

Oppression has lasting impact in Eastern Europe

Gary Ross’ description of his region’s spiritual climate sounds like standing between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.”

The rock is the dregs of Communist rule, which programmed people to believe there is no God. The emerging hard place is post-modernism, pulling younger Europeans toward perceived happiness by way of money, sex and success.

Ross and his wife, Kimber, served in Russia for six years before being unexpectedly sent out of the country in early 2014. They’re spending a year in Finland, working with a minority group of Russian-speakers so that they can keep up their language skills, and help strengthen churches and leaders in Helsinki.

Their temporary home is generally more open and modern than Russia, Gary said, and people more freely talk about spiritual things. But, “God is not relevant in many peoples’ lives. The focus is on doing whatever pleases yourself, or whatever makes you feel like a good person.

“In fact, I have noticed in other Eastern European countries that the longer they have been removed from communism, the more modern they have become. And the more modern they have become, the more ‘post-modern’ they have become—caring less and less about spiritual things.”

In Finland, the Rosses are developing leaders in local churches that can share their faith and lead their own small groups. When the family returns to Russia, they’ll be going back to a country that lies outside Eastern Europe’s “Bible Belt.” In that region stretching across Ukraine and Moldova, Baptists exist in



We serve in ... Europe

The diverse eastern portion of the continent can’t be easily generalized or stereotyped, said missionary Gary Ross, who grew up in Belleville and currently serves in Finland.

great numbers, Gary said, and healthy churches are sending out their own missionaries to Russian-speaking countries.

But outside the belt, “the people are very closed,” he said. “...They are generally reluctant to listen to strangers and their ideas. If you are able to enter their tight circle of friends, they are very warm and friendly and loyal. They will also be more open to your faith and anything you say about the Bible.

“But it often takes years to really achieve that level of trust with this culture.”

Pray for missionaries like the Rosses who are standing in the gap, between the rock and the hard place.

— Meredith Flynn

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE, UM,...



When Jesus described his kingdom, he compared it to a hidden treasure, a mustard seed, and a farmer whose good crop was being sabotaged by ruthless plowboys and would finally be sorted out at harvest time. His kingdom was “at hand,” here and now, but also beginning to break into the current reality.

Explaining God’s kingdom was tough enough back then, but how much more today among people who have never lived in a kingdom, or under the rule of a

king. (The closest we have in America is the “Magic Kingdom” headed by a mouse and his girlfriend.)

People who have lived under sovereign, even autocratic, rule may have a better understanding of how truly amazing it is to have a new king set up shop in their warring and decaying society, and bring with him the promise of peace, blessing, and salvation.

Then to see that promise fulfilled, what a day that will be.

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT... THE KINGDOM

Read Article 9 of *The Baptist Faith & Message (2000)*, “The Kingdom,” at IBSA.org/B101.

Every generation probably feels this way, but it seems the pressure to compartmentalize one’s faith keeps reaching new heights. We see it in the temporary suspension of a Christian reality TV star after he expresses his views on same-sex marriage. We see it in the calls for Christian politicians to leave their faith out of their policy-making. And maybe you’ve personally experienced the pressure to keep “what happens on Sunday morning” out of your work environment.

Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper said it this way, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

Though the world wishes it weren’t so, the Kingdom of God can’t be turned off with a switch or pushed back with legislation or confined by zoning laws. It knows no state or national boundaries. It’s not just for some types of people. And best of all, it is a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:28).

And yet, even though the Kingdom is good news, sometimes you and I can look upon our world and

work was to look out at the campus and to declare to God that it all belonged to Him. Yes, it often felt like enemy territory, but when I reminded myself that it was already His, I found a boldness to say and do the things that would push back the darkness.

That’s why *The BF&M* reminds us “to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come.” Indeed it has come, but we pray and labor as ambassadors, calling our friends and neighbors to awaken to the truth that Christ is King, and of His kingdom there is no end.

May we not forget how Matthew often described Jesus’ message as “the gospel of the kingdom.” This Good News is not just a message about personal salvation or Christ’s authority. It is also a declaration that those who submit to Christ as King are adopted into an eternal family living under His rule and care. For the younger generation fragmented and isolated by politics and technology, this is an increasingly important aspect of the gospel.

