

## Partnership visit to Russia – Jill Baker, Jan-Feb 2017

### Friday 27<sup>th</sup> January

Smooth flight to Moscow and met there by Irina Margulis, District Superintendent for Moscow. Her English is limited but on the hour+ drive into the city I established that she oversees a district of 12 churches around the Moscow region, each (I think) with their own pastor. Immediately this compares and contrasts with (e.g.) our situation in Glasgow where we have a similar number of churches over a much smaller geographical area but with only 4 pastors... Whenever I asked the size of any congregation I was told “small”, but, in practice, “small” seemed to mean anything from 12- 50.

Dinner with the office staff at a Korean restaurant (reflecting, perhaps, the significant contribution of “Old Korean” Methodists to the Russian Methodist Church). Ref. Fyodor Kim, pastor of Raduga ministry in the city centre; his wife, Katya Kim, Bishop’s assistant; Sergei Kim and Sergei Pugachev, both lay office staff (legal & financial I think); Lydia, member at Raduga and office receptionist and DS Irina. I felt warmly welcomed by all; Fyodor and Katya have the most English and both put themselves out to make me feel at home, with Fyodor especially interested in how things work in MCB. The role of Vice-president is a bit of an enigma within UMC circles as they really have no equivalent.

“Blues Hotel” was a good place to stay, although my room seemed to be above the kitchen... a loud rattling began at about 10pm... at 11pm I phoned reception to tell them about it, the receptionist replied “I think it is air of the kitchen, I will off it”; which, thankfully, he did. Once that was sorted all was well, although I discovered (as I had been warned) just how warm Russian interiors can be!

### Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January

Russian pancakes for breakfast went down well. Promptly at 11am a different Irina arrived; I was pleased to discover that this was Irina Rushkevich who wrote the prayer in the Methodist Prayer Handbook which I had used the previous day; she is a lay student at the seminary. (NB: A number of lay people take the same courses as those in ministerial training, but with no plans for ordination – another interesting concept, especially as MCB continues to look at our training methods and “the ministry of the whole people of God”.) Irina’s English was not fluent but she was very keen to communicate and made good use of a translation app on her phone whenever we came to an impasse (which was often!) She had come to collect me by taxi, along with Pastor Tatiana and we all set off to the church which Tatiana pastors in the suburbs of Moscow, in Mytyschy; about an hour’s drive.



We arrived as the children’s club was starting and spent two hours there, making snowmen (out of socks and grain, not real snow), drinking tea, eating Scottish shortbread which I had taken and playing other games (a version of “Articulate” was a particular challenge for me!) The work at Mytyschy is a great story – when Pastor Tatiana took over about 4 years ago the congregation had dropped to about 4 or 5 (I sensed that there had been some difficulty with her predecessor who had taken a lot of the congregation with him when he left). They now have a worshipping congregation of about 25 and a number of activities in the week, of which this children’s club was an excellent example. The congregation had raised funds to purchase the premises in which we met; rooms in a block of shops and offices and were proud of their facilities. Small wonder that Pastor Tatiana had been a recent winner of the “Pastor of the year” award! Another idea we could introduce?!

From there a group of 8, including two children, lunched together (Japanese this time – are there no Russian restaurants in Russia?) and then made our way back into Moscow for a performance of “Cinderella”, not at the Bolshoi, but at the Moscow International Performing Arts Centre. It was delightful and after a day of struggling to communicate across language barriers I reflected on how music and movement can tell a story so

effectively! Back to the hotel on the Moscow Metro which I was glad to experience – some of the stations really are remarkable with ornate tiles, paintings, bas-relief, light-fittings and very long, steep escalators.

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> January

Porridge for breakfast and ready to be collected from the lobby at 10am by Mariya (Katya Kim, who was to take me to explore Moscow, being ill). Mariya, a member at Raduga, is a young woman from Samara, a city about 1000km from Moscow, who has been living and working in Moscow for the past five years. She described herself as “in love with Moscow” and spoke very good English, so an ideal guide for me! She took me to the Alexander Gardens, stretching along the entire 865m length of the western Kremlin wall, which were beautiful in a wintry way, with bare black trees and a good depth of snow. I still have to pinch myself to believe that I have now been to Red Square; for at least 50 years I have wanted to visit this historic scene of great tragedy and great glory and now I have done! It is not red on every side – in fact the Russian name “krasnaya” meant “beautiful” in Old Russian and only in modern times has the location been known as “Red Square”. It is an ambiguous name; red for Communism, red for the buildings or red for the blood spilled there? Although the Kremlin itself feels familiar from news broadcasts, the square as a whole held many surprises for me, not least that all down the opposite side, almost like a running commentary on the inevitable failure of communism, runs “Gum”, a 250m long shopping mall full of luxury goods and oozing bright lights and capitalism - the Russian equivalent of Harrods! At either end of the square, like referees in the long contest between capitalism and communism, stand two more magnificent buildings; the red-brick State Historical Museum offering the silent reflections of history, and, at the opposite end, the elaborate, brightly-domed St. Basil’s Cathedral representing the thread of religious observance which, despite all efforts, has never been totally silenced in the country. As the temperature was around -13 we dropped into “Gum” to thaw out, but made no purchases from the opulent goods on offer.

