

Case Study

Svetmiru Ministry to Russian-Speaking Immigrants



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Light Presbyterian Church (LPC) is located on the border of Toronto and Mississauga in Ontario, providing an ideal location to minister to immigrants coming to Canada. LPC's ministry to Russian-speaking immigrants, Svetmiru, gives Russian-speaking believers the opportunity to worship, pray and attend Bible studies, while deepening their relationships with other Russian speakers. The ministry reaches every age group—from young children to families to elderly individuals.

How did God awaken you to this need or opportunity?

The story of our Russian-speaking ministry begins in the 1990s. In fact, it begins in Kazakhstan Central Asia. Our greater church, the Korean portion of our church, is very missions-oriented and when we started doing missions in Central Asia, our mission teams met a lot of Ethnic Korean Slovak speaking people there. We were ministering to them and as years went by several immigrated to Canada. When they wanted to find a place to worship they came to our church and we had an English-speaking ministry that they joined. But there was a language difference, and that's how the Russian-speaking ministry started as a whole new ministry.

I had grown up in this church, studied in the US and spent some time in full-time ministry in Korea but was asked to come back. After a few months, the Russian pastor went to Russia and could not come back as there were visa issues.

The church asked me to step in for a couple of weeks so they could find somebody to replace him. A lot of the leadership with the Russian-speaking ministry knew me when I graduated high school, went to college and they knew that I had gone to seminary. They were comfortable with me and so they asked me to come and speak for a couple of weeks. I was working with a translator, which worked out very well. We talked and they asked if I could stay because I was an in-house person they knew.

It wasn't so much that I was praying to God asking He give me a ministry. It was that I was already in ministry. This door opened with people I loved, and since I knew them from growing up we explored me becoming the pastor. It was a great opportunity and they are all very much like a family. They asked me to stay and it was good because they tied our Russian-speaking ministry to our mother church—the Korean-speaking ministry.

What is the scope? How many people are we talking about?

In the Slavic ministry of the church, we have 50 to 60 people. On a holiday with all the people included we will get up to a 100. As far as the people in Toronto, it's interesting because our church is right on the border of Mississauga and



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Toronto. Our area is partly industrial and really close to the airport. The origin is very Indian, actually Indian people.

All the Russian people come as far as 20 to 40 minutes away. But the Russian-speaking people in Toronto number about



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100,000 people. I am not sure but those are the numbers other Eurasian-speaking pastors have given to me.

Did you all develop any strategy or methodology to meet this opportunity?

What we try to do is gather with the other Russian-speaking ministries in the area, from different denominations. For example, we have gathered with the Ukrainian Catholic Church. We find that once the leaders are united, we can make a concerted effort to reach out to the population.

We do have several events throughout the year. For example, we have a free Thanksgiving event and a summer picnic where we extend invitations. People meet each other through immigration or other people's businesses or family events so in those venues we try to attract new comers.

You must have faced some obstacles. What are those that immediately come to mind?

Language and culture were the most obvious obstacles. I thought, I won't be staying in this ministry too long because it is so hard every Sunday. I thought back to when the days of how difficult it was to listen to the sermon through a translator. I've learned to pick up on some of the phrases.

Also, initially my gender and age were considered as obstacles. Many of the Russian-speaking community people were of the Orthodox background when they converted to Protestant Christianity and were used to elderly gentlemen as pastors. When I came I thought, "I am not going to be here for too long so it's ok," but it took

a real getting used to it for myself, a lot of the immigrants and other people in our community.

The youngest ones obviously are kids. Several are maybe five years older than I, and we have a lot of senior citizens. I just thought that for them it would be hard for them to deal with the younger female pastor. For the first four to six weeks I think it was hard—especially when they heard from the leadership that I was staying. Those are the most difficult aspects.

But here is the interesting thing. The same thing happened to me when I was actually ministering in Korea where I was familiar with the language and culture. With the Russian community I definitely knew parts of the culture but not the subtle ones and that was interesting because I did not know the language.

But whatever they may have complained about I did not hear because my translator was very good. Perhaps she thought I did not need to hear some things. So it was a year or two afterwards that I got the impression that maybe it was difficult. The younger families who immigrated here in their 20s, and who are now in their 30s, were perfectly fine. But, in fact, now the older ones encourage me. The language is always an issue but, because I have picked it up on and off and because they know me, it's very family-like and they really welcome me.

The other aspect that I found difficult was the workload. I was already doing a full-time ministry in youth/college ministry and then this was added. So it was no longer just an age group but went from babies to the oldest people. There were baptisms and funerals and a lot of activity.

