

Breaking The Gender Barrier in Russia

God is using Russia's first female Bishop to redefine traditional roles in her country.

It's not easy being a woman in Russia, a country where historical cultural values give men dominant roles and do not allow for the possibility that women can lead or teach men—especially on matters as important as whether a man born in Israel 2,000 years ago is the Son of God. Nor is it easy to be a charismatic Christian in Russia, where displaying the gifts of the Holy Spirit is often greeted with deep skepticism if not outright hostility.

That means Bishop Natasha Schedrivaya, president of the Moscow-based Calvary Fellowship of Churches, has her hands full in the world's largest country as she faces skeptics within and without her denomination.

“There are pastors who are praying against me, that God will remove me and some other women in leadership because it is not the work of God but of Satan,” Schedrivaya said during a recent interview in an outdoor café on Moscow's fashionable Tverskaya Street. “There are changes coming in these churches but not always so quickly.”

Schedrivaya was elected in 1997 as president of the Calvary organization and is the first woman to be elected by male peers to such a key leadership post in Russian churches. She is also considered to be the first woman ever to be ordained a bishop in Russia. It is a highly respected title there. But Schedrivaya said she doesn't let her ascension to such key positions distort her vision of the humbling role God has given her in her homeland.

“Russians know how to order and to command, but we need to better understand that a leader is really a servant, especially in church structure,” Schedrivaya says.

Calvary Fellowship, which Schedrivaya leads, consists of 80 churches in Russia and more than 300 churches across the vast lands of the former Soviet Union. The churches are mostly charismatic and Pentecostal.

Schedrivaya estimates that 46 percent of Calvary churches are pastored by women, an unusually high number in Russian Protestant circles. More traditional Pentecostals and the vast majority of Baptists in Russia are skittish about accepting women in leadership roles, although 80 percent of the membership of Pentecostal, Baptist or charismatic churches are women.

This resistance to women in ministry is a result partly of Russian Protestants’ isolation from world developments and their struggle to survive during 70 years of severe religious repression under Communist rule. It is also a result of the influence of Russia’s dominant faith, Russian Orthodoxy, which allows women virtually no role in religious services outside singing in the choir, and traditional Russian cultural values.

Schedrivaya told Charisma magazine during a 2001 interview that Russian women missionaries who teach the gospel at home meetings in villages often find that men won’t listen to them because they don’t believe it is appropriate for women to teach men on important matters such as spirituality.

“Yet often the Holy Spirit intervenes, and a lot of these men are drawn by God into the home Bible studies and are saved,” she says.

Despite the hard work that many Russian women are doing to carry out the Great Commission across the many countries that now make up the former Soviet Union, women are rarely recognized or given the opportunity to advance their gifts in

a male-dominated hierarchy, Schedrivaya says.

"It is a challenge even to work with the Protestants. But with the Orthodox I think we'll have to wait for the coming of the universal church of Jesus (when He returns). For them, I think, it is an abomination," says Schedrivaya, who, like most ethnic Russians, has Orthodox ancestors.

Aside from her work at the helm of the Calvary Fellowship, Schedrivaya, a tall, energetic woman with a gentle forcefulness, leads a Moscow church of 40 members and travels about the immense former Soviet Union giving leadership conferences that are sometimes co-hosted by American evangelists.

Perhaps her most ambitious project, however, is the Village Gospel Harvest Project launched in 1998. The project's aim, as she explains it, is to outfit inexpensive, Russian-made vans with religious literature and send out missionaries to the estimated 36,000 villages in the former Soviet Union that have yet to be evangelized.

"If we can ask God for 1,000 vans and each of those vans can go to an average of 36 villages, then we will reach the 36,000 number," she says, adding that the project has so far given out 14 vans with another eight planned for this year. "There are villages out there where there are not even any Orthodox. I get reports back from the Far East that there is nothing, nothing at all."

One of the recipients of such a van is Pastor Mamuka Djebishashvili, who leads the embattled Word of Life congregation in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, a country of 5 million located in the Caucasus Mountains between Russia and Turkey.

"There are a couple of villages where we had wanted to evangelize, and now it is easy. We just send the van," Djebishashvili, 32, said in a telephone interview from the

Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

"We can work like this all summer. In the winter it is a little more difficult because there is no electricity and so people don't gather as much," he said in reference to frequent wintertime power outages.

Djebishashvili met Schedrivaya in the early 1990s at a Bible school in Latvia operated by Calvary International, a Florida-based missions agency. Many of the school's graduates are now pastors across the former Soviet Union. According to Schedrivaya, Georgia is an especially difficult place to work—geographically and politically—so the mobility afforded by a van is especially important.

Djebishashvili's church, which meets in a rented movie theater, was attacked last December 23 by a mob of radical Orthodox believers led by Father Basili Mkalavishvili, who has launched dozens of attacks against Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses but never has been arrested. Since the attack, in which 20 parishioners were beaten, Djebishashvili says his congregation has shrunk from 300 to 200 members.

Despite the violent Orthodox priest's attempts at enforcing a kind of extreme Orthodoxy, Djebishashvili says the general public is much more tolerant and would, for example, be ready for women to play a greater role in church life.

"Although the Orthodox here don't accept women as ministers in the church, we've got St. Nino, who brought Christianity here, and we consider her equal to the apostles," he notes, referring to Georgia's acceptance of Christianity in A.D. 337. "People are quite ready to accept women in a church role. I don't see how anyone could object to Natasha's work."

All the same, Schedrivaya reports ongoing resistance to the empowerment of women that she teaches during her leadership conferences. She recalls one Russian pastor with a congregation of 93 women and seven men who asked Schedrivaya

to help motivate his flock.

"He is telling them to sit down and cook. I'm telling them to get up and go," she remembers with a smile.

Although a hint of frustration sometimes creeps into Schedrivaya's voice, she generally exudes patience and hope when speaking of the task of enlightening and evangelizing in this nation of 143 million, where less than 1 percent of the population is Protestant. Perhaps memories of her own conversion give her staying power.

She grew up the daughter of a Soviet Army officer who was responsible for keeping soldiers solidly atheistic and away from people like the evangelist that Schedrivaya has become. Living in Minsk, Belarus, and working as an English teacher, she first came into contact with religion through an underground Pentecostal congregation in 1988.

"I'd never heard about God or Christianity," she recalls, adding that she was initially deeply skeptical, even to the point of angering a friend who had escorted her to the service. "She got mad at me because I was so stubborn."

Although she was eventually saved in 1990, that stubbornness is still evident and serves Schedrivaya well as she plows ahead with her gargantuan, divinely inspired task. Church planting is the key to winning Russia village by village, she says.

"Seventy percent of all the money (in Russia) is in Moscow," she says. "Let them have the money and the power struggle. The government will never help the villagers."

"But if 36,000 villages are reached for Christ, all of Russia will prosper. In 1996, God put it in my heart to do work with women because 80 percent of our church members are women," she says. "They are [the] best positioned to do missionary work." And Schedrivaya, determined to impact her country for

God, is helping to make sure they get to do it.

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