out foreign agencies and workers and to discriminate against other faiths. Russian evangelicals claim these complex laws (registering congregations and organizations, building codes) are being used capriciously – or even systematically – to make life as difficult as possible for them. Laws requiring educational licenses to conduct instruction are being misused to stop Bible teaching on the academic and even the informal level. Pray that such prejudice will only serve to strengthen the resolve and dependence on God for all who suffer. Pray that those who seek to thwart God's work will instead see it prosper and grow.

Evangelicals in Russia are in a time of both growth and pressure. Times have changed from the euphoria of the 1990s; in places such as St. Petersburg, non-Orthodox church attendance plateaued and may even be declining. The Church is settling in for the long haul as a small but significant minority. Much prayer is needed for:

a) Growth, which has occurred, but not consistently. Evangelicals have trebled since 1991, a feat all the more impressive given overall population decline. Some large charismatic mega churches that started in the 1990s now have more than 4,000 in attendance; other congregations remain stuck in Communist-era survival mode. Since 1991, the number of congregations for some Christian networks has multiplied 30-fold. Pray for sustainable, balanced growth that matches quality with quantity.

b) Evangelical culture. With aggressive ingress in the 1990s, Western evangelists were often culturally insensitive and imported forms and styles harmful to shaping a mature Russian evangelicalism. Some groups remain unregistered; others prefer to cooperate with and even influence the government. Some reject Western forms of worship and practice; others take what they like and leave the rest. Some are traditionalist and conservative, others ambitiously progressive and modern. Pray that Church leaders might have the wisdom to guide Russia's evangelicals into becoming truly Russian, while remaining truly biblical.

c) Church unity, deliberately targeted by Communists in the past and even by the government and Orthodox Church today. Tensions remain between Baptists and renewalists, and between old-school Pentecostals and newer charismatics. While church networks – such as RUECB (Baptist), OTsKhVE (classical Pentecostal), ROSKyVeP and SKhVEP (Pentecostal/charismatic) and ACCR (charismatic) – join many thousands of congregations among them, there is still no effective national-level body drawing together all Russian evangelicals. Pray for a Russian Evangelical Alliance, for the regional interdenominational committees and for the National Prayer Breakfast, all of which can play key roles in uniting believers.

d) The decline of the more-traditional Protestant groups, which had been rapid, especially since 1991. Many of the evangelical population under Communism were ethnically German – now most Mennonites, many Lutherans and Baptists have emigrated to Germany. These more historic denominations held more respect from the Orthodox establishment, but their potential impact as a bridge disintegrated along with their plummeting numbers. Pray that those who remain would regain a heart for the Russian nation and its people and work toward the salvation thereof.

Christian leaders, who are few in number, must rise to many great challenges. Lack of training in the past, need for funding today and loss of many pastors and educators through emigration contribute to this lack of leaders. The role of foreigners will be highly limited; solutions must come from within Russia. Pray for these needs:

a) Biblical leadership patterns need to be instilled. Authoritarian leadership styles, a legacy of Russia's past, sadly shape how most Russian pastors operate today. This is particularly difficult because women make up the large majority of churchgoers, men have a much lower life expectancy and too few pastors have an extensive theological education. Christian Women in Partnership is a joint venture that prepares women to be effective in ministry.

b) Discipleship patterns are sorely inadequate. Many churches across all evangelical groups are filled with younger folk. But most of these come from non-Christian backgrounds and need grounding in Scripture and a Christian worldview. Systematic Bible study and expository preaching are rare. Cell-based Bible study groups are one key solution; pray for their multiplication.

c) Theological education is crucial. Hundreds of theological institutions have formed since 1991, from discipleship schools up to seminaries. Pray for the Euro-Asian Accreditation Association that seeks to ensure high standards in the more academic institutions. Theological education needs to be indigenized and to address the issues relevant to Russia's unique situation.

d) TEE is an equally important training tool. SEAN (Study by Extension for All Nations) has a very extensive nationwide TEE program under the guidance of the Open Russian Theological Academy. To assist the thousands of pastors and preachers with minimal theological education, many denominational and interdenominational networks are embracing SEAN. Bible Education by Extension (BEE) and Emmaus Bible College and others have TEE courses used throughout the country.

