

## “Experience the Life”

By Beth Sandell, with input from other team members

In July, 2006, six women from the United States traveled to Magadan, Russia, to join in a Christian women’s conference. Our team included:

Mary Schaefer, Kent Covenant Church, Kent, Washington  
Toni Schwabe Crossroads Covenant Church, Forest Lake, Minnesota  
Virginia Maldonado, Professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota  
Crystal Dahlgren, Student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota  
Wendy Meyer, Evangelical Covenant Church, North Mankato, Minnesota  
Beth Sandell, Evangelical Covenant Church, North Mankato, Minnesota

This was my ninth trip to Russia since 1993 and my seventh trip to Magadan since 1999. My other visits to Russia’s Far East were to teach Christian Education at churches and in a small Bible College. The opportunity to go with other women from North America to Magadan was a dream come true for me.

Each of the American women had participated in women’s conferences in our own hemisphere, but doing something similar in Magadan was quite radical. This city is the former center of Stalin’s Gulag prison system. There are only about 1,000 non-Orthodox Christians spread among 15 churches and fellowship groups in Magadan, a city of 130,000. The powers of fear and suspicion which held people under Communism, in the former Soviet Union, have filtered deeply into the thinking of some church members. For most of the twentieth century, it was not even safe for believers to worship together. Today, there are many traditions in the churches that prevent women from some of the blessings that we take for granted in North America. For example, most churches maintain that women are only permitted to teach children, not adults, and women are not allowed to lead or preach during worship. Christian women in Magadan have never had the opportunity to fellowship and worship together as sisters in Christ across denominations. The presence of our team of Americans would give the women in Magadan an “excuse” to gather and worship and learn in spite of their denominational differences.

We knew the cost would be significant financially, physically and spiritually. For each one of us, at the point of decision, opposition from the evil one began in our personal lives. Each of us experienced some kind of family crisis or schedule problem. Some of us had elderly or sick relatives who needed our attention. Some of us had new grandchildren to welcome into the world. Two of us had minor car accidents. Many of us made financial sacrifices to go. The Lord impressed each member of our team with the promise, “You will go, you will get to Magadan, and you will encourage the women.” We were inspired by Matthew’s story about Jesus going into the region of Magadan, which no longer exists in the Holy Land, but exists in Russia’s Far East. Jesus was leading the way. With all of the opposition, our only goal had become to get to Magadan. We trusted the Lord to do the rest.

We originally planned to travel the easy and short way, to the west, through Alaska, 4000 miles across the Bering Sea, and into Russia’s Far East. However, the week before we were scheduled to leave, the Russian airlines went bankrupt. We had to quickly change our itinerary to leave one week later and to travel east, across the United States and the Atlantic Ocean. Our new route meant we changed planes in Copenhagen, Denmark, and spent time in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, before going across all of Russia, to get to Magadan, a total of 17 time zones from Minnesota. We had to fly one week later, and the added cost in time and money caused four of our original team to drop out of the mission trip. These dear friends formed the core of thousands of believers who were praying for us throughout the weeks of the trip.

On the other hand, that extra time at home seemed provided by God specifically so we could use the time for important events in the lives of our families – an unexpected pregnancy discovered, a healthy baby to be born, the funeral of a close friend, and many reconciliations and situations resolved.

Another positive result was that the change in route gave us several days in St. Petersburg for orientation to Russian culture and life. We stayed with Leonid and Leanna Regheta, Covenant missionaries, at St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU). What a blessing they were to us as they introduced us to life in Russia by their loving hospitality. Leanna served us nourishing and delicious dinners each night. We enjoyed their two children, Linnea and Timothy. Leonid helped us to register our passports with city authorities and to exchange our dollars for Russian rubles. We learned about SPCU's history and Constantine, their Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, invited us to return to them any time to "experience the life" of St. Petersburg.

One day, we had lunch at the Hermitage Museum and gazed at original paintings by Rembrandt and DaVinci. Albina, an English-speaking guide, narrated a city tour. We saw the Church of the Spilled Blood, built on the spot where Czar Alexander II was mortally wounded, and the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonder Worker, where she was baptized, except she referred to it as being "Christianized."

