

Chapter 33

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 this country 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. I traveled to Russia to continue training him. 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



DAVID WILSON PREACHING IN A RUSSIAN CHURCH



DAVID GABRIELIAN PREACHING IN ANAPA



DAVID GABRIELIAN IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL

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 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



MISHA & DAVID GABRIELIAN



COUNSELING AFTER AN OPEN-AIR MEETING



DAVID GABRIELIAN PREACHING BY THE SEA

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 on one occasion 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.



MISHA PREACHING

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



PRISON MINISTRY TO THE LADIES

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 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!



PRISON MINISTRY TO MEN

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."

The Lord led David to find a godly man named Mikhail Tsvirinko. He trained him to do effective open-air evangelism, and in 2006, Mikhail joined our staff, and the base for OAC was moved from near Moscow to the Black Sea where Mikhail 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 Christian brothers from a nearby church promised to return every



CANADIAN MISSION TEAM WITH CHIP WELTON

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.

Eventually, Mikhail was called by his church to be their pastor, and in Russia, one doesn't disobey the elders of a church. But in God's providence, Mikhail met Konstantin, and they became involved in open-air ministry together. God used this partnership to change the direction of Konstantin's life and preserve the ministry of OAC in Russia. In 2021, the leadership of our ministry in this country was handed over to Konstantine. Here is his testimony.

My name is Konstantin. I am forty-five years old. My parents were completely blind. From the very childhood I understood, that we need to help them and other people. This greatly influenced my character. My mother was a Siberian Tatar, this is the northernmost people professing Islam.

My father was Russian. I grew up at the intersection of two cultures. I remember in my childhood my mother's sister came to us, she watched on me, and then she said that with such a character I should be a Muslim priest. Yes, I've become a priest, but only a Christian evangelist.

My father was very fond of reading [both parents have now died]. Next to our house was a library, where there were books with the braille script for the blind. The love of reading was passed on to me as well. And I couldn't sleep if I didn't read something. At age of 28, I started reading the New Testament like a simple book. I wondered, why this book influenced history so much. There was no one who preached gospel to me, but God touched my heart anyway. I prayed to accept Jesus into my heart as Lord and Savior, and after that my life began to change. And I found the Baptist Church.

My first desire was to tell people about Christ. My heart was just on fire. But I realized I did not have enough knowledge. At the age of 30, in 2005, I entered the West Siberian Bible College at the Faculty of Theology, graduated after three years and received a bachelor's degree in theology. In college, I met my future wife, who was studying to be a children's Sunday school teacher. She, like me was burning with the gospel, and ready to tell everyone about Christ. We love talking about Christ to unbelievers. Now I am happy that I can do this every day. 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!'

Konstantin now lives with his family near the Black Sea, but he travels far and wide as he preaches in the open air, schools, libraries, senior citizens' homes, orphanages, prisons, etc. The Lord has led him to use a unique method to get crowds to listen to the gospel. By using large pictures of the works of famous artists, people are immediately attracted to hear him tell stories about these pictures. They are all based on the Bible, like the Prodigal Son. After his picture presentation, he then goes to his sketchboard and preaches. This has opened doors that were closed to us in the past. Even the Orthodox priests who opposed us now invite him to speak to their people. He has even been interviewed on TV. So, God has raised up His servant to reach the unreached that we could not reach.

Please pray for Konstantin and his wife, Svetlana, who was also trained to use the sketchboard by Uli Hofius from OAC Germany.