We returned to the area of my hotel to visit the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Novodevichy Convent. By now the sun was shining and the gold and silver onion domes, the white walls and the red brick towers looked perfect against the snowy background. It was a place of peace and prayer and a perfect contrast to the centre of military and political power from which we had come. We lunched in a traditional Georgian restaurant where we had soup, “lavash” bread and raspberry and mint tea. Over lunch Mariya opened up more about life in Russia which I found very interesting. In particular, as I talked a little about life in Scotland and the Independence Referendum, she remarked that she found it surprising and perhaps challenging that people from Western Europe are so interested in politics and seem to believe they can make a difference. In Russia, she suggested, the country is so huge and the state so dominant, that the general feeling, especially among young people, is to let the Government run the country – that is their job, and the people should just make the best of their lives. This, I suggested, could be what leads to revolution and uprising from time to time but, she felt, life in Russia is getting better (and she did specifically say that this was more true of life in Moscow than the rest of Russia) so things are more stable. As I say, interesting.



In the afternoon we both went to the Raduga congregation, which rents space from the Theological Seminary - in modest but reasonable accommodation, neither smart nor scruffy. After being shown round I was taken to the bible class which Mariya was helping to lead. There were 7 or 8 women there, they all contributed and it seemed a good group. At the end everyone shared a need for prayer and I was invited to join in (the rest of the class had not been translated, which I was glad about; preferring to let people ignore me and carry on as usual.) Then we all prayed for each other at the same time, especially those on our right & left - sort of silently although most were whispering aloud; very simple but very moving.

Then into church... a good-sized room with one end fitted out as a sanctuary, and about 100 seats but about 70 of the seats remained empty... whether this was because it was an unknown British preacher or whether that was normal was not explained to me. The congregation was primarily elderly – a mixture of women and men,

with maybe around a dozen of the thirty folk there under the age of 60? Mariya and others with whom I spoke talked of Methodism being regarded as a “sect” in Moscow; the Russian Orthodox Church is so dominant that it is the only understanding of “church” which most people have, any other form of religious devotion being viewed as suspect. This seems to impede the mission and undermine the confidence of individuals and of the church as a whole. Again I reflected that there are similarities with Scotland where Methodism is so tiny, the Church of Scotland so dominant and there is an issue of Methodist identity.

The worship began with prayer, greetings and the reading of a psalm, then a time of praise - Fyodor is a gifted musician and played guitar & led the singing - all in Russian with words on a screen. Just one child was present, a girl to whom Fyodor told a story and gave a blessing before she was taken out by Sergei Kim. The three bible passages were read by the worship leader for the day, who was also my interpreter and who appeared to do a very good job, helped out occasionally by Fyodor or other members of the congregation. My main text was the story of manna in the wilderness from Exodus 16 linking its daily provision to the “Day by day” theme of Acts 2. I don’t know if it was the right message for the situation – it is never easy to preach in a different culture. A couple more songs to finish then all downstairs for dinner; rice & tasty soup with Russian salad; more Scottish shortbread was well received afterwards. The church sees this sharing of food as an important part of its ministry, to the elderly in particular and also to one homeless man who is a regular attender and part of the church. I was interested to hear that the congregation sustains around 6 bible study and fellowship groups, many of them held by Skype during the week. There are also two weekly prayer meetings, one at 7am on Tuesday mornings and another in an evening. The latter, however, now has a poor attendance so will also change to a 7am slot. Prayer and bible study appear to be priorities. In conversation with Fyodor and others over dinner they were surprised to hear firstly that Andrew has four congregations to care for and secondly how close together these congregations are geographically. As I explained, it did sound rather strange – people had travelled for up to an hour to attend this service, which is the only Methodist service held in the centre of Moscow (apart from a Korean congregation which shares the same building but meets earlier). Shouldn’t we be rationalising our resources in a similar way?

