

Siberia: gospel work in Novosibirsk

With temperatures typically down to -30 C in the winter and around +30 C in the summer, the city of Novosibirsk, located in the centre of Siberia, certainly enjoys an extreme climate.

But such temperatures are not the only extremity in the city. There are places of extreme poverty and physical need right next to million dollar villas and four-wheel drive Toyota Landcruisers and, despite a nominal Russian Orthodoxy, there is also an unimaginable need for the gospel of Jesus Christ to touch and transform lives in the city.

Theology and integrity

As an OM (Operation Mobilisation) team we work with the Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches in and around Novosibirsk. These churches have sound theology and leaders of great integrity, but have greatly suffered in their 101-year history in the city from two major problems.

The *first* of these problems is, of course, well known — it was the state persecution of the church and individual Christians from the 1930s until *perestroika* in 1990. Of course, during these years the level of persecution had periods of greater and lesser intensity, but the fact that it took place over such a long time meant that it seriously affected not only the Church's ability to evangelise, but also meant that whole generations of Christians were not able to receive any kind of higher education, whether secular, biblical or theological.

Christians leaving

The *second* problem is much less widely known, but has seriously affected and damaged the Church from the time of *perestroika* until the present day. This problem is emigration — Christians leaving Novosibirsk and their churches for a more comfortable life in either Germany or the USA. Although the general population of the city has not been reduced by this phenomena, for a number of reasons the number of Christians has significantly fallen, by as much as 50% in some

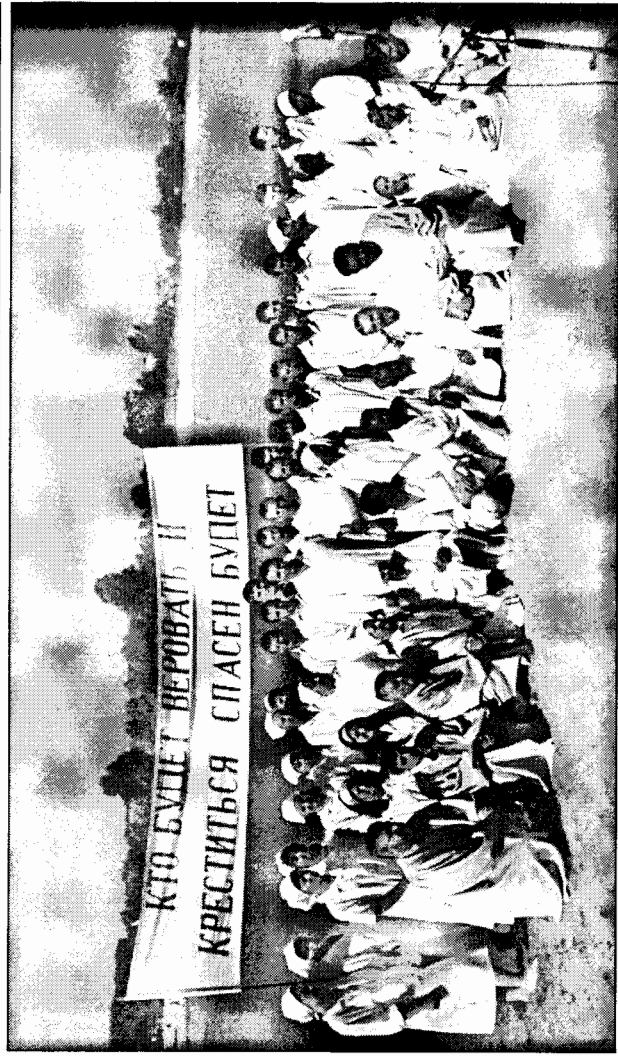
churches. But it is not only the sheer number of Christians who have left over the last 15 years which has caused such a problem, but also the kind of people who have left. Typically those able to emigrate were well organised, motivated, middle-aged, married couples with children — or, in other words, those whom you would normally expect to have leadership roles in their churches.

The Russian Baptist churches, which these emigrants have then founded in Germany and the USA, have too many chiefs, but hardly any Indians, whereas in Novosibirsk there are many Indians who have been left, but not the chiefs to lead them. For instance, today, in one city centre church with a membership of about 200, around 150 of these members are pensioners with the other members mainly made up of young unmarried people. There are no facilities for babies or very young children in the church, because there aren't any young couples with small children. Virtually everyone of middle age has left.

Hope for the future

In this difficult situation, however, there are signs of life and a hope for the future. Like many churches in Russia, the Baptist churches in the city work together to run a well organised drug and alcohol rehabilitation scheme. This programme, together with a growing evangelistic work among students, ensures a steady trickle of young converts into the churches and it is in these young people that as an OM team we have decided to invest our time, energy and resources.

Half of our team is committed to evangelism, mainly among the students in the city (an estimated 140,000!). They are actively involved in making contacts, running evangelistic Bible studies and



Summer 2005, Baptism with one of the OM team

training others in this type of evangelism. The other half of our team is now focusing on a new project, the setting up of a specialist Discipleship Centre to train and disciple these young converts.

Discipleship centre

The idea behind the Discipleship Centre is to have a place where young Christian people can spend an intensive six months studying and grounding themselves in the Bible, learning about their gifts and how to use and develop them, and learning practical skills in evangelism and the discipling of others. We are planning to accomplish these goals by offering a mixture of classroom teaching and practical ministry experience.

Students will live in the Centre for six months and each morning is devoted to studying the Bible and some basic theology taught both by OM team members and local Russian pastors and teachers. The other emphasis of the course — practical ministry experience — will be in the afternoons, evenings and at weekends. Students will carry out some kind of min-

istry in a local church, depending on their gifts and ideas for future ministry. One weekend each month the students will then be sent out two by two to other towns and villages in the Novosibirsk oblast (county or state) to work in the many small and struggling churches which either already exist or are in the process of being planted.

We are planning to accept the first intake of students in September 2006 for the six-month course. There are many challenges in the setting up of such a Centre, not least financial ones in a country where many are still living pretty much from one day to the next, but with God's help and blessing we are confident that the Centre will soon be able to start serving the local church in Novosibirsk.

For further information, or to receive a free DVD describing the work of the OM Discipleship Centre in Novosibirsk, contact Colin and Bron Cleaver: cbcleveland@bigfoot.com.

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