Pray for a vision for outreach. Many churches, especially newer groups, have ambitious goals for evangelism and church planting – locally, regionally and nationally. Pray that this new spirit of faith and expectancy will result in great fruit from the effective proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. Pray for:

a) Church planting. Thousands more churches need to be planted; 90% of Russians still have no meaningful link to any kind of church – Orthodox, Protestant or otherwise. There is one Protestant church for every 18,000 people in Russia, and 42 of Russia's 125 largest cities had no evangelical church as of 2009. The NT Church of Perm – which meets in what was once Lenin's Palace of Culture – planted 300 daughter churches from 1991 to 2009 and aimed to plant 100 more in 2009 alone. The goal of Russian Baptists, together with SGA, is to see a Bible-preaching church accessible to each of Russia's 100,000 communities.

b) A vision for social transformation and activism. Newer churches and younger people in particular are engaging with many needs of society – ministry to the poor, to widows and orphans, to those in prison, to those with HIV/AIDS and to drug addicts. Such ministry is also winning evangelicals a better name with the government and opening doors for collaboration with the Orthodox Church. Pray for the passion, the funding and the people to be sufficient in order to see a powerful gospel impact in this way.

c) An indigenous, trans-denominational network to emerge. Most of the larger groups have an admirable desire to plant new congregations; getting them to work together would be a true answer to prayer. There needs to be initiative and funding for research and publicity as well as envisioning for Russian believers.

d) Missions mobilization. For years, Russian culture and language dominated while those of ethnic minorities were suppressed. Nearly 20% of the population are non-Russian and speak 100 languages. Pray for a mission vision in the Russian Church, and for the ability to bridge the cultural and social barriers Russian missionaries face; the legacy of imperialistic Tsars, Russian Orthodoxy and Communists puts them at a disadvantage. Ukrainians are more active than Russians in cross-cultural outreach in Russia. Pray for the launching of many more Russian mission agencies.

Expatriate ministry in Russia did not earn a good name for itself with the enthusiastic but often ill-judged activities in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some estimate over 1,500 missions and church-based agencies launched into ministry with little coordination. Insensitivities, short-termism, importation of foreign cultural forms and ecclesiastical empire-building offset much of the good that was achieved. Since then, the government is squeezing out foreign mission presence through legal changes and visa regulations. It is difficult, but not impossible, to maintain a long-term presence as a Christian worker. Foreign believers can still have a strategic impact through short-term visits to teach, train and help set up locally run ministries. Pray for missionaries and agencies to model networking and cooperative fellowship as well as to humbly assist the national Church to fulfill its own purpose. Pray also for the international partnerships focused on the major ethnic minorities for Bible translation, outreach and other ministry.

Nationwide ministry challenges in special need of prayer include:

a) The uneven growth of evangelicals. Moscow and St. Petersburg hold only 10% of the population but command a much greater share of mission activity, ministry and resources. This is to the neglect of the smaller and more remote cities and towns.

b) Students and young people. Hopelessness prevails in the attitude of most of Putin's generation, who grew up in a context of rapid change, widespread corruption, plummeting health and creeping despair. Over 3.5 million study in 50 universities and over 850 higher education institutes. Various international student agencies work with networks of Christian groups on campuses, despite regulations limiting their activities. Pray for ministry to young people that impacts them on intellectual, emotional and spiritual levels; CCX(IFES), CCCI, YFC as well as increasing student ministry from Russian churches – these reach out to students and young people.

c) Children. There are more than 800,000 orphans in Russia; many more live in broken families. There are over one million street children (some claim many more). These are at

high risk of abuse. Many turn to extreme violence and crime. The CoMission for Children at Risk is a network of 218 groups involved in ministry to children; pray that their ministry and that of local Russian congregations would reach many.

d) Prisoners. Over 825,000 are incarcerated, one of the world's highest rates of imprisonment. TB, AIDS and drug addiction each claim tens of thousands of lives. Pray for more ministries to reach this most needy – and responsive – group.

e) New religionists. Some claim massive followings, despite often intense persecution. Their false teachings not only inoculate Russians against the truth but can also raise the ire of the Orthodox Church and government against all foreign groups. Scientology is found all over the Russian Federation. The JW's now claim 290,000. Theosophy, esoterism, parapsychology, the occult, shamanism and others exert influence over many. Pray that Christians may be trained and armed with the Word of God to combat these false beliefs and to win those ensnared. The Center for Apologetics Research helps pastors and churches with training and literature.