### Monday 30<sup>th</sup> January

Largely spent travelling by train from Moscow to St. Petersburg in the company of Lena Kim, a pastor and editor of the “Upper Room” daily devotional notes, but who also works three days a week in a secular job as her salary from the church would not be enough to live on. She was surprised to hear that few, if any, British Methodist ministers have second jobs and, when I told her of our current crisis in presbyteral numbers, she wondered whether this wouldn’t be a possible way forward. It seems to have much to commend it (especially to me with my Primitive Methodist background!)

St Petersburg station was another work of art; in light snow we met the taxi Lena had pre-booked and began a journey of almost two hours (initially impeded by the city’s rush hour but consequently enhanced by a slow drive through the beautiful floodlit streets of central St. Petersburg) out to the venue for the Youth Forum, near the Finnish border, arriving there around 7:45pm. Immediately we were plunged into activity – dinner had almost finished, but two meals were provided in polystyrene boxes and at 8pm we joined the gathering of about 45 young people from across the Eurasian region along with their leaders for ice-breaking games. We had, unfortunately, missed the opening worship led by the Bishop, Eduard Khegay, but there was no shortage of worship over the week! I was glad to have a young man assigned to me as a translator; Fyodor, from Kyrgyzstan (who works as a spiritual director for a Christian orphanage but who also has another job, repairing washing machines, in order to supplement his income).



Group time gave the opportunity for Lena and I to be taken to our rooms, in another block on what appeared to be a vast campus – Raivola, a holiday resort not previously used by the church for their Forum, but an excellent venue. Set as it was in extensive snowy, forested grounds with a huge, brightly-lit Christmas tree by the main entrance, it had something of a fairy

tale feel! Scotland but more so! I had expected shared rooms or even dormitory accommodation, but was in a single en-suite room (as were all the adults, I think, with students sharing in twos). I returned to the main hall for the evening worship, which lasted until around 10:30pm, led mainly by the youth bands, of whom more below!

### Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> January – Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> February: Youth Forum



What a privilege to engage with these young people for a week. Just a few reflections:

- The worship was outstanding. Three bands primarily led from the stage (from Samara, Ukraine and Estonia) with other musicians occasionally taking part. They were gifted, energetic and devout, leading worship in a mature, sensitive, Spirit-filled way with brilliant music and a great deal of prayer. Words were projected – all in Russian of course and I wished I knew the language, but the language of worship is deeper and I felt at one as I clapped or hummed along, managing to join in with the alleluias and the O-O-Os! Every evening except one (when a talent show took some of the time) around 2½ hours were devoted to worship, and, on the final evening, the session lasted from 8pm until 2:30am.
- The preaching at morning and evening devotions was serious and thorough (sometimes perhaps a little too thorough) but included some very moving testimonies as people interpreted the scriptures.
- Main sessions were led by Rev. Jeremy Bassett, originally South African but now living in Oklahoma and Director of the Office of Mission there. The theme was “When God calls” which he shared in simple, direct messages and seemed to go down well. His colleague, Sarah Nichols, also shared something of her story and, in particular, her role in Project Transformation, a literacy project, which will be one of the Eurasian missions in summer this year (more below).
- Several sessions were dedicated to hearing from the mission teams of 2016 and advertising the available missions for 2017. These are 4 projects in different parts of the region aimed at addressing a social need in the name of Jesus, through the agency of the Methodist Church. It is clearly hoped that all the young people will engage with these missions in some way – by prayer and fund-raising if not able to be missionaries themselves.
- On the whole the presentation of material was somewhat “old-fashioned”, there was good use of video and screens in worship, but other sessions were mainly talks from the front followed by group time to discuss questions. I sensed that there were times when the youngsters were drifting a bit... but perhaps that is inevitable!
- There was one session of workshops, with dance, music, lectio divina and video-making on offer, the results of all seemed good.
- I was very warmly welcomed to the Forum by the organisers (although I must have been foisted on them by the Bishop when we made the plans in October in Norway!) I had been invited to lead the final “lecture” on Friday morning, for which I took the theme “The call to be a pilgrim” and tried to build on Jeremy’s teaching during the week and also look at how the youngsters might “re-enter” their own situations at the end of this week’s journey. Despite the fact that few had had more than a couple of hours’ sleep the night before they were present in body and (largely) in spirit too!
- The youngsters too were, I felt, friendly, polite and really tried to communicate with me. Some spoke English very well and were keen to practice it, others knew only a few words, but smiled a lot!
- I had also taken Justice and Holiness and 3-Generate wrist bands and these were very well-received, with many in evidence all week. When I was introduced on Monday night I brought warm greetings from the British Methodist Church and especially from our youth, which received a little cheer. Perhaps there are ways in which a deeper partnership between our youth work and that across Eurasia could be built?

