

Bible Translators Reach Remote Muslim, Buddhist Regions in Russia

A Moscow-based ministry has converted portions of Scripture into 62 languages in the world's largest country

Mikhail Kindruk and other Pentecostal missionaries spent 20 days traveling by boat along the remote rivers of eastern Siberia, visiting 25 villages inaccessible by road. What they found, he said, was astonishing: even a full decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, no one had heard of Jesus.

"Not one person had a Bible. Not one person had heard the gospel," Kindruk said. "In every village, practically everyone came out to hear the Gospels and to get a Bible from us."

About half of the literature distributed in last summer's trip is provided by the Institute for Bible Translation, an ecumenical Christian organization that has been working in the world's largest country since 1973, first secretly and now with varying degrees of openness.

Perhaps more than any other Christian organization, the institute has laid the groundwork for evangelizing the 130 ethnic and language groups of the former Soviet Union by working to provide them with Scripture in their native languages. The institute's most popular publication—with 8 million copies in the last 20 years—is the Children's Bible.

"To date, I think this is the best one. It is very accessible to kids and even to adults," Kindruk said, noting its usefulness to those encountering Christianity for the first

time. "Out there ... people don't know God at all. There was a lady who came home to her husband and said, 'Today, I accepted Jesus.' He got indignant and said, 'Who is this Jesus?' He thought Jesus was another man."

Aside from the Children's Bible, the institute specializes in translating the Bible into the languages spoken by ethnic minorities throughout the former Soviet Union, a vast area spanning 11 time zones. Although the majority of people speak Russian, evangelists said it makes a huge difference for people to read the Bible in their mother tongue.

"People think in their own language, so it is one less step mentally for them to read the Gospels in their own language," noted Kindruk, who spent 10 years building the Pentecostal Church of Jesus the Savior in Chita, a remote Russian city of 400,000 north of the Mongolian border.

In his work in Chita, Kindruk said he often encounters Buryats, a historically Buddhist people with their own language. So far all he has been able to offer them is a brochure about Jesus. This year, however, the institute plans on publishing the Children's Bible in the Buryat language. In the coming years, the entire New Testament will be published in Buryat, says Natalya Gorbunova, one of the institute's 30 employees.

"Irrespective of the number speaking their language, we consider that every nation has the right to read the Bible, or at least a portion of it," Gorbunova said.

Boris Arapovic, a charismatic Christian from the former Yugoslav republic of Croatia, founded the institute in 1973.

He set up shop in Stockholm, cobbled together funds from Scandinavian churches and set about the daunting task of translating Scriptures into the non-Slavic languages of the Soviet Union.

Today, the institute is centered in Moscow and boasts 62 translations ranging from a full Bible for the 8 million Tajiks to the Gospel of Luke for the 2,000 Itelmen people living on the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia's Far East.

"We thought this would just be a book for the libraries," Gorbunova said of the Itelmen translation of Luke in 2002. "But then the local archbishop organized dog teams to deliver it and presented it to schools and libraries. People were so happy. It was a major event. We've never had a response like that."

There are up to 60 million Muslims living in the former Soviet Union. Some countries—most notably Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—severely restrict the institute's work by denying visas or thwarting shipments. The leaders of other Muslim regions are welcoming.

"For the people who don't have printed books, even if they are Muslims, it is a special honor for them to have a holy book in their language," Gorbunova said.

Gorbunova said she is devoting more time to fund raising and developing contacts in the United States to help cover the institute's \$800,000 annual budget.

"For the last few years the institute has experienced very big financial difficulties," she said, adding that a donation of \$

covers the cost of one Children's Bible and \$ pays for a New Testament.

Frank Brown in Moscow

Contributions to this Russian Bible translation project are being matched by an anonymous donor. Send your tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, "Russian Bibles," P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.