

American Missionary Couple Uses English Classes to Evangelize Russia

Jon and Sonnet Barr say their technique at The English Exchange is centered around building relationships

In the 15 years since the Iron Curtain fell in Russia, Christian missionaries from the United States have witnessed decidedly mixed results in their efforts to gain a foothold in the largely atheist country.

Through the years, evangelists flooded in, sparking reports that thousands of Russians were professing new faith in Christ. But almost as soon as the missionaries packed their bags, many of the new believers fell away and developed an aversion to Christianity.

Now another wave of missionaries has launched a new movement aimed at producing more lasting results in Russia. The idea is to lay the groundwork for evangelism by developing loving and trusting friendships between Russians and American Christians first. Their vehicle: English classes.

“The missionaries [of the past] rushed in to do ministry without researching the culture to realize that Russians make life-changing decisions differently than the Western perspective,” said Sonnet Barr, a missionary with Moscow-based The English Exchange, affiliated with the interdenominational United World Mission based in Charlotte, N.C. “You can’t fault their hearts, but you can fault the failure to respect and understand the attributes and characteristics of a different culture.”

Added Jon Barr, her husband: "Russians were quick to raise hands, come forward in meetings and say the sinner's prayer. But the reality was that they were looking for a relationship that would last a lifetime, and the lengthy dialogue required by Russians to change the ideas of the heart."

The idea of using conversational English as a ministry tool is not new in Russia or elsewhere around the world. But what distinguishes the Barrs' approach from others, according to experts, is their focus on building relationships—an often tedious and painstaking task.

"The Barrs have made their approach less evangelistic," said Eugene Richardson, missions pastor at Shepherd of the Hills Church in Porter Ranch, Calif., which has sent several of its members to serve on short-term assignments with the Barrs.

"Their approach is to establish a relationship so there is trust," Richardson said. "Who they are becomes a greater witness than what they say."

The Barrs arrived in Moscow in May 2001 to minister at a camp that used the Bible to teach English. Jon Barr, a graduate of Calvary Bible College in Kansas City, Mo., was assigned to train Russian youth leaders. Sonnet Barr, who has an undergraduate degree in music from California State University in Bakersfield and a certificate in Bible from Columbia International University in South Carolina, was assigned to train worship leaders.

Just eight days into the mission, one of the main ministers suffered a stroke and returned to the United States. "With three other teammates who had been in the country less than a

year,” Sonnet Barr said, “[God] started what He wanted: a program based on loving relationships with His people totally dependent on Him.”

The Barrs’ program uses staples of the American summer-camp experience—silly songs, dances, skits and other activities designed to build camaraderie.

Teachers, recruited from U.S. churches and Christian colleges, are encouraged to maintain a fun and friendly atmosphere, sharing their faith only in informal settings outside the classroom.

Not everyone, though, has been satisfied with the slow, long-term approach to evangelism. Some missionary organizations working with the Barrs have pulled their ministers out of Russia because of a lack of quick, quantifiable results in the form of church plantings and baptisms.

The Barrs defend their plan, defining their ministry as a “plowing” mission. They measure success in the relationships established with several Russians who became Christians through the program and now share their faith with successive students.

They also measure success in their effort to tackle tough subjects. This summer they held lectures on black history and race relations in the United States to counterattacks by skinheads on Africans, Armenians and Georgians.

But the Barrs say they are most gratified by the response to their follow-up efforts with graduates of the program. After the July camp, a group of Americans maintained the social ties

through kite-flying, bowling and other activities. As a result, 15 of the students took the next step and attended a church service.

Dion Haynes in Moscow