- Bishop Eduard Khegay was in attendance until very early on the final morning and shared both formally and informally with the youth. He is clearly well loved and well respected by all ages. He is an extremely bright, thinking man and I had some interesting conversations with him:
  - The road-map towards financial autonomy is, he thinks, proceeding well. He spoke of the “donor mentality” of people of his generation, who were used to everything being given in grants from other sources, but felt that the younger people have a different mind-set and expect to work towards financial independence.
  - He was clearly, and justifiably, proud of the growing youth work and said that the Forum always makes him feel positive and hopeful about the church.
  - In particular he spoke of how events such as the Forum work “horizontally” to create relationships and momentum across the church, which is often lost in the “vertical” transmission of ideas and energy from Conference to the districts, to the pastors, to the congregations... I loved the idea of “Horizontal Connexionalism” and think we could learn much from that concept in Britain (“3-Generate” is certainly one such example, and I would suggest MWiB is another; do we put enough resources into these ways of developing the Connexional church?)



- Young people attended the Forum from across the region; Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and, for the first time, Estonia. It was moving and significant to see Russian and Ukrainian youngsters leading worship and dancing together, given the current situation of war between their nations. For some, the journeys were considerably longer than mine had been from Britain. The youngest participant, Valeria, aged 16, had travelled on her own from Komsomolsk-on-Amur in the far east of Russia, a distance of over 9000km (through 7 time zones), to attend.
- These few days and these young people have left an indelible mark on me & I feel privileged to have been involved with this event.

### Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> February

A wonderful (and well-timed) day on my own in St. Petersburg, processing some of the emotions and impressions of my first week in Russia and walking the streets of this remarkable city which is so full of the past. Great grandeur (some of it a bit faded), tragic and triumphant history, complex politics. All around were banners marking a commemoration of the 900 days of the Siege of Leningrad which finished on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1944 (& is commemorated every year, it seems) but the hotel concierge was surprised when I asked if there were to be any activities to mark the centenary of the February Revolution in 1917. It seems Russia is not quite sure how to approach this milestone. As an article I found online in the Guardian expressed it, to celebrate revolution in any form goes against Putin’s emphasis on stability, but neither can he nor his government be seen to support the policies, style or methods of Tsar Nicholas II who was forced to abdicate almost exactly 100 years ago... Interesting times!

### Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February



By taxi to Stremlyenie Methodist Church in an industrial area on the south-east of the city. Rev. Oksana Petrova looked after me (she is one of two pastors based at that church with, I think, two congregations meeting there at different times). The building was well appointed with an attractive sanctuary area and good meeting rooms along with a well-equipped kitchen, toilets and sleeping accommodation with a shower. A band formed of about 5 young members of the congregation led the service, with Oksana reading the bible passages (which she had chosen), Jeremy Basset

bringing greetings and me preaching – seemed okay! Oksana translated. The congregation included about 8 youngsters who had stayed on in St. Petersburg after the Youth Forum, also Rev. Andrei Kim and Rev. Irina Margulis. In all a congregation of about 30.

Worship was very similar in style to the previous week at Moscow. Again substantial refreshments were shared after the service (more shortbread opportunities!) and I was able to chat with a few members who had some English. At 2pm a soup kitchen for homeless/destitute men operated from the church – around 12 men attended and were grateful to be given hot soup, sandwiches and hot drinks. They mostly looked in a poor state, many of them disabled and with faces weathered by the extreme cold of a Russian winter on the streets.

I was collected from the church by Julia, a member at Pskov Methodist Church, and good friend of Nicola Vidamour. She drove me to the airport to pick up Nicola and then drove us both to Pskov on snowy roads in the dark – a journey of five hours. We stopped midway for a light meal (and my first experience of Soviet toilets!). Julia was delighted to be reunited with Nicola, who is clearly held in very high regard across the Russian Methodist Church and nowhere more so than in Pskov where she served as pastor from 2003-2009. Julia would not accept money towards the petrol or the meal – and this generosity was repeated on many occasions by folk who felt they wanted to repay Nicola's kindness and the giving of herself in ministry during her time here.