As basic Christian views of morality and ethics are pushed to the fringes of society, younger believers are all the more eager to embrace the broadest possible view of the Kingdom. Let’s celebrate the “big tent” of the Kingdom, while allowing documents like *The BF&M* to facilitate efficient mission work among like-minded churches.

Chase Abner is IBSA’s Collegiate Evangelism Strategist.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

(Hebrews 12:28-29, HCSB)

But that’s the thing... What happens at our church services is a celebration of a King whose kingdom knows no bounds. What we sing and talk about with our churches isn’t just true amidst that gathering of people and it most certainly isn’t confined to that building we sometimes call “church.” The Kingdom of God, in one sense, includes all that exists. David said, “The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord” (Psalm 24:1).

wonder just where the King is and what He’s doing. There’s still sickness. Lives are broken. Sin is being normalized in our communities. And sadly, our churches are often growing smaller. Yes, it’s easy to question God in those instances, but maybe we need to spend more time questioning ourselves. Are we really living like Jesus is our King?

When I served as a campus minister at SIU Carbondale, one of the things that kept me focused on my

CONSIDER THIS For personal study or group discussion

- 1 What current events make you struggle most with the idea that God is King of all the earth?
- 2 What do you think would be the most noticeable change in your community if all your neighbors came to know Jesus as King?
- 3 Which Bible verse is most helpful to you when you need courage to labor for the Kingdom in the face of opposition?



Faith forgotten?

Of **800 million**

Europeans, nearly **99%** do not have a personal relationship with Jesus.

In the region that gave rise to "Christendom," **80** people groups are still unreached and unengaged with the gospel.

Low church attendance is a major indicator of decline in Western Europe.

52% of people in Britain claim to be Christians, but only **1.4%** attend church weekly.

Germany: **1.2%** France: **0.9%**



In Eastern and Central Europe, some leaders sense a reawakening toward Christianity, evidenced by a return to traditional marriage and family values.[†]

In Russia, the number of adults who identify as Orthodox Christians rose from **31%** to **72%** between 1991 and 2008.

And the percentage of those who don't identify with a religion fell from **61%** to **18%**

Still, the number of regular church attenders is only **7%**

Through the **Cooperative Program**, the International Mission Board sends missionaries to strengthen and start churches in Europe, **so that the gospel is shared there.**

CP WORKS

Sources: IMB.org, Pew Research, *First Things*,[†] "Empty Churches: The Decline of Cultural Christianity in the West" by Kyle Beshears.

WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT

EVERY ONE A MISSIONARY

Woman's Missionary Union began 125 years ago as an "auxiliary," or helper, to the agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention. It became the world's largest Protestant missions organization for women, leading them to pray fervently for missionaries, advocate for their support, and find their own place in the missions cause.

By many accounts, though, WMU's beginning was a rocky one. It was officially established in 1888, after several years of debate about the role of women in Southern Baptist ministry. Men meeting that year for the Southern Baptist Convention at Richmond's First Baptist Church were reportedly tense as the women met at a nearby Methodist church.

"The attitude of many there might be expressed in the words of one pastor who, suffering the same uneasiness, said he always felt it safer to attend the women's meetings, as 'You never could tell what the women might take to praying for if left alone,'" wrote author Ethlene Boone Cox. "...Some predicted the women would follow other women's organizations and control their own money, send out their own missionaries, desire to serve on the Board, and, in the end, seek to run the Convention."

But the idea wasn't to interfere with the current work of the SBC, ladies had said at a previous meeting to discuss the formation of a central women's committee. Rather, they wanted "to be more efficient in collecting money and disseminating information on mission subjects."

More than 100 years later, WMU is a leading resource for missions education materials, particularly age-graded curriculum for kids and stu-



Illinois WMU Director **Carmen Halsey** (left) has led women and students on two recent mission trips to the Dominican Republic.

dents. The ministry, localized in church, associational and statewide groups, has grown to include a publishing house and a fair trade retail business that supports impoverished women across the world.

