

Russian Baptist pastor tours U.S., takes best practices home

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) A Russian pastor whose grandfather was killed for being a Christian toured the U.S. recently, studying church ministries and providing a rare, first-person look at Russia's complex religious landscape after widespread persecution ended.

During Victor Ignatenkov's youth under the Soviet regime, Christians could meet only for worship. No Sunday school, midweek Bible study, or proselytizing.

Today, Ignatenkov, 59, said he's free to lead whatever activities he wants as pastor of the Central Baptist Church in his hometown of Smolensk—a city situated between the capitals of Russia and Ukraine—and as regional bishop for the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist. The union is a group of evangelical Protestant churches that began emerging in Russia about 150 years ago as an alternative to the Russian Orthodox establishment.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) International Peacemaker Program sponsored his U.S. journey, which included stops in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and several other states.

Ignatenkov spoke to a political science class at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee, on Monday (October 6) before heading back to Smolensk, with best-practices ideas to share with his church.

Ignatenkov was buoyed by the large, bustling churches he saw in the U.S. "with rooms for everything." He said he was most interested in examining churches' social ministries to homeless people, in prisons, and elsewhere, and taking those lessons home. He'd like to duplicate cooperative efforts between governments and churches to provide faith-based services to Russians in need.

Ignatenkov, speaking through a translator, hedged on discussing Russian President Vladimir Putin's close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin helped resurrect the church, which the state once crushed. And though there is no state religion, the Orthodox Church receives preferential treatment.

"What's important to us, what we value, is that Putin as president holds a neutral stance," Ignatenkov said. "We do not experience governmental limitations because we are Baptist."

Not all church leaders can say the same. The government refuses to recognize some religions, which means religious freedoms are limited. A U.S. State Department report last year slammed Russia for its treatment of minority religious groups, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostal Christians. Members of those groups may be subject to arbitrary laws and denied access to places of worship or visas for visiting missionaries, the report said. Some face physical violence.

For denominations the government recognizes, the political reform movement that began in the waning days of the Soviet Union, *perestroika*, threw open doors to religious freedom.

At first, Russians couldn't get enough evangelical preaching, Ignatenkov said. They packed cultural centers for special services and snatched up free Bibles.

These days, people are indifferent.

"Probably because the quality of life is better," Ignatenkov said. "Everything that had been forbidden was of course very interesting. It's not forbidden, so of course it's not interesting now."

A Pew Research Center study of major religious groups in Russia covering data from 1991 to 2008 tracked a surge of interest in Protestant Christianity, Islam, and Roman Catholicism that then leveled off. The share of Russians who attended church once a month rose from 2 percent in 1991 to 9 percent in 1998, then dropped to 7 percent a decade later.

Seventy-two percent of Russian adults identified as Orthodox Christians in 2008, the survey found, but that didn't translate into church attendance.

Trouble for Russian Christians began in 1937 under dictator Josef Stalin, Ignatenkov said. His grandfather, Pavel Gorbatenkov, reared six children in his Baptist faith, including Ignatenkov's mother, Olga. With the pounding of soldiers' fists on the door, they knew in an instant their happy, peaceful lives were over.

Pavel Gorbatenkov was imprisoned and denied visits with his family, who still brought food to the prison for two weeks. After that, the soldiers didn't take the food, but they also didn't tell the family Gorbatenkov had been shot—news that came years later.

Today, Russia's constitution provides for religious freedom, but other laws, including one banning "extremism" and a new law on "offending the religious feelings of believers," restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of minority religious groups.