The next day, Leonid showed us the aristocratic house that some call the birthplace of Evangelical Christianity in Russia and accompanied us on a canal boat tour. We saw the University building where Mendel taught chemistry and a courtyard where writer Dostoyevsky drank coffee. We enjoyed a tea time at the Stroganoff Palace. We shopped at a Christian bookstore.

On our third evening in Russia, we climbed aboard the all-night train to Moscow. Our train was called the Nicholai Express, and each car was emblazoned with the double-headed eagle crest that symbolizes imperial Russia. Inside, there was lots of green velvet upholstery in the sleeping cabins. Our tea was served in silver holders, and we felt special.

After we arrived in Moscow, Christian drivers met us and took us for breakfast at the Starlight Diner, a Russian version of a 1950s American café. Next, we visited famous Red Square, with St. Basil's Cathedral, the Kremlin and Lenin's tomb. We looked at these from the outside, as no one cared to go inside. We spent time and money in the GUM department store, which is now like a huge upscale mall on the edge of Red Square.

In the afternoon, our drivers delivered us to Domodedovo Airport, one of the four Moscow airports. Mary and I speak some Russian, but we were really taxed by this situation. The lines for checking in were horrendous! We had so many supplies and materials for the women's conference and other friends in Magadan that we exceeded our baggage weight limit, and we were forced to pay extra baggage fees. In Russian airports, you cannot pay for the excess weight at the check-in counter. You must go clear across the crowded lobby. In all, three different service counters were involved.

After our eight-hour flight on a very crowded Interavia airplane, we arrived in Sokol airport, about an hour away from Magadan. The only problem came as we were walking on the tarmac to the airport lobby. An official stopped Crystal from taking a photograph, because this is considered a military zone. Then, we were met by our wonderful friends and co-planners of the conference: Irina and Igor Krishanovsky, Lyuba and Oleg Federov, Andrey Salmanov, and Lina Polovnikova. They seemed surprised that we actually had made it to their isolated corner of the world.

The area around Magadan is gorgeous in an Alaska sort of way, and even somewhat like northern Minnesota. When we arrived, they were glorying in sunny weather, since they had had fog and rain for days. On our way into town, we stopped at the Mask of Sorrow. This enormous monument is a memorial to those who died in the Gulag camps. During the Stalin period, prisoners were sent in ships to work to death in the mining camps. The memorial included stones set around with names of the camps and symbols of people that

were exiled there: Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, and others. It is a sobering place. We also spent some time at the museum and saw the exhibits of historical items from the prison camps.

We had planned on home stays for our visit, so each of us had a different living experience. We had more opportunities to get to know Russian friends. Together, we laughed and cried and were surprised when our ideas were confused in the translations.

Virginia and Wendy lived in the guest facilities at the Catholic Church. This new building had kitchens and community gathering rooms in the basement. One of the Catholic priests, Father Michael Shields, an American from Anchorage who studied at St. John's University in Minnesota, expresses a deep unconditional love and acceptance for the people of Magadan. He is much beloved and has great influence. Virginia and Wendy helped parishioners deliver food to elderly people.

Crystal and Mary were taken to an apartment owned by a Baptist family. Crystal Dahlgren, the youngest of the team, says about her experience, "I stayed in a one-bedroom apartment next door to our host family. This apartment consisted of a small kitchen with a stove, oven, sink, a small refrigerator and a table for two. The bathroom was simple. When we arrived, we were welcomed with the warm Russian hospitality from our Russian mom, Lillie. Each day she or her children would check in to see how we were doing. This provided opportunities to learn more and practice the Russian language.....One unexpected surprise happened four days before we left – the hot water was turned off throughout the entire city. This reminded me of living in early American pioneer times!!"

