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Mission Connections

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Al and Ellen Smith | Mission co-workers serving in Central and Eastern Europe

In Their Weakness, the Lord's Light Radiates

For the last 18 years, most of the ministry we have been involved with in Russia has been with small churches. The largest is a church of about 300 members, but most are between 12 and 50 members. In truth, the 12-member churches are not a part of the partnership program, but they are a rich part of our lives. We have not yet connected American partners with them, because the size of most Presbyterian churches could overwhelm them, but remember the “not yet.”



I spend time reading about the small church movement and the simple church movement. I think I am drawn to these topics because of our rich experience with the small churches of Eastern Europe. I know the depth of fellowship, the courage and the inspiration of small churches struggling in an often hostile environment. I need their witness. Their witness is a complex mixture of humility, courage, tenacity and grace.

After visiting Wake Forest Presbyterian in North Carolina, I began following the blog of Derek Maul, one of their members. I often find that his blog brings clarity to something I have been thinking about. Just today, he reflected on 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, using the Message, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible. I rarely look to the Message, but the words that Derek drew my attention to resonated — “⁷ If you only look at *us*, you might well miss the brightness.”

I think of a very small church, led by Sergei, a young missionary from Ukraine. He and his young family came to Russia before the conflict in Donbas (the breakaway region of Eastern Ukraine). They came to a small city that has never had a Protestant church. For the Baptist leadership in the region, it is a strategic city. For Sergei and his family, it is a call upon their hearts. It has not been an easy call to take up. They have had one challenge after another. They had a space to worship in one half of a duplex owned by Christians from another town. The small community had been on the verge of building a church, having purchased land and expecting other churches in the region to come help them with construction. Before they could begin, they discovered that the land flooded during wet seasons, becoming inaccessible. They purchased another piece of land in a central location, only to find that it had a utility easement across one corner (something the seller had failed to disclose). As

Thank you for supporting Al's work as outreach facilitator for minority peoples in Russia and Ellen's as regional liaison for Central and Eastern Europe. Your prayers and financial support have helped make a difference to the lives of people living in Central and Eastern Europe.



Former worship space destroyed by drunken neighbors.

they studied the problems with land, their neighbors at the duplex got drunk and set the building on fire. The building was beyond repair. They sought next steps, gathering for worship in the meantime in members' apartments (something that is now against the law.)

The region can support Sergei with only a very modest salary, so he and his wife have both found jobs. They have had to move repeatedly for different reasons. It would have been easy for them to go home to Ukraine, but they have instead sought Russian citizenship, faithful to the community the Lord has called them to. It is not easy being Baptist in small places in Russia, but the Lord's light shines from them. They see good things that have come from their presence. In one of the several buildings they lived in was the family of an Orthodox priest. There is distance and often prejudice between Orthodox and Protestant Christians, and in these tumultuous times prejudice can increase. But Sergei's kids are so well behaved, and the family so gracious, neighborly and considerate to all around them, that the priest's family took notice and befriended them.

It has been challenging for Sergei to develop children's ministry in their small city, but he has looked around him with eyes of compassion. In his movements about the city, he noticed a group that few ever see. He began conversation with Roma



A day camp for Roma children.

families, inviting them to church and, with his wife and children, starting a summer camp program for Roma children. It is humble, but it is more significant than I can say.

I think too often we are looking for the showy stuff, the big projects, the great victories. Eugene Peterson’s words should challenge us. It would be easy to look at this humble church in Russia and see only the challenges, only the humble efforts, only the failure, but it is in their weakness that the Lord’s light radiates. We sometimes forget whose ministry it is in the flashy stuff.

The rest of the passage, this time from the NRSV:
⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to

despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

We need one another. Al and I hope to find ways to facilitate dialogue between our own small churches and the small churches in Eastern Europe that we might encourage one another, challenge one another, share our experiences, celebrate the little stuff and center ourselves on what it means to hear the Lord’s call in small and sometimes challenging places.

Al and I are in the States at present and would love to engage in dialogue with small churches on this side of the Atlantic. We would love to visit with the medium and large churches too, to share about the Lord’s ministry in Russia, Ukraine and Poland. We are grateful for the support we receive from so many churches. Your prayers, your notes of encouragement, and your financial gifts make all the difference. If you would like to find new ways to partner with us, just be in touch.

With love in Christ,

Ellen & Al

Connect and support the mission work of:

Al and Ellen Smith

Serving in Central and Eastern Europe as regional liaison (Ellen) and outreach facilitator for minority peoples in Russia (Al)

You are invited to continue supporting Al’s and Ellen’s work through prayer and encouraged to get to know them through updates like this, personal letters and emails. If you are able, please support this ministry through financial gifts. Individual donations may be made online at presbyterianmission.org/donate, or mailed to the address below. Churches are asked to send donations through your congregation’s normal receiving site (this is usually your presbytery).

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Email: al.smith@pcusa.org **Email:** ellen.smith@pcusa.org
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Thank you for reading about Al’s and Ellen’s ministries.