Unreached peoples. There are 78 ethnic minorities considered unreached, totaling over 13 million in population. (See the different ethnic republics below.) Most expatriates and even Russian ministries focus on reaching ethnic Russians. Moscow operates as the centre of the former Soviet world, and nearly every ethnicity from the fSU can be found there. Most of these ethnicities are more accessible and open away from their home location and cultural setting. Pray for effective partnering and viable strategies to plant churches among them.

a) Muslims number over 17 million and account for the majority of non-Russians in the Russian Federation. Their growth and the ethnic-Russian decline could make Muslims a majority in Russia by the end of the 21st Century. The largest groups are Tatars (5.5 million) and Bashkirs (1.6 million), but there are also many Central Asians and peoples of the Caucasus. Undocumented and often illegal, millions of Central Asians live as temporary workers in Russia. Pray for openness to the gospel on the part of Muslims, and a loving and sensitive passion for their salvation on the part of Christians in Russia.

i Radicalization of Islam. While only around 20% (at most) of Muslims faithfully practice Islam, the radicalization of Muslims in Russia accelerated due to the Chechen war and foreign Islamist influences. Russian military belligerence in the south and the equation of Christianity to Russian imperialism make witness to these peoples difficult for practical, cultural and spiritual reasons.

ii Conversions to Christianity. Some reports claim up to two million Muslims converting to Orthodoxy. This is seen as a reaction of horrified Muslims to terrorist atrocities, such as the Beslan massacre, and consists of mostly nominal Muslims in the Caucasus region. Protestant missionary effort is limited but sees fruit among the peoples of the Caucasus.

b) Several widely dispersed peoples need prayer:

i The Jews once numbered over two million, but are now reduced to one-eighth of this. Emigration to Israel continues, but there are important concentrations in European Russian cities. Significant numbers – over 10,000 – have come to Christ, and a large proportion of Messianic Jews in Israel are of recent Russian or Ukrainian origin. However, pockets of Georgian, Tat and Hill Jews in the Caucasus region are still unreached. The Jewish Autonomous Oblast in Far East Russia only has a few thousand Jews remaining, but there is outreach to them.

ii The Romani (Gypsy) live scattered over European Russia with many in the Urals; they are significantly Christianized but also heavily marginalized. Some areas see an awakening and churches planted. About 5% of Russian Gypsies are evangelical.

iii The Chinese number over 50,000 in Moscow alone and over one million nationally, including temporary migrant workers in Siberia and the Russian Far East. They are largely unevangelized, though a few dozen small churches exist. Russian attitudes toward Chinese are poor, but Chinese in China and abroad have a growing heart to reach these unappreciated workers who are essential to Asiatic Russia's economy.

c) The 16.5 million Russians of the “near abroad”. The collapse of the USSR left many as ethnic minorities in the 15 new states formed, where they are often resented. Their status and future are far from secure. Nearly 20 million Russians emigrated back to the Russian Federation in the last 25 years – often with few possessions. Pray that many among them might be receptive to the gospel and in turn gain a burden for the non-Christian peoples among whom they lived.

Christian support ministries for prayer include:

a) Bible distribution. The Bible Society of Russia (BSR), reestablished in 1992, works to ensure that all people can read the Scripture in a language they understand. It prints one million books annually, most of these being Bibles or other forms of Scripture, which are distributed from their four centers.

b) Bible translation is an ongoing challenge. IBT, started in Sweden in 1973, is the main agency working on translation into the minority languages in the fSU. They oversee around 100 translation projects, publishing several new translations of the Bible or NT each year. The transforming effect of Scripture in the languages of minority groups is often astonishing. Pray for the personnel, for competent native language speakers, for finances and for the freedom to complete this daunting task.

c) Christian literature. There are now several Christian publishers – MIRT and Triad are two large ones. Printing, distribution and sales are immense challenges due to Russia's size and economic crisis. Narnia Centre produces titles focused on children and young people. Pray for effective cooperation in literature strategies.

d) MAF-USA entered Russia in 1992 and from its base in Moscow developed an unusual service – logistics, warehousing of Christian materials for 70 organizations, Internet/IT services for Christian organizations and distance learning. They are now moving into mission aviation in Siberia. This was possible only after finding Russian nationals to act as pilots; foreigners are not allowed to fly as pilots in Russia.

e) The JESUS film has been extensively shown on TV, film and video. It is available in 31 languages.

f) Christian radio played an honored role in evangelism and encouragement of Christians during Communist rule. But today, less than 1% of cities in Russia have a local Christian radio station. New Life Radio, Christian Radio for Russia and Radio Theos are examples of Russians taking the lead in providing Christian media. IIR/TV, **FEBC**, **TWR**, **IBRA**, **WCB** and World Harvest Radio are all foreign-based ministries broadcasting into Russia in 17 languages. A wealth of Christian radio for the languages of Russia is available via satellite and the Internet. Pray that those whose hearts are open might find these broadcasts.