

In The Shadow of the Kremlin

Old traditions die hard in the former Soviet Union, but RICK AND DENISE RENNER are bringing hope to millions of Russians.

When you look at Boris Godunov's face in the old Russian painting, you see a combination of fear and aggression, anger and hopelessness.

Here is a dictator who mercilessly killed a child, the rightful heir to the throne, so that he could be czar of Russia. The painting shows him standing in a dimly lit room, holding up a lamp that does little to chase away the darkness. His other hand seems to be reaching toward a Bible.

"That picture," says American missionary Rick Renner, "is the story of Russia over the past centuries—spiritually stumbling in the dark, searching for someone to give them answers from God's Word."

Renner should know. He has lived in the former Soviet Union for the last 15 years and has established one of the largest Protestant churches in Moscow. He has seen the darkness of this culture—but he has also seen many hands reaching for truth.

Although communism did all that it could to eliminate God from Russia, the country has deep roots in the Christian faith.

"The symbol of Russia is an eagle with two heads," Renner explains. "During the time of czarist Russia, it was said that two heads were needed to look over the whole of Russia because it was so large. But when this official emblem of Mother Russia was established, one head represented the state and the

other the Russian Orthodox Church. It was a clear message that both ruled over and protected Russia's people."

Today Renner is working to reintroduce the gospel here, and it is not an easy task. As wonderful as it was for most Americans to witness the breakup of the USSR, it was a painful time for the Soviet people.

"When communism fell, instability stepped in," Renner told Charisma. "The economy crashed, money lost its value. It was a devastating time, and countless people suffered."

Renner explains that when the old system went out and the new system was being established, it created a short-term time of great hardship for many people-especially the elderly. "When the USSR collapsed and things began to radically change, it was a very hard time for Russia," he says. "These kinds of changes would have been difficult for any nation, and it was hard to cope with all the needs of the people."

"One group who felt the pain of the changes was the elderly. They are really deep in my heart, so God gave us a mandate to do something special to help them at this time in their lives."

An Open Door

A native of Oklahoma, Renner had a successful ministry in the United States. He authored several popular teaching books, including *Living in the Combat Zone*, *The Point of No Return* and *Dressed to Kill*, all distributed by American publishers-and he could have made it in the U.S. as a televangelist. He never imagined he would end up in the former Soviet Union, but

he realizes now that God prepared him for that part of the world.

As a youth, Renner was bold in his faith and preached in the hallways of his high school. He studied Greek in college to further his knowledge of Scripture. Little did he know the hidden benefit this knowledge would provide.

While in school, Renner was blessed to meet the woman God had chosen to be his wife, Denise Roberson. "I was in church when I heard this amazing voice," he says. "I turned and saw the most beautiful woman singing a prophetic song."

In 1990, years after Rick and Denise married, he was sitting at a missionary conference, waiting for his turn to speak. Beside him lay a Russian Bible that belonged to one of the other speakers.

"As I picked it up and started leafing through it, I was stunned," Renner says. "With my background in Greek, I was able to phonetically read that Russian Bible!"

He took the Bible back to his hotel and pored over it. He kept saying to his wife: "Honey, listen to this! I can read Russian!"

Renner couldn't put the Bible down. He had no goal in mind but was nonetheless driven to understand the Russian language.

By then his ministry had really begun to expand. His books were selling well, and his schedule was so booked that he had to decline more requests than he could accept.

Then came an invitation he couldn't resist. He was asked to go to Latvia-a former Soviet republic-to teach in a Bible school. At first he was reluctant to take the time away from his ministry in the U.S. -until God made His plan clear.

And what God said came as a big surprise.

Says Renner: "When I stood in front of those Soviet students, the Holy Spirit said to me, 'Welcome to your new home.' I was shocked. I didn't believe it. But over and over, God spoke those same words to me."

So in 1991 the Renners moved with their three young boys from the United States to Latvia.

"We moved to a town where World War II seemed to have just ended," Renner says. "As we walked down the main street, we saw long lines of people in front of stores waiting to see whether there was bread or other food available."

Although the weather was cold, the people were warm, and the fire of the Holy Spirit drove the Renners to try new methods to reach people for Christ. Soon a door opened for Renner to purchase time on a Soviet television station. "We had the opportunity to provide the first regular Christian TV programming in that part of the world," Renner says. "I didn't have to pray long-it was obvious that only the hand of God could open this door."

A Warm Reception

Overnight, the Good News With Rick Renner program began

receiving thousands of letters. People were getting saved and healed and marriages were being restored. Soon the Renners received help that allowed them to expand their ministry and see their vision unfold.

Of course, they had many partners who had been generously supporting their American ministry for years. But then they received a call from televangelists Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, offering generous support. Next, a call came from two people they had heard of but never met: Dave and Joyce Meyer.

“After verifying that we paid our bills on time and that we were careful stewards of what God had given us, the Meyers began to support us on a regular basis,” Renner explains.

Thanks to such generous support, Renner and his family have been able to make a huge impact on the spiritual climate and culture of Latvia. The church they established has grown, and during the 1990s, they built the first new church building in Riga, the capital, in 60 years. Today 1,200 people call that church their home.

Renner’s Good News program remains on the air, and the ministry has facilitated getting the Copelands, Meyer and Marilyn Hickey on television in nations all over the former Soviet Union. His show and the other programs they broadcast are now seen on 76 stations, reaching a potential audience of 110 million.

