

Lessons From Ukraine

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A reader recently took issue with me on a somewhat sobering column I wrote about the decline of Christianity—and the concomitant rise of Islam—in Europe (“Europe at the Crossroads,” December). I wrote that Third World missionaries might be better equipped to bring Christianity back to Europe than Americans. He thought I might have been “America-bashing.”

Far from it. There are surely outstanding American missionaries in Europe. But you don't have to be a foreign affairs expert to know that in Europe, currently, being an American doesn't open a lot of doors.

But a powerful illustration of the larger point I was making came to the forefront during the demonstrations in Ukraine in November and December against the country's first runoff election for president. That vote was considered by millions of Ukrainians and finally by the Ukrainian Supreme Court to have been marred by outrageous fraud and ballot-stuffing.

In the second runoff, even more closely observed by foreigners and regarded as generally fair, the opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, was shown to be the decisive winner. He picked up 52 percent of the vote compared with 44 percent for his opponent, the pro-Moscow candidate Viktor Yanukovich.

To many Ukrainians, Yushchenko's victory was nothing less than a miracle of God, wrought by the prayers, fasting and demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian

Christians. Late in January, Yushchenko, praying and crossing himself, was sworn in as the new president.

You don't ordinarily think of evangelical Christians when Ukraine is mentioned. After all, for more than a thousand years Russians and Ukrainians have looked to Kiev, Ukraine's capital, as the fountain-spring of Slavic Orthodoxy, the tradition of Christianity that originated in Constantinople and came to Russia through Ukraine.

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainians have been evangelized by evangelicals—domestic and foreign—perhaps more than any other country in Europe. The result? There are now an estimated 13,000 evangelical fellowships in the country, in contrast with 12,000 Orthodox churches.

Even more remarkable, Ukraine has what may be today the largest church in Europe, the 26,000-member Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations (a Pentecostal church). And most remarkable, the church is led not by a Ukrainian and not by an American, but by an African—34-year-old Nigerian former student of journalism, Sunday Adelaja.

Adelaja's story is as instructive for the evangelization of Europe as it is plain unlikely. Touched, as he says, by "an encounter with God" during his first job after journalism graduate school, he thought he might interest Ukrainian professionals and intellectuals in the cause of the gospel. They showed no interest in it—or him.

So he turned to the one group willing to pay attention to the message: drug addicts, alcoholics and the down-and-outers. Not

surprisingly, many of the new converts showed such revolutionary change in their lives that their families became Christians too.

Adelaja's church grew with amazing speed during the 1990s. It was organized into more than 2,000 home groups and emphasized the participation in church ministry of as many congregants as possible. During the election demonstrations, in addition to praying and fasting, members of Adelaja's church brought food, warm clothing and tents to the demonstrators in Kiev's Independence Square.

Each day's demonstrations were opened and closed with long prayer meetings. Some Christians fasted throughout the 12-day standoff before the first election was declared invalid. Adelaja told a foreign reporter at the height of the demonstrations: "About 400 or 500 pastors are there every day, praying with microphones to the whole square so everyone could come and join us in prayer, praying for Ukraine, and fasting and preaching and giving the Christian alternative."

Well, if that doesn't set an example for us Americans, what does? Pray for Ukraine, and of course pray for America's Christians (finally) to wake up from their slumber.