Perhaps WMU's greatest contribution has been helping women—and by extension, their families—step outside of their normal lives in order to answer the Great Commission given by Jesus to his followers. Wrote historian Patricia Hill about the interdenominational women's foreign mission movement of the 19th century: "Through their work for missions, women gained confidence in their ability to function competently outside the confines of a narrowly defined domestic sphere. And they were assured that the world needed them."

Then, and now.

—Meredith Flynn

Think about it:

1. When have you moved outside of your normal routine for a mission project or trip? What challenges and benefits did you experience?
2. In which ministries in your church do you see the concept of partnership at work?

ILLINOIS IN SIGHT

Local associations take missions lead

The organizers of the first Baptist association in America, established in 1707, couldn't have known networks of churches would still be fulfilling their vision today. But they are. Southern Baptist churches working in geography-based associations—including 34 in Illinois—do more together to share the good news about Jesus than they could do apart.



Bob Dyer (left) poses with a fellow missions volunteer and several English students at Sibirska School in Presov, Slovakia.

Take Three Rivers Baptist Association. Headquartered in Shorewood, the group of northern Illinois churches is eight years into a missions partnership in Slovakia. They exemplify the spirit of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, established mainly for the survival of small churches, wrote Frank Lay in a series of articles marking the association's 300th anniversary.

"During the second half of the 18th century...the Philadelphia association began appealing for the churches to cooperate in fulfilling the Great Commission," Lay wrote. "Through cooperation, the association could accomplish what

no single church could do alone."

Today, many associations elect a moderator to help govern annual or semi-annual meetings. Some are led by a director of missions (DOM) and a team of volunteer ministry coordinators.

Three Rivers' Slovakia partnership started when a group from the association attended a meeting hosted by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board in 2006. There, they learned that Eastern Slovakia had no Southern Baptist missions personnel working there.

"It was like electricity ran through the room when they began to share that need," said Bob Dyer, Three Rivers' point person for the partnership. Six churches in the association have participated in mission trips to Slovakia since 2007.

Mission teams have held conversational English classes in a library and in schools, and volunteers look for other opportunities to talk to Slovaks over coffee, on walks, or at a cookout. In the seventh year of their partnership, Three Rivers saw the first two baptisms to come out of the ministry.

The association, led by DOM Dan Eddington, also serves as the International Mission Board's "virtual strategy coordinator" for Eastern Slovakia, meaning they not only facilitate their own mission teams, but also help involve Slovak Christians and others in the U.S. in a strategy to reach the country.

Because together, we can do more—here, and everywhere.



mission illinois

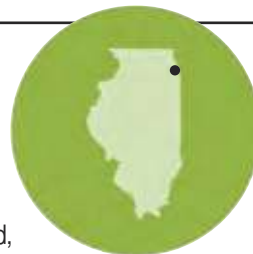
Pray for a new church

Location: Burbank, Oak Lawn & Lombard

Focus: Arabic-speakers in Chicagoland

Characteristics: Single homes and apartment complexes

Pray: For friendships to begin and grow so the gospel is shared, and for Arabic-speaking church planters.



— From the IBSA Church Planting Team

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ABOUT B-101

This is a 20-part study on the basic beliefs and missions of our denomination. It is designed for new believers, new Baptists, and those who want a refresher. Clip it out of the newspaper, fold into a four-page leaflet, and share with the people who would benefit from the information. You might even lead a study.

B-101 can be used for:

- **New members classes**
- **Study on missions in Illinois and around the world**
- **Exploration of doctrines in *The Baptist Faith & Message***

Make as many photocopies as you need for study groups, church members, and worship attenders. Or download the PDFs at www.IBSA.org/B101.

Produced by the editors of the *Illinois Baptist*: Eric Reed, Meredith Flynn, Lisa Sergent. Designed by Kris Kell.

Look for B-101 in every issue!

What are you doing on Wednesday nights?

This is the 11th in our 20-part series. That means more than half the essays on *The Baptist Faith & Message* are ready for use in a new members class, small group, or doctrine study. Look online and download the set. We've bundled them for easy printing and distribution.

By the way: If you need copies of *The BF&M (2000)*, they can be downloaded too, or IBSA will provide them for your new study group.

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