



## UBA ASSISTeam Goes Global

by Jonathan Brooks

"The experiences on this trip to Russia have reinforced my convictions that we need to teach the Bible for life transformation rather than to simply communicate information or gather more and more of God's Word to hoard it," said Jeremy McKewen (2<sup>nd</sup> from left), chairperson of the UBA ASSISTeam, and one of a team of six who traveled to Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, under the leadership of Sally Hinzie in October 2007.

The Russia team consisted of Sally Hinzie, Leonard Hinzie, Dave Sheddrick Keith Rogers and Dianna Garner in addition to McKewen. The team's primary purpose was to teach and train Russian church leaders in how to start and lead small group Bible studies. McKewen observed that small groups are not traditionally used by the Russian church. Russian Christians typically worship together and study privately. The concept of small groups is new to them.

"We should seek to take hold of what the Bible says and live it out," added McKewen, who serves as Minister of Youth at Richey Street Baptist Church in Pasadena. "It is a matter of how obedient will I be versus how much information can I store."

Fellow ASSISTeam member Dianna Garner (row 2, first from left) was able to connect with some of the kids she met during her first trip in 1997. She noted that after 10 years of being part of their local church, the Russian youth are still seeking to know Christ. "They are very obedient to their parents, attend church, and do what they are supposed to do," said Garner, who serves as Missions Pastor at New Hope Community Church. "However,



the students are still trying to figure out how what they are learning about Christ should affect their daily lives. I am not sure how much is head knowledge and how much is heart knowledge. Russians are very intellectual. They don't seem to have grasped the relational aspect of their faith. The process to assist them in their relationships with Christ is a slow one, which is one reason we keep going back."

The team not only led a conference for church leaders in Nizhny Novgorod about small groups, but they also modeled small groups at a halfway house for former prisoners. "This was a very powerful experience for me," said McKewen. "The halfway house is state-run; the environment is bleak and little hope exists there. We joined with two missionaries who minister to the group weekly and, using a translator, modeled small groups to the men who live in the halfway house."

During the small group gathering, Garner, an African-American, fielded a question about slavery in America. Garner concluded her answer by saying that God is not concerned about the color of one's skin. She asserted that she traveled 7,000 miles one way to be with the Russian Christians because she trusts God.

"It is equally important that you trust God in the midst of your present condition," Garner told the former prisoners. "Trust Him and He can change your life. Instead of focusing on your condition, focus on building His Kingdom."

Micah, one of the halfway house residents, asked to speak privately with Garner after she concluded her answer. During their discussion, Micah decided to follow Jesus. The ASSISTeam members were able to see the life transforming potential of Scripture unfold before their eyes.

The team also visited a couple of other halfway houses on the edge of Nizhny Novgorod run by churches. One of the halfway houses they visited was a drug and alcohol rehab center. It was a small, two-bedroom house with no running water. Twenty-six young adults live in the house. The ministry was started by Dmitry Zborsky. (Click [here](#) for December article on Dmitry.)

There was such a demand to help people recover from drugs and alcohol that Dmitry and his team put as many people as they could in the house. During the AssistTeam's visit, there were over 30 people crammed in the tiny living room worshipping and sharing Bible stories. Team members shared the story of the demon-possessed man and how Jesus healed him. They discussed how to become a missionary to one's own people. Among the people there, the team saw a hunger to absorb God's Word and a desire to change their generation for Christ.

The trip to Russia was McKewen's first experience with international missions. "I really didn't know what to expect. This trip opened my eyes to how similar people are even though they speak different languages and are from different cultures and have had different experiences. I found the Russian people to be very much like most people I know here in the U.S. They were warm and very committed to their faith."



McKewen also noted that Nizhny Novgorod, population 1.5 million, has six universities. "There is a hunger in young adults in Nizhny Novgorod to reach their generation, but there is also a fatalistic attitude toward reaching the lost," said McKewen. "They see their culture as hindering their ability to share the Gospel. Evangelical groups are considered cults. The young Christians don't feel they have a voice; their friends don't want to talk about their faith since they see them as members of a cult."



The struggle of Russian Christians to adjust to becoming marginalized is similar to what McKewen has observed in the United States. The young Russian Christians seek to overcome cultural challenges in order to impact their community for Christ, just like American Christians. The similarities he observed installed in McKewen the need to cooperate with and encourage fellow brothers and sisters in Christ around the world.

For Garner, who has served on UBA ASSISTeams since 1992, the trip reinforced the importance to reach the lost for Christ both locally and abroad. "How we approach that goal will be different for each group encountered, but the fact remains that we all need Christ." In essence, she, like McKewen, calls all Christians to obediently follow God for the purpose of transforming both the world and their local communities.