

# Evangel Fellowship builds church network in Russia

Evangel Fellowship oversees 500 churches in the former Soviet Union, and leader Houston Miles says the future is bright

Christianity is capable of withstanding any future in Russia.

That's the assessment of Houston Miles, whose Evangel Fellowship International (EFI) has in the last decade earned a pioneering reputation for its strong missionary work in Russia.

"Christians have a track record there," said Miles, 73, founder and chairman of EFI. "I've seen a lot of maturity. It's pretty established. It would be hard for a government to get rid of them. They're going to go on. As long as the doors are open we're going to keep going there."

Missiologists speculate that the window of opportunity for missionary work in Russia could close within the next five years because of the country's unstable political and economic climate. Miles said he has always believed it would take two to three generations for communism to effectively change into a free-market economy. Despite the uncertainty, some Russian missionaries believe the door will only narrow, with persecution bringing on a great revival.

"The door [of opportunity] hasn't closed yet, but it's gradually closing," said Miles, who is scheduled to visit Russia again in December and March 2002.

Miles, whose background is Assemblies of God, was the longtime pastor and bishop of Evangel Cathedral, one of the largest nondenominational congregations in Spartanburg, S.C. He relinquished his pastoral role during the late 1990s to devote more time with EFI, which was formed in 1984 and is a Pentecostal alignment of ministers started with about a dozen pastors who shared similar interests and goals for furthering the gospel. It has grown to more than 500 ministers, 145 of whom are senior pastors.

EFI, which maintains an office in Moscow, is the umbrella fellowship for more than 500 churches in Russia. Many of the Russian pastors with ties to EFI are in their early 20s and until their association with EFI were in need of guidance from mature pastors.

"A lot of them looked to somebody to help show them the guidelines, and EFI has come alongside of those churches and groups of churches, fellowships with them and does ministry conferences," says Glenn Muncy, pastor of Cornerstone Worship Center in West Union, S.C., and a companion of Miles' on 10 missions trips since 1997.

EFI sponsors a Bible college in Moscow that offers a two-year core curriculum and is affiliated with Christian Life School of Theology, based in Columbus, Ga.

"I think we've developed a lot of good relationships," Miles adds. "We've got a lot of good friends. We' them financially. So, it's proved to be a good thing there."

A priority for EFI has been to provide financial help for Russian churches, which adds permanence and legitimacy to the

gospel they preach.

In some regions, churches face resistance by local governments that deny them access to cultural halls, auditoriums or sports complexes where they could hold public meetings. Sometimes local resistance comes in the form of rent that is raised so high churches cannot afford it.

Miles said one of EFI's most successful fund-raising efforts brought in \$175,000 for a Moscow church to purchase its own building. Many other churches still hold meetings in homes much like first-century believers did.

"They understand if times get tough for they feel they can't get buildings, [then home meetings] will be their lifeline," Muncy said.

Miles made his first of 35 trips to Russia in December 1991, just months after the fall of communism. Many of those early trips were devoted to evangelism. Muncy recalled how easy it was to attract crowds as large as 10,000.

"They were very open and looking forward to some of those things. Churches started from those meetings, and thousands were saved," he said. "As time has passed, it's gotten more and more difficult as the newness [of Western missionaries in Russia] has worn off. It's not quite as easy to draw the same crowds."

Even though attendance now numbers in the hundreds, Miles said EFI's efforts have shifted toward women's conferences. His wife, Evelyn, has conducted seven in the last three years in an effort to develop strong local leadership and maturity

among believers.

Elsewhere, EFI has done missionary work in India, China and Mexico and has an orphanage in Nicaragua. The organization is scheduled to venture into new territory next month, participating in pastors conferences in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Nov. 5-11 and in Myanmar (Burma) Nov. 12-17.

**-Cedric Harmon**