With that said, I feel blessed with this congregation because they are very diligent. They are trying to establish their lives in Canada but also maintaining the ministry so I get a lot of help. The adults are very responsible in setting an example for praise times and in organizing fellowships. We worked out all those issues.

What are the most transferrable principles that you have learned?

I know this is going to sound obvious, but I hope every pastor believes this. Stick to God's Word.

When I first began I used to ask myself, "How do I make it culturally relevant?" Or, "How do I get around the language issue?" There were so many variables to think about. So I just decided I was going to preach God's Word and love them.

So God's Word and love—that's the most transferrable principle I have identified in youth ministry when I first began ministry and now in immigrant ministry. I believe that in every human being when God's Word is preached and there is sincerity behind it, regardless of language barriers or age or how cool that pastor is for young people, people are hearing and reasoning with the truth.

Another strategy is around food. It is important to spend time with people—especially from different cultures—and just sit and have their food and talk about family. There is something about the casualness of breaking bread together and sharing of cultures that really brings people together.

It's interesting because a lot of the Russian-speaking people in our community have a Korean ethnic background so their

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food, over the generations while they were living in Kazakhstan, has become fusion food like Korean and Russian food. So it is great to be able to transfer the principles of love and fellowship.

Then, speaking to them with kindness and honesty. Truly taking your time with them. Not just saying, "I am the pastor here



and I don't know your language so I am going to preach the Word and take off," but really spending time with them.

We established cell groups a few years ago and I can't go to each one every week, but I alternate from cell groups each week.

Showing sincere interest in the immigrants' culture and in their lives really breaks down a lot of unseen walls.

Just sitting in their homes being with them is a really great way to get through cultural barriers. I am not the best Russian speaker, but I can read their language now and I know the words in a lot of the songs that are been translated from English to Russian. You just pick up one at a time. I find a language is always easier to learn when you are singing. Showing sincere interest in the immigrants' culture and in their lives really breaks down a lot of unseen walls.

One of the other principles I found in immigrant communities is showing that you care for their kids. Many immigrants come so that their kids will have a better chance—whether America or Canada. They can get into better schools, go to college, speak English and really carry themselves with dignity.

One of my goals when I started the Russian-speaking ministry was with their kids, who were around the same age as my students. This second generation speaks English and a little bit of Russian, so we had an English-speaking youth ministry and it has worked.

All young people in our church, whether they are from Korean, Indian or Russian-speaking ministry, come to our youth group meetings, hang out together and go on mission trips together. Take care of the young generation because you know by the time the second generation becomes adults they are going to know each other. You know I really love their kids and that generation and, when the adults see that I really care about the future of the Russian-speaking ministry, it becomes the highlight.

What have you learned which might have taken you on a different course of action if you were to start all over again?

Prayer and patience. Prayer is a given. Any ministry we do needs lots of prayer support but we also need patience because it took months to break the ice. These immigrant families are working from Monday to Saturday and we do get to see them on Sunday. It was after a few months of showing them that I am consistently there and also visiting their homes and showing interest that people opened up their hearts and home.

Lots of patience is needed with them because of their background in Kazakhstan—the place where they come from—is very hostile to religion and they had to be on their guard for so long. And not just Kazakhstan, but a lot of previous Soviet Union countries. For example, we have some Ukrainians in our community and we can tell they are still attached to their homeland and there are a lot of things going on in their hearts and in their thoughts. So we need to be patient when we are approaching immigrants. We need to earn their trust.

Also one other thing that encourages the Korean-speaking community is to be generous. For example, our church is big and there are lots of rooms being booked all the time. If we have the opportunity to move all the Bible study classes because the Russian-speaking group wants to use it, we should. It shows that we care for them but also we consider them part of our family.

To be honest, that's how the Korean church started to grow in Canada. Lots of people in the Caucasian churches mentored us; they made us feel important, even in the smallest things. That kind of kindness is what we should extend to other people groups.

You had a very unique way of getting to know this immigrant community as a result of your mission work in Central Asia. If a church wanted to know about the immigrant community around them, how would they go about doing that?

A great thing about Toronto is its food festivals. For example, there is a weekend in the summer when the Polish community will have a street festival. Then there is Chinatown. If you lived in Toronto for a few years you get a feel for where these people live. One of the ways would be to go out and do some community outreach; not just talking about how the Gospel is

important but also meeting physical needs by volunteering through libraries or through community centers.

