

To Russia with love: Pastor Gordon Penfold spreads reconciliation message overseas

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

It took 18 months of bureaucratic red tape, but Pastor Gordon Penfold of First Baptist Church in Holyoke finally received a religious visa to visit a far eastern section of Russia for two weeks in March.

On Sunday, April 19, Penfold shared his experiences in Russia with the community by giving a slide show presentation at First Baptist Church.

Penfold said his journey to Russia actually began in the early 1990s, soon after perestroika. "Our church hosted Sergei Timchenko, one of the heroes who survived the Communist persecutions in Ukraine," he said. "At that time, Sergei was a student at Denver Seminary and was a key person in The Light of the Gospel, a missionary movement in the Former Soviet Union."

He visited the church Penfold was pastoring in Las Animas with Ray Prigodich. He taught at Denver Seminary and was one of the founders of Donetsk Christian University in Donetsk, Ukraine.

At the end of their time together Penfold said to Prigodich, "If you ever need someone to teach at the University, I would be available."

Penfold said it seemed like a natural fit because his wife Beth was fluent in German and had studied Russian at CSU.

He also explained that not long after he became a Christian in 1969, he had begun to pray for the spiritual condition of the former Soviet Union. He said he knew life was extremely difficult for those who desired to serve Jesus Christ in that part of the world.

"We were greatly challenged by their great perseverance in the face of overwhelming hardship," he said.

In 1994 Prigodich called and asked Penfold to travel to Ukraine and teach at the University. "I agreed and that was the beginning of an ongoing relationship with Christian education and ministry in churches in the former Soviet Union," he said.

Two years ago, Victor Gaydayenko, a friend and former student, contacted him about the possibility of making a trip to Primorye, the Russian Far East.

Gaydayenko is the president of Word of Grace Bible College in West Ukraine. He is also an integral part of Hope to People, a mission agency that grew out of The Light of the Gospel.

Penfold agreed to pray about the possibilities of making the trip, and began the attempt to get a religious visa for the trip. That is difficult at this point in time, as Russia as a whole has been denying entry to the country on religious visas.

Initially, he was going to travel to Russia last fall. However, it became apparent that no visa could be obtained. He discovered the minimum period of time required to obtain a religious visa is four months.

Yuri Morokhovets, director of PAMCEC, the Primorye Association of Evangelical and Missionary Churches (part of Hope to People), and Penfold's contact in the Russian Far East, asked him to make a trip in the spring. So he began the process of obtaining a visa late last fall.

There were four obstacles Penfold faced in obtaining a religious visa in Russia. First, the climate in Russia is growing quite hostile toward evangelical Christianity.

"A friend of mine and former missionary to Russia told me, 'Gordon, you will never receive a religious visa. They are simply not granted in Russia any longer,'" said Penfold.

His friend and his family were forced out of Russia a few years ago and now reside in Ukraine. But Penfold decided to go ahead. "Reality told me, 'You can pursue this invitation, but don't expect to receive it,'" he said.

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Secondly, his application had to be approved by two government agencies. Third, one must obtain approval from the Russian Embassy in the U.S. for travel to Russia. Religious visa applications are often denied by the Embassy.

Finally, many travelers who do receive the visa are turned back at the border when arriving in the country. "So there was a chance that my only view of Russia would be from inside of the Vladivostok airport," said Penfold.

Nevertheless, he pursued the visa application, and was scheduled to leave on March 5, 2009. With no visa and no good prospects of obtaining one, he wrote a letter to Yuri Morokhovets on Feb. 5 that read, "Yuri, this trip is not coming together. Let's cancel the trip and try to reschedule it for the fall."

Morokhevets wrote back with urgency, "Gordon, this fall will not work. We need you to come now. We need you to work with our pastors and our churches."

Penfold responded he needed to have the invitation by Feb. 20 to have any chance at all of obtaining the visa in time for the trip.

Feb. 20 came and went. . .and no visa. He called Morokhevets, who said, "We will have the invitation on Feb. 24." In that case, Penfold responded, he had to push the trip back one week, which Morokhevets agreed to.

Meanwhile, on an act of faith, Penfold purchased airline tickets for March 12-26.

On Feb. 24, he received the official invitation from the Russian government to travel to Primorye. The next day he sent the visa application, faxed copy of the invitation and his passport to the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Two days later, he was informed by the Embassy the faxed invitation was not clear enough to grant a visa. On that same day, the hard copy of the invitation arrived in Colorado Springs. It was faxed again and sent with a scanned version to the Embassy.

Finally, on March 2, Penfold was told the visa had been approved. However, by the time it was approved, it was too late to retrieve it from the Embassy. So the visa was to be sent back to the travel agent.

Two days later, the visa arrived in Colorado Springs as promised. "But reality now set in," said Penfold. "I had only a week to prepare to travel a third of the way around the world!"