Renner has traveled all over the former Soviet Union—a country that spans 11 time zones—visiting villages where the program has impacted lives. He has met with pastors and laymen and

heard the same heartbreaking story.

“When communism fell, literally thousands of evangelists poured in, bringing the gospel,” Renner says. “But then many of them left, and there were no churches or pastors to help Christians walk with the Lord. So brand-new Christians stepped in to pastor churches—some of them little more than teenagers. They gave their flocks their all, but they had no teaching, no guidance, no mentoring. They were doing the very best they could, but they needed help.”

Renner established a pastors’ association to meet that need. For eight years he has poured himself into these leaders—sending mature pastors to their homes to meet with and pray with them, supplying them with incredible teaching materials and resources, and hosting intense Bible conferences where they can gather to be trained, equipped and refreshed.

The pastors’ network has grown to 794 churches all over Russia and the other republics of the former Soviet Union. Many of the congregations are small, and the towns are so economically devastated that there is no way the churches can afford full-time ministers. Renner has been able to offer partial support to some of them.

“The results have been amazing,” Renner says. “In the churches where we have allowed pastors to go full time, we have seen more than a 20 percent spike in growth.”

In 2000, after Renner trained his assistant to take over the work in Latvia, he and his family relocated to Moscow—a rapidly growing metroplex of nearly 16 million where rental prices are skyrocketing and there are few evangelical churches.

Says Renner: "Property values are so expensive that no church has been able to afford to establish its location in the center of the city. Even apartments Americans would consider outdated rent for \$300 a square foot per year."

Despite this daunting financial challenge, the Renners started their Moscow Good News Church across the street from the Kremlin. They began with 200 people, meeting in a conference room at Hotel Russia.

"Our family also lived steps away from that historic site," Renner recalls. "There on Red Square I'd see people gathered in protest. Most of the time they were seniors, longing for what they had lost. I'd see old men with their war medals pinned proudly to their chests and elderly ladies carrying old flags and symbols of communism.

"I'd go out and walk among these elderly people as they protested and played old songs from their youth. I know it sounds weird, but I love the communists. Of course, I don't love what communism stands for, but the people are proud and hardworking, and they've been so hurt in their lives. They need Jesus. I would walk among them and pray that He would use me to bring them to Him."

In January 2004, God gave Renner a plan to do just that. He developed a program called Golden Stars that uses celebrities from bygone days, traditional songs and dance, and the Russians' innate love of culture to reach them.

"Elderly Russians come to see a free, professional show that features the Doris Days, Elizabeth Taylors, and Bob Hopes of Russian entertainment history," Renner explains. "Once they

are here, we offer them a free membership in our Vitamin Club and load them up with free groceries, gifts and a month's supply of vitamins."

The results are softening the hardest of hearts. Interviewed after one of the monthly Vitamin Club programs, one tiny elderly woman clutched a gift bag tightly to her chest and said, "I know the vitamins are helping me. I don't have any teeth, and I can't eat very well. These help me feel better. This church is nice."

Missionary Sacrifice

It has been a year since the launching of the initial Golden Stars program, and 3,000 Moscow seniors signed up to be a part of the Vitamin Club even before the huge event last October.

That event saw 8,000 senior citizens-90 percent of them unsaved-in an event that was so huge and distinguished that politicians and upper government officials made an appearance on the stage to welcome the huge crowd.

The program is just one facet of what Renner calls "social evangelism"-an out-of-the-box strategy that takes most ministry outside the church building. Today the Moscow Good News Church runs outreaches aimed at prisoners, drug addicts, the elderly, disaffected teenagers and homeless children-a serious problem in Russia today.

Recently the church celebrated its fifth anniversary with 5,000 in attendance. The service was held in an arena built for the 1980 Olympics. Dignitaries, ambassadors from three countries and visitors from 50 nations gathered for worship.

Currently, the church does not have a building that can seat the 2,000-plus members who regularly attend its weekly services, so Renner is forced to rent whatever hall is available during a given week at a cost of more than \$700,000 a year.

"We are praying for God to open the doors for us to have our own home," Renner says. "We have nearly \$4 million in the bank for the purchase of a building, but once we buy it, it's going to take much more money to renovate."

The church uses all kinds of venues for its meetings, including an old theater located near a subway stop. The location has a peculiar challenge: It's also home to a burlesque show.

One evening, Renner was leaving a meeting when the elevator opened on the wrong floor. In walked a woman in spike heels and a Marilyn Monroe-type hairstyle. She had been drinking and was wearing an overcoat over her costume.

She screamed: "Pastor Rick, why are you here?"

Renner blushed. He wasn't sure why this woman knew him. All he could think of was how glad he was that she had her coat on over her racy costume. He later learned that the burlesque dancer had been coming to his church.

"It just shows how many people are coming who are just beginning to explore the possibility of a relationship with Jesus," Renner says. "Thank God she is coming to church-and I hope she keeps on coming! She doesn't know that what she's doing is wrong now, but if she'll keep attending church and

open her heart, that will be another precious soul saved for Jesus.”

This dancer, like so many other Russians today, is groping in the dark for an answer. In her case, a caring family left the comforts of American success and traveled 5,500 miles to bring one to her.

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For more information, call 918-496-3213 or visit . Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Rick Renner Ministries, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.