

# How to reach 5 million Russian-Americans for Christ

By Mickey Noah

ALPHARETTA, Ga. – Twelve Russian and Ukrainian church planting strategists and pastors from across the U.S. and Canada met in the first strategy roundtable of its kind at the North American Mission Board Dec. 1-2 and founded the “Slavic Church Planting Network.”

The group – representing nine different state conventions, the Canadian National Baptist Convention, churches and associations -- set a “God-sized” goal of planting 500 new churches – Slavic and non-Slavic – by 2025 in urban areas throughout the two countries.

Participating in the two-day strategy session at NAMB were Anatoly Moshkovsky, Philadelphia, Pa.; Anatoly Odnoralov, Denver, Colo.; Andrew Ryzhkov, Atlanta, Ga.; Tony Ahaev, Fresno, Calif.; Fedor Songorov, West Springfield, Mass.; George Harlov, Boston, Mass.; Ivan Mileyev, Fresno, Calif.; Jan Vezikov, Boston, Mass.; Victor Pilipchuk, Cleveland, Ohio; Victor Visotsky, Falls Church, Va.; Victor Antipov, Port Charlotte, Fla.; and Yury Suprunov, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Almost five million Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking people – a conservative estimate -- live in North America, according to Mark Hobafcovich, NAMB’s consultant for urban church planting in North America.

Out of this number, Hobafcovich estimates there are only 170 Russian/Ukrainian Slavic Baptist churches and missions -- with a total membership of some 23,400 -- in all of North America. Only some 60 of these churches are Southern Baptist. Of the 23,400 church members, Baptists represent only 0.47 percent.

Hobafcovich said the population of the five million Russian and Ukrainians in North America breaks down like this:

- of Russian ancestry in the United States: 2.65 million
- of Russian ancestry in Canada: 338,000
- of Ukrainian ancestry in the U.S.: 863,000
- of Ukrainian ancestry in Canada: 1.07 million.

The top five U.S. states by populations of those of Russian descent are New York, 460,261; California, 402,480; New Jersey, 189,524; Illinois, 121,397; and Massachusetts, 110,033. States with the largest Ukrainian-American populations are New York, 148,700; Pennsylvania, 122,291; California, 83,125; New Jersey, 73,809; and Illinois, 47,623.

But reaching Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking people in North America is “very complex,” according to Hobafcovich, because whether Jewish, Orthodox Christian or Muslim, all must be engaged and understood on the basis of their worldview and culture.

“We also haven’t done a good job with the second- or third-generation Russians who came to the U.S. as youngsters or were born here but whose worldview was shaped by Russian culture and language. Although highly capable, intelligent, intellectual people, they just don’t fit the American mindset.

“We must pursue all of these people with different strategies because one size does not fit all,” said Hobafcovich. It’s complex but very exciting.”

Each one of the dozen Russian pastors and church planters who attended the NAMB roundtable last week have their own unique backgrounds, mission fields, churches, challenges and stories to tell.



Mark Hobafcovich (center-right in white shirt), the North American Mission Board’s consultant for urban church planting, makes a point with the dozen Russian pastors and church planters who formed a new Slavic Church Planting Network during a recent roundtable session at NAMB. Photo by John Swain

Tony Ahaev and Ivan Mileyev both work as ethnic church planters for the California Southern Baptist Convention, based in Fresno.

“Our job is planting new churches among the Slavic people of California,” said Ahaev, 62, “which conservatively has 300,000 to 400,000 Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking people in the whole state.”

Mileyev said the biggest pockets of Russians in the Golden State are in Los Angeles, the counties south of Los Angeles, San Francisco and in Sacramento. He pastors a Slavic Baptist church in Fresno.

Ahaev, who has planted churches in California for 20 years, said during that time, 80-100 new Slavic churches have sprung up throughout the state.

“We just don’t have the trained people with the skill and experience to work with the Russian Jewish people. For example, there are a lot of Russian Jewish people west of L.A. in the Beverly Hills area. But they would never come to the Baptist church I pastored in Hollywood. They just don’t mix.”

Ahaev believes in a strategy of reaching out to California Russians and Ukrainians by starting English as Second Language (ESL) classes, doing social outreach and teaching them about the Old Testament.

“Once you’ve done that, then you slowly introduce them to the Gospel,” said Ahaev. “You just can’t go in and say, ‘Let’s have church.’ They won’t respond to that. They had no culture of religion in Russia. It takes a long time to reach them, a lot of patience. The best way is to start new churches.”



*Tony Ahaev (foreground), a 20-year veteran of strategic church planting among Russian Jewish people for the California Southern Baptist Convention, Fresno, Calif., tells his Russian pastor colleagues from across North America how “patience is the key” to sharing the Gospel with this people group. Photo by John Swain*

Four years ago in Toronto, new pastor Yury Suprunov – who had just come to Canada from Russia – took a big chance when he suggested planting a new church north of the city to the 250 members of his 100-year-old church downtown. After a century, they didn’t see the need.

But they had to admit that Toronto’s growing Russian population had migrated 30 miles north of the city, where Yury planted his new church, Good News Baptist Church. Today, the downtown church still has its 250 members, who are now proud of their young church plant attended by 80 or so north of Toronto. Suprunov estimates that Toronto has 500,000 Russian-speaking people.

Anatoly Moshkovsky, 56, is an ethnic church planting team leader for the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania/South Jersey. For 10 years before that, he pastored 200-member Ukrainian Baptist Church in a Philadelphia suburb.

“According to the Philadelphia school district, we have 100,000 Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking people in seven counties surrounding Philadelphia,” says Moshkovsky. He said only 2-4 percent – 2,000-4,000 – are evangelical Christians.

Even in the heart of the Deep South, some 55,000-75,000 Russian-speaking people call Atlanta home, said Andrew Ryshkov, who with wife, Inna, operate Byelorussian Mission, based in Cumming, Ga.

“About 70 percent of these are Russian Jewish located in Atlanta’s northwestern, northern and northeastern suburbs between Interstates 75 and 85 and Georgia Highway 400. Only 2,000 of them are evangelical Christians. We have so much work to do in planting new churches in the Atlanta area,” Ryshkov said.

In the last 10 years, Ryshkov has helped plant two Russian churches, one each in Snellville, Ga. and Doraville, Ga. He will soon publish a book on how to start Russian churches, and how to witness to Russian Jewish people. Ryshkov and his church plants use weekly home visitation to reach out to local Russian Jewish residents and as a result, he sees salvation decisions each week.

“Everything starts with friendships and relationships,” he said. “Ninety-nine percent of the people who come to one of our two churches come first to our house for dinner and fellowship. And thanks to Inna, we have an excellent library, and we use books to reach Russian Jewish people, who are very intellectual.

“We do this because we have a great calling,” says Ryshkov, the son of a long-time preacher and church planter back in his home country of Belarus. “I always dreamed of being a preacher like my father. It burns in my heart.”

NAMB’s Hobafcovich says that “if you look at this work from the macro level, it looks impossible. However, it’s a God thing. This is very hard work. But these guys have such a passion.

“You have to have a sense of calling because if you don’t, you would just give up. It’s too hard. But the passion comes from the heart of God. You have to be compassionate about lost people.”

Hobafcovich said Southern Baptists have the partnerships already in place to reach North America’s five million Russian-speaking residents.

“We have a good infrastructure with the associations and state conventions. Through the Cooperative Program, we have the funding mechanism. Once we know where we’re going and develop some strategy of how to get there, we can overcome the obstacles. When you step out of the boxes of your mind, the light comes on and you can see the possibilities.”