Penfold departed for Russia on March 12 and entered the country two days later. "It's always a bit unsettling entering another country—another culture with a strange language," he said. "I was not totally a stranger here as I have made seven other trips to the Former Soviet Union. I had simply never been in Russia."

Vladivostok is located on the east coast of Asia near to the place where China, Russia and North Korea join. The Primorye region is located not far from Japan, and is eight time zones removed from Moscow.

"Russia is a huge country," said Penfold, adding, "Nearly everyone drives a Toyota!"

But he was there for more than just sight-seeing. Morokhovets had made the needs very plain. All of the churches that were started after perestroika had either plateaued in attendance or were in decline.

Many of the churches were new ones pastored by inexperienced pastors. Consequently, there was a great deal of unresolved conflict in those churches.

Penfold and Morokhovets developed a threefold objective:

- Conduct a pastor's conference that would equip pastors to handle conflict in a biblical way.
- Equip pastors to begin thinking strategically so they more effectively reach their communities with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

—Spend time with churches, pastors and church groups, and give them counsel in their individual ministries and situations.

Penfold said his role as a facilitator and peacemaker involved three areas affected by conflict. “Conflict affects all of us at different levels,” he added. He explained it this way:

“First, sin creates conflict between God and us. The Lord Jesus addressed this need when He made peace through the blood of His cross (Colossians 1:20). The Gospel is the means of reconciliation in this area of life.

“Second, we often have conflict with people. Conflict is inevitable. The key to conflict is not avoiding it, but handling it in a biblical fashion. Only then can we be overcomers in life rather than those overwhelmed by conflict.

“So my role was to train and equip the pastors and church leaders in the practices and principles of handling conflict God’s way.

“Third, people often experience deep conflict within themselves. There is no peace in the depths of their being. This is often the result of an unwillingness to accept forgiveness from God or from a failure to genuinely extend or accept grace and forgiveness from others.

“Part of my role was to help individuals handle the issues of unforgiveness that plagued them.”

During his two-week visit to Russia, Penfold kept a hectic schedule. First, he led a week-long pastor’s conference attended by 45 individuals. Most were pastors or associate pastors, with a few other church members sprinkled in the group.

He preached a total of eight messages in 12 days, spending two and a half days on Conflict Resolution and Biblical Reconciliation alone.

According to Penfold, most of the churches in the area are young and the pastors have less than five years experience. These two factors tend to lead to conflict.

“Many pastors commented they wish they had understood these principles five years ago,” he said. “It would have saved them lots of headaches and heartaches.”

He also spent nearly a day and a half on Fresh Start Principles of turn around. Said Penfold, every church represented at the conference was either plateaued or declining in attendance.

The final half day was spent discussing leadership issues in the churches

During his time in Vladivostok, he also counseled seven different church groups or pastors regarding issues of conflict in their local churches.

The most involved of these reconciliations concerned two churches located in a city north of Vladivostok. Penfold traveled eight hours to get there so he could work with the churches. One of the pastors was a former student of his at Donetsk Christian University.

After listening to the two sides of the issue, Penfold recommended a 30-day period for preparation for reconciliation. But he said his former student responded, “No! You are the only one I trust! If we can’t seek reconciliation with you, there will be no reconciliation.”

So his team stayed an extra day to seek to bring resolution between the two churches. “After over three hours on Monday night, God brought peace between the two parties,” he said. “It was at this point I knew one of the reasons that God brought me to Russia was for this meeting.

Added Penfold, there are three evangelical churches for 28,000 people in the Primorye region, and the conflict between these two churches had become a proverb. “Look at the evangelicals! They are always fighting with one another!”

“Our prayer,” he said, “is that there will be a new proverb, ‘See how much they love one another!’”

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Because he was working so hard throughout his visit, Penfold said he wasn't able to absorb the fact he was in Russia until the trip was nearly over.

"On March 20, as we traveled through Vladivostok, I noted the back of the vehicle in front of us on the freeway. The driver had carefully scrubbed the winter grime off his license plate. The license plate in large letters said, 'RUS.' It suddenly dawned on me. I am in Russia."

"Up to that point," he continued, "I had been so busy with all of the details of translation, the conference and with eight hours of instruction each day, that the reality of my position had not sunk in."

In addition to the conference and other duties, Penfold also found time to preach in a Russian Orthodox Church and became the first American to ever visit one of the local orphanages.

Reflecting back on the work he did during his two weeks in Russia, Penfold is grateful for the opportunity he received to be a part of it. "God gave me the privilege of being involved in biblical peacemaking and reconciliation on all these levels during the trip to Russia," he said, adding, "Please pray that the steps we took will continue to bear fruit."

Finally, Penfold thanked those who prayed for and supported his trip to Russia, saying "Where prayer is focused, power falls. All I can say is Slava Bogu—Praise God!"