#### Monday 6<sup>th</sup> – Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> February



2 very cold days spent in Pskov, with temperatures falling to 21 degrees below freezing! The days were a mixture of sight-seeing and catching up with Nicola's friends, including her former colleague, now retired, Rev. Nelli. These conversations gave me opportunities to hear more about what it means to be a Methodist day-by-day in Russia in 2017. I was glad to visit the church at Pskov; the congregation is currently without a pastor, which causes concern, but (a later conversation with the DS suggested) may be helping the church to develop local lay leadership. A pastor in every

congregation is the experience and expectation of Russian Methodist churches, despite the relatively small numbers in most congregations. This has been funded in large part by partnership with the UMC in America, but the current Bishop Eduard is keen to move towards financial autonomy, so some re-thinking may have to be done about sustainable staffing levels. I wondered whether we in the British Methodist Church need to give more serious consideration to finding ways to increase pastoral support in our congregations, whether through lay or ordained ministry.

#### Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> February

A cramped five hour bus journey back to St. Petersburg began the day. We made our way by a local bus back out to Stremlynie church in whose accommodation we were to spend the final three nights of my stay in Russia. Rev. Oksana Petrova met us and helped us to settle in and we had more conversation about Methodism in Russia and in Britain. Nicola and I travelled into the city centre for shopping and to eat in the evening.

#### Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> February

A wonderful experience spending 5 hours in the Hermitage art collection housed in the Winter Palace. For me, it was a personal pilgrimage to see Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal" which I found very moving and inspiring. I know reflections on this painting, and more widely on art, culture and faith, especially in the Soviet/Russian context, will feed into my thinking, preaching and speaking over the coming year of office and beyond.

Further inspiration, through music, at a performance of Bach's Mass in B minor at the Mariinsky Concert Hall in the evening.

## Friday 10<sup>th</sup> February

This time it was the Russian Museum, with its fine collection of Russian art, which took most of our day and again it was an inspiring time with space to begin processing my experiences of Russia and to begin to prepare for “re-entry” into the British context.

In the evening we again made our way out to the Mariinsky area, this time to the old theatre, for a brilliant production of the ballet “Swan Lake” – very Russian and a wonderful end to the visit. We were joined for this by another of Nicola’s former friends from the Methodist Community in Pskov (now living in St. Petersburg) and once again I was given a window into Nicola’s much-appreciated ministry in this vast land.

## Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February



Our final morning was spent at the church premises, engaging with ministers arriving for a meeting later in the day. First in was Rev. Tatiana Menshova who had travelled for more than 13 hours from Belarus and who arrived at 8am. She is currently DS of a huge area – Belarus, Kaliningrad and Pskov – and shared something of her role and her family life with us. Her story of conversion to Christ through asking for prayers for her disabled son from the local Pentecostal church, and then of meeting Methodists at an ecumenical gathering and finding the Methodist doctrine and practice more in keeping with her own understanding of the gospel, of gathering friends around her in Belarus to share in study and prayer and from this of growing a new Methodist Church of around 35-40 people was very inspiring – and humbly shared. Again, so much to learn about growth happening principally through relationships.

Rev. Elena Chudinova, the St. Petersburg DS and main pastor in this congregation, also joined us and again it was good to talk and share stories and to build relationships. Rev. Andrei Kim, whom I had met in Norway and at the Youth Forum, and who is a long-standing colleague and friend of Nicola’s, also arrived and we all shared in further conversation before they began their planning meetings and Nicola and I made our way to the airport (to discover a delayed flight!)

Overall reflections:

- A wonderful opportunity – thank you! So many different experiences within my time here, some of which I found personally stretching. Great to have Nicola join me at the end to share her expertise in language, culture and Russian life and to help me reflect on the whole visit.
- Some striking similarities between Scotland and Russia, ranging from both being very dependent on the oil price and having largely cold, snowy weather and a lot of trees to the more significant church situation of a tiny Methodist community in a nation dominated by a national church (Church of Scotland/Russian Orthodox). The Russian Orthodox Church does not welcome other denominations, leading to the “sect” thinking mentioned above; something I have also encountered amongst Scottish Methodists. Add to that the fact that both cultures eat a lot of porridge and in both places addiction to alcohol (whisky or vodka) is a real problem and you begin to see what I mean!
- Russia is a fascinating and immense country. It seems remarkable that such a large land mass could possibly be governed as a cohesive unit – perhaps it can’t. In this post-Soviet context it is significant that Methodism operates across the entire Eurasia region as one body (if thinly spread).
- Our partnership with UMC in Russia is greatly valued. This has been incarnated through Nicola’s ministry there and it has been good to pay an official visit and so build on that. “It is not often that a British Methodist comes to see us” Elena Chudinova said as I bade her goodbye on the last day.
- Everyone invited me back – but that is the generous Russian hospitable spirit. I would love to think I might go again one day, but even if not, feel that this visit has strengthened an already positive relationship and certainly helped to shape and form me.