

An Unexpected Move of the Spirit—in New Jersey

New Jersey is probably the last place I would associate with spiritual revival. It's the most densely populated state in the U.S., with clogged highways, crowded beaches and many older churches that are closing. But last Friday night I saw evidence of vibrant Christian faith in the middle of New Jersey's urban core.

About 85 young adults—most of them Ukrainian-Americans—jammed into a small chapel in the town of South River, a few miles from Newark. They worshipped for an hour, and as they sang, a few more people slipped into the back of the room. Some of them were from Portuguese, Hungarian, Indian, Asian and African-American backgrounds.

The leader of this group, Igor Marach, is only 24, but he's been involved in youth ministry since he was 18. Like so many Slavic Christians in this country, he embraced faith in Christ at an early age. Now, he's seeing an unusual spiritual momentum stirring among his peers—and it is spreading outside of his Slavic box to other ethnic groups.

"God is really doing something special with Slavic people in my generation," says Igor. "Everyone is looking for truth. They are looking for something to believe in. And in this great search they are finding Jesus!"

Grace Church's young adult service takes place on Friday nights, when many 20-somethings would typically be in nightclubs or bars—especially now that pandemic restrictions have been relaxed. But these kids were worshipping Jesus with abandon. And after a sermon about total surrender, eight people made decisions to follow Jesus the night I visited.

After the first ministry time, another group gathered at the

altar asking for prayer to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Greg Szabo, a 22-year-old immigrant from Hungary, came to the front of the church that night and was touched by God as his friends laid hands on him.

“I was filled with the Holy Spirit that night and began to speak in tongues,” says Szabo, who came to the United States when he was 11 years old. He gave his life to Jesus in August during the pandemic. When he got home Friday night, he says he prayed in the Spirit for 45 minutes nonstop, “and a supernatural peace came over me, and a sense of intimacy that I have started developing with God.”

The youth didn’t leave the church after the service ended on Friday. They went to the basement to drink coffee and eat snacks until after midnight. On Sunday afternoon they all went to the Jersey shore to play volleyball and get more fellowship time.

Shady Hebish is a 24-year-old immigrant from Egypt who is now a part of the Grace Church family. He doesn’t understand when people in the church speak in Ukrainian or Russian, but he believes the love of Jesus overcomes the barriers of language and culture.

“I joined this community because I saw the love of God in the people,” says Shady, who speaks Arabic and English. “They welcome everyone from every background. I know that when I bring new believers and friends to Grace Church they will feel the love of God.”

Dan Rachkelyuk is only 22, but he helps lead the Friday meetings at Grace Church. Like so many of his Ukrainian friends, his family moved to the United States after the Soviet Union dissolved. He now believes his new homeland is his mission field.

“The Holy Spirit is moving in our youth,” Dan says. “Some people come to our services, and they were not even invited.

They are repenting and coming to Jesus almost monthly. And we are seeing signs and wonders following the preaching of the gospel.”

What is happening at Grace Church is actually not unique. A large number of Slavic Christians came to the United States in the 1980s and '90s, looking for religious freedom. They settled in Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, Sacramento, New Jersey and many other urban areas. Today, the children and grandchildren of those immigrants are spreading revival fires beyond the confines of Slavic culture.

And at a time when many American congregations are losing members, Grace Church has run out of seats. On this past Sunday, worshipers had to gather in an overflow room in the basement of their building. The church has purchased property nearby to build a bigger sanctuary, and the pastor announced they will begin an English-language service in two weeks to reach those who don't speak Ukrainian.

These immigrants who fled from the former Soviet Union didn't realize God was sending them to the United States to be missionaries. Today's new generation of Slavic believers is taking that mandate seriously. {eoa}

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