

A Youth Explosion in the Ukraine

They call it vybukh, or 'explosion.' It's the best word to describe what the Holy Spirit is doing among youth in Ukraine, where most churches have been ill-prepared to meet the needs of troubled teen-agers.

Outside a cavernous sports hall on a crisp Saturday evening in Kiev, Ukraine, hundreds of teen-agers crowd together, waiting in line to purchase tickets to a 7 p.m. concert. When the arena doors finally open, droves of youth rush into the hall and quickly find their seats. It's a scene repeated in thousands of cities across Europe as young people hit the town to party at high school dances or catch their favorite rock bands in concert.

But this event is different. The concert has been touted for weeks in the city's Protestant churches as a unique witness to the Holy Spirit's presence in Ukraine.

The nearly three-hour concert lives up to its name: vybukh, or "explosion." The music is painfully loud, and the singers and dancers are unrelentingly energetic. The show is tight, well-choreographed and—aside from the lyrics—indistinguishable from a secular rock concert. It is a style of worship radically different from what many of Ukraine's Protestant believers are used to.

But for the 2,000 teens attending the Vybukh concert, this is God in a form they can understand. The youth in this city of 2.3 million, weaned on local MTV and hip to the latest Western

fashions, have little interest in the Orthodox Christianity of their grandparents or in joining the often staid Protestant congregations that survived 70 years of atheistic Soviet communism.

“They go, but they don’t understand what it is all about, what with the old language and all,” says concert organizer and youth leader Yury Ravnushkin, referring to the old Slavonic language used in most Orthodox Christian services. “They can’t find the answers they need. Most kids don’t even try.”

For much of the Saturday night concert Ravnushkin, sporting baggy cargo pants and dyed-blond hair, was center stage, whipping the young crowd into a frenzy. The next morning he was in Kiev’s Hillsong Church, where he serves as youth leader, getting ready for the first of three two-hour services that would stretch until 3 p.m.

When it comes to ministering to youth in the former Soviet Union, the 1,500-member Hillsong Church is in the vanguard, using techniques that are novel and radical, but effective. Over the course of just 18 months, the series of Vybukh concerts have grown from 100 to 2,000 people, mostly teens. And church leaders believe they are only seeing the beginning of a great move of God among the country’s youth.

Reaching Lost Youth

Operating out of a rented theater where the congregation shares space with a Chinese restaurant and bar, kickboxing studio and video poker lounge, Hillsong is the capital city’s

second largest Spirit-filled congregation. Planted in 1992 by missionaries from the network of Hillsong churches in Sydney, Australia, the Kiev church has been steadily pushing the envelope of the Ukrainian Pentecostal and charismatic scene.

Hillsong's pastors, Zhenya and Vera Kasevich, both 30, incorporated the Vybukh concert into a three-day training seminar for several hundred church leaders from across Ukraine. Vera says Hillsong is filling a long-empty niche by catering to youth. Her husband agrees.

"Most churches don't do anything with youth," Zhenya told Charisma. "That's for three reasons: Youth don't bring in money; youth cost money for the extra programs that are necessary; and, last of all, youth are very unstable. They could be here this year and gone the next year."

Vera says that even those Ukrainian churches that do try to cater to youth often get it wrong.

"The other churches just try to attract them with discos or something," says Vera, who, by Kiev's street standards, dresses radically in a knee-length black leather coat and matching leather pants, along with a purple hair weave and matching fingernail polish. "We try to disciple them. We have 40 home groups for children, 40 for youth and 120 for adults."

Kiev has emerged as one of the most dynamic cities in the former Soviet Union for Christian youth ministry. Besides Hillsong, at least three other Protestant organizations based in Kiev specifically target youth.

One of the more recent arrivals is Judy Sculley, 38, an

Assemblies of God pastor who moved to Kiev a year ago to plant youth churches and develop youth programs with the Ukrainian Free Churches' Union of Evangelical Christians, one of two Pentecostal church associations in the country. Like Vera Kasevich, Sculley says the traditional sermon-based dynamic simply does not work in youth ministry.

"Young people want something more punchy, something that answers their needs," says Sculley, who plans on founding a Spirit-filled church in Kiev just for young people. "The churches need to get beyond having someone preach straight for an hour and a half and then expecting everyone to get excited about hearing the Word of God."