Toni and I stayed in an apartment with the family of Alexei Verbitsky, a Christian and a famous mammoth tusk sculptor. I knew this family from earlier visits, but this time, Alexei was out of town to find more mammoth ivory and their oldest son was on holiday in China with his grandmother. We enjoyed the opportunities for early morning conversation over "milk porridge" and late-night reflection over borscht with his wife, Sveta and their other three children. We were able to worship and have lunch at the "house church" shepherded by Pastor Peter Ukanov and his wife, Paulina.

Each day, we met at Revival Church to enjoy huge lunches prepared by two rollicking "babushkas." They delighted in filling us up with different kinds of borsht, cabbage rolls, bread, potatoes, and salads. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, we had planning meetings with our interpreters: Irina Krizhanovskaya, Lina Polovnikova, Anna Chernyshova, Olga Kuznetsova, Leeza Korolyeva, Olga Bokalova, Irina Dem'yanchenko Aygerim Dzhunashalieva, called "Aija," who is a daughter of one of my former Bible College students, Zhanna, and a member of the Uglich indigenous people group. Some were seasoned interpreters, and others were English-speaking university students. They were all a blessing to us.

The Christians in Magadan are not accustomed to doing anything together. However, one thing they all had in common was saying the Lord's Prayer in their worship services. So, our theme for the conference was the Lord's Prayer, which was a wonderful unifying tool. Toni, the executive director of Covenant Women in Minnesota, gave a devotional talk in each conference session, on some part of the Lord's Prayer. We learned that prayer to Our Father is vital; women were created especially by God to use spiritual gifts to build up the church; that God calls us to forgive one another; and that we can worship God in unity.

Each woman from North America prepared and led seminars on topics such as family, godly living, scarf stamping, journaling, forgiveness, and conflict resolution. Russian women helped us plan and lead the seminars. These sisters were leaders in their individual churches, like Olga Rybakova, the Revival Church pastor, and Zoya Volovod, the wife of the Seventh Day Adventist Church pastor.

One of Mary's responsibilities was to plan worship with the musicians. Lina, Mary's longtime friend and radio station worker, was the liaison among the music team, including Christina, the Baptist pastor's wife, and another young woman. Mary brought overhead transparencies of praise songs in Russian that she knew they

would know. Mary played the piano or keyboard for the group songs at the beginning of each session. The trio used another keyboard with pre-recorded music for their special numbers.

Each day, we held the conference sessions in a different church. The Good News Pentecostal Church allowed us to meet in their building on Thursday night. This was enormously symbolic for two reasons. One, this was the first underground church established in Magadan, and it was the place where we began our conference. Second, the church's tradition is for women to cover their heads with scarves during worship. Our team brought to Magadan a beautiful rectangular head scarf for each woman who participated. Out of respect for this significant church, all conference leaders wore the scarves on this opening night. We took our cue from the Apostle Paul who counseled church leaders to avoid placing stumbling blocks in the way of believers. About 35 women attended this first session.

The Baptist Church hosted about 55 of us on Friday night. Pastor Dmitriy Evdokemov and his wife, Christina, made us very welcome. We enjoyed singing praise songs in Russian and English and special music by Christina, Lina and others. We realized that the English word we were using about the mission of the conference ("equip") was being translated into Russian words that meant "to make perfect" or "to improve." Such language wounded the feelings of some Russian friends, because they felt we had judged them as inadequate.

The Catholic Church opened its kitchen and meeting rooms all day on Saturday. More than 75 women came for these seminars. The general session on "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" seemed to have the most impact on the Russian participants. There was a time of praying together in small groups. Women told later about asking forgiveness from others as some even took action when they went home that day to take care of unfinished relationship business.

Sunday night, we met in the Seventh Day Adventist Church building. For our final gathering, there were more than 95 women and even some men. At every meeting, the Russian Christians contributed to the discussions and thanked us for coming to encourage them. We saw new faces each time, but on the last night, we saw many who had come to all four meetings.