Canada and Toronto are very good at having community centers that are language-based depending on where your immigrant community is from. I found another awesome way is to know some of the teachers in the area—whether elementary or high school. There is always somebody who is struggling to get to know the language and the Canadian culture. Teachers will be able to point out children and families who can use some help with their needs. Meeting some of those needs opens up opportunities to reach out to the people.

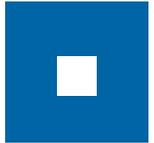
What is your most compelling success story?

There are two that I want to speak of. One of them is about young people that are growing up in their new culture. I remember when I left this church to go study in the States one of the young boys, Alexey, was about five years old and was a ring bearer in a wedding. Six people attended the wedding—four of them were from my family and the church.

It was such a great encouragement when I came back and he was in grade 9 or 10. Now he is graduating high school and he is still part of our English-speaking youth. That shows you that God is working in the first generation and He really seeks to bless the second generation. They all have their issues but seeing God's faithfulness throughout the generations is great. Again, I can see where our Korean community had to overcome this 10 to 20 years ago and for me they have offered that kind of help. It's humbling and rewarding on my part.

Another success story has to do with a really great brother of mine, Slava. He was a brilliant student in Kazakhstan and has the hands of a surgeon. He was single and He felt God told him to come Canada. You rarely see young single guys get their visa to come because it's thought they are going to stay and be dependent on the system. But somehow he made it here and started from the bottom.

Though he was very educated and smart, he did not know English well. He started working part-time jobs here and there as a security guard. I think a lot of immigrant people give-up because they see that their life is going nowhere and they settle for these jobs.



But Slava was not that type of personality. He worked hard—he was doing two or three jobs at one point—coming home at 3:00 a.m. and just collapsing on his bed. At that time, the pastor lived in the same community apartment building as Slava. The pastor told me stories of how Slava would work so late then come home to have some pulav (Russian rice), collapse on the bed and wake up two or three hours later and do the same thing again.

He worked hard and currently he speaks English fantastically—he is my translator on Sundays. He has established himself in the medical profession and oversees patient care for a well-known laser therapy company. He performs as the right-hand man of the president of that company—traveling all over the place to tell people about the medical advances of laser therapy.

He has gone to Texas to do some work with the military there and also to Cuba. He has been all over the world, and he was featured in the *Toronto Star* in an article because they are saying immigrants like him work hard and contribute to Canadian society. When I saw that article I said, “This is an example of how the Lord blesses when we work hard.”

You can see through God’s promises in the Bible that God is with you when you work hard and God is with you when you honor the government of the country you are in. He is one of the deacons of our community now. He is one of those guys when he starts to speak you know that there is a great story there and he commands that kind of respect.

How has the Lord used this outreach to change you and your church?

I always knew that God was mission-oriented—we learned it all the time in seminary and I know that my church is mission-oriented. But when you get in the ministry, it is so different from how you are brought up.

We began to see how God has blessed us so that we can be a blessing to other immigrant communities.

It’s amazing to feel your heart inflamed with that kind of love for other cultures. It has extended the scope of my vision for God’s kingdom and His people. It taught me humility—I am not as capable as I think I am and it does not matter what degree I hold and how good I am in English. When there is a language barrier, you realize that you know very little. Life is more than just communicating through the mouth and showing love and care. It changed our Korean community because we began to see how God has blessed us so that we can be a blessing to other immigrant communities.

I remember growing up in the early 1980s when the Korean community was just growing up in Toronto. It was hard, as there were a lot of church splits. Even my parents tell me that, if it were not for the help of a few Caucasian Canadians, even on the personal level, they wouldn’t be where they are now.

My mom remembers particular ladies who encouraged her to continue studying. My dad remembers the immigration officer who helped him fill out the forms for us to receive assistance. I find myself in a position to not be on the receiving end but the giving end. As the second generation I need to recognize that my parents received that help so I can give that help. So that really opened my eyes to the cycle of generations in Canada and the opportunities I have to serve.

We always wanted to send out young people because they had a vision for the future. May 18th to the 31st we sent out our first Russian-speaking missions’ team. They are going to Israel because there is a large population of Russian-speaking Jews. The Russian-speaking Jewish community has come out to help them.

It’s great to be able to contribute to the churches’ vision because now we feel we are stable enough. We have seven people going and we feel like we are actually changing the culture by contributing to it right now. Our Russian-speaking church is growing, and I feel they are getting more stable and they are getting a vision for how they can not only receive from the Lord but also give.

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