Sculley says she has been struck by young people's hunger for the gospel, recalling one meeting in April 2000 that drew 300 unchurched youth. When it came time for the altar call, the majority responded. "Even more surprising was that I'd say 70 percent of them were men," she says. "You just don't see that elsewhere."

As Ukrainian society becomes increasingly Westernized and begins to grapple openly with topics that were once taboo, such as sexual abuse, eating disorders and abortion, Sculley predicts that youth ministries will have more and more social relevance.

"Once they take the lid off it and start talking about these things, people's hearts will be exposed, and they will be walking around like the walking wounded," she says, referring to the gradual process of sensitive issues entering Ukrainian public dialogue. "Only God can help the guilt and the shame. Imagine if you are a girl who has had five or six abortions and you are entering into a marriage."

One of the main goals Sculley hopes to accomplish in the three years she has committed to working in Kiev is to encourage the development of youth ministries on a grassroots level. To that end, she plans next fall to start a 12-month certificate program for Christian youth leaders throughout the former Soviet Union.

Rising to the Challenge

According to the government's Committee on Religious Affairs, as of October 2000 Ukraine was home to 6,400 Protestant congregations, 2,121 of which were Pentecostal or charismatic. Comparatively, there were 12,600 Orthodox Christian parishes and 4,066 Catholic parishes. The government does not maintain figures on the number of individual believers.

Protestants in Ukraine generally enjoy more freedom than their counterparts in other former Soviet countries, such as Georgia or Turkmenistan, where they are actively persecuted. Bickering between the dominant Orthodox Christians who are divided into three separate factions do not wield the political power they might otherwise.

Ukraine's religious landscape, however, may change as two of the three factions work to unite into one church. Patriarch Filaret, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kiev patriarchate, is keen on joining with the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Should this happen, he says, Orthodox Christians will be in a much better position to lobby the Ukrainian government for a crackdown on sects and foreign

missionaries.

But even if the government policies regarding foreign religious workers don't change, the influence of these workers on local Protestant ministries is likely to wane all the same, according to Sergei Suknenko, 29, director of Rouka Dopomogy, a Kiev-based organization that specializes in Christian youth leader training. Ukrainian believers themselves must rise to the challenge of reaching lost youth.

"In the long run, all the American ministries are not going to be of much help. The two cultures are just so different," says Suknenko, referring to vast historical and economic differences that separate one of the world's richest countries and one of Europe's poorest, where an estimated 50 percent of the population lives below the poverty level and the life expectancy for males is 60 years.

"To give you one example, here there is often a special sense of reverence in church," Suknenko says. "You wouldn't have clapping or laughing or running. There is a sense that God is going to be angry if kids are having a good time in church."

Suknenko's partner, American missionary Doug Landro from the Atlanta-based Reach Out Youth Solutions, agrees. Landro, 38, says he sometimes encounters legalistic attitudes in the Ukrainian congregations that thwart the development of vibrant youth programs. He describes observing signs in one of Ukraine's largest Baptist churches that read: "No boys with jeans. No girls with makeup or earrings."

"We deal a lot with the idea that the kids need to change first, and only then will the church welcome

them," Landro explains.

These widespread attitudes make Hillsong's flashy Vybukh concert an unusual event in the world of Ukrainian Protestantism. In the final analysis, Suknenko says everyday efforts such as after-school programs and youth-focused classes will prove the most successful in reaching teens for Christ.

The need is enormous. A sociologist by training, Suknenko rattles off facts and figures demonstrating post-Soviet youths' tremendous desire to fill today's moral vacuum. A recent poll in Russia showed that 81 percent of youth feel a hopelessness about their role in a society where they cannot expect protection from the government, police or army.

"If people don't have a feeling of security, that is when you have low morals," Suknenko observes. "One reason young people have premarital sex is that they think, 'If I can't enjoy my future, I might as well enjoy life while I can.'"

And that's why Yury Ravnushkin, the Vybukh concert organizer, says he tries to convince youth that they have a choice that their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents didn't have growing up in the atheistic Soviet Union.

"We try to tell them: 'You can get what your parents didn't get. You have God. God will help you with these things.'"

It is a message that youth ministers across Ukraine are praying teens will hear. *

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