We felt that the goals of the conference were met. Many sisters in Christ experienced blessings of worship, fellowship and the Word. The women had a great time together laughing, crying, praying, singing, talking, eating ... just like in America. They heard each team members' personal testimony which helped them see that women are women wherever we live. Culture and worldview become less important than spiritual unity. They saw that many of their neighbors and acquaintances, though from different denominations, loved the Lord as much as they did. They experienced the fruit of the prayers of thousands of friends around the world who were lifting this conference up before the Lord.

Wendy had traveled to other countries but had never been in Russia before. She says about the Christian women of Magadan, "The 'Lunch Ladies' served our daily meal of borscht with gusto. A recovering alcoholic served God with excellence by delivering food to the elderly. University students practiced English as our interpreters. The women are intelligent, creative, strong, humble, hospitable, resourceful, and prayer-ful. They worship the Lord with their whole hearts and are concerned about their families."

Mary had been to Magadan many times and knew the desire of these women to have a conference. "Our Russian planners successfully found churches to meet and Russian women to partner with us in presenting several seminars. They also helped us be culturally appropriate. The musicians discovered that their songs could match the nightly theme from the Lord's Prayer. Women were moved to seek and grant forgiveness and the women of the Christian community of Magadan enjoyed worshiping their God together with love and understanding."

We observed a huge hunger for Christian fellowship and freedom for their Christian walk in Magadan. We hope our Russian sisters will be strong enough to reach across those denominational barriers and greet each other when they meet in the city. Maybe they will even meet together for encouragement. I look forward to the time when the mountains of Magadan region will bow and when the seas of Magadan's bay will roar at the sound of the name of the Lord.

One afternoon, we met and prayed with the staff members at New Life Radio, a Christian FM radio station which has been on the air for 10 years. Its license has been renewed each five years. At this point, they have been waiting almost one full year for the next renewal. Even though all paperwork was submitted on time, their application was at first denied. Now they have an attorney working on the appeal process. The staff members continue to make programs which are used in Moscow at the satellite radio broadcasting station coordinated by Dan Johnson, an American who began the station in Magadan. We suspect that the person who wants their radio channel in Magadan has paid a hefty bribe in Moscow. Or this may be another example of Russian President Vladimir Putin tightening the reins of independent expression, as he has in the political arena, by appointing the regional governors and dissolving the bodies which formerly elected them.

We left Magadan on Tuesday, July 25. The Siberian Airlines plane back to Moscow was routed through Novosibirsk, where I had visited missionary friends in 1998. We had a two-hour layover to enjoy lunch in that very new, modern air-conditioned airport.

Sasha, another Christian driver, met us at the airport in Moscow. His wife is related to the Golub family that established the Good News Pentecostal Church in Magadan more than 30 years ago. We spent the night in the Eurolux Hotel. Our jet leg made us even more befuddled by their version of a shower – really just a long, thin faucet from the wall at waist level. Then, we had another day in Moscow as tourists. We stopped at the Moscow offices of the Christian satellite radio station, at the souvenir vendors near Moscow University, and for lunch at MacDonald's restaurant.

Our Scandinavian Airlines flight home included an overnight in Stockholm, Sweden. We stayed at the Radisson SAS Arlanda Hotel, connected to the airport. The breakfast buffet was out of this world. Our tired group enjoyed the bountiful fresh food and used some time to reflect on the trip and bless each other with affirming words. It was an awesome group, with God-given wonderful skills and gifts. We are sure God put the right people together for quite a daunting task.

We passed through US Customs in Newark, New Jersey. Then, Mary went on to Seattle, Washington, and the rest of us went to JFK airport to journey back to Minnesota. All of us were delayed for hours on the East Coast due to thunderstorms, but we did eventually get home on Friday, July 28.

We learned many life lessons during this trip. We learned that God might actually use perceived glitches to bring about even better experiences. We were reminded that God is in control of everything, even timing and airplanes. God taught us that our first conclusions about situations and people may be inaccurate. We need to have open hearts and listen to godly counsel. Toni Schwabe noted, "We each left a little of ourselves in Russia. Don't miss it—experience the life that God has called you to. Answer the call when it comes your way. You will not be sorry."