

REACHING OUT FOR CHRIST IN EUROPE



The Reformed Church in America was not among the first to send missionaries to the former Soviet Union. In the first years after the fall of communism, Reformed Church in America Global Mission was busy establishing—and reestablishing—relationships with the historic churches of these countries. In truth, the Christian church had been present in many of these countries for hundreds of years. In many instances, these churches were celebrating and sharing the Christian faith hundreds of years before there even was a Christian church in North America.

Consequently, RCA Global Mission came to the table not with solutions, but questions: What are your greatest needs right now? Are there ways in which we can help you—and you can help us—as we move into this new era of opportunity?

Against this background the 1994 General Synod voted:

To request Mission Services [now RCA Global Mission], in consultation with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and other potential partners, to continue its exploration for a viable long-term mission approach with a partner church in the former Soviet Union; and further,

to include as part of that exploration a challenge to the Reformed Church in America to consider the goal of placing with a partner church a team of five to ten persons in one of the republics of the former Soviet Union in 1996.

Since that time the RCA has taken that challenge seriously and has developed partnerships with Christians in Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Russia, and Ukraine and continues to explore other potential partnerships in Europe.

CROATIA

After the fall of communism in 1991, Croatia declared its independence. This sparked several years of regional warfare with Yugoslavia, which had previously claimed the territory. Ninety percent of Croatia's 4.5 million people are ethnic Croats. Five percent are Serbs. A large majority of the population is Roman Catholic, but churches are still struggling through the aftermath of communism and the war with Yugoslavia. The RCA has partnered with the Reformed Christian Church in Croatia and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek to help revitalize these congregations, and RCA missionaries work with seminary students to explore new models of ministry and reconciliation. Since May 2006 an RCA missionary couple has been working with both the Reformed Christian Church and the Evangelical Theological Seminary.

ESTONIA

One of the first republics of the former Soviet Union to declare its independence, Estonia is a country of about 1.3 million people. It is one of the three Baltic countries (along with Latvia and Lithuania) and is roughly half the size of Indiana.

Estonians have a strong Lutheran heritage, but the church dwindled to almost nothing during the German occupation of World War II and the subsequent imposition of communism. There remained, nonetheless, a committed remnant, both within the Lutheran church and the Union of

Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches of Estonia. Working in partnership with that remnant, we are seeking to be faithful witnesses to Christ and his kingdom.

From 1995 to 2009 RCA missionaries lived in Estonia to help the church there. They focused on starting new churches and bringing renewal to historic ones by:

- Teaching pastors and lay leaders biblical principles and practical skills for church growth and renewal.
- Working with a cell church, a model for new church starts.
- Mentoring local pastors.

Since 1998 the RCA has also provided financial support to the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches of Estonia, enabling them to fund a mission secretary and a youth secretary. The mission secretary provides training and motivation for mission and outreach throughout the country. The youth secretary equips churches for more effective youth ministry.

HUNGARY

Hungary has a population of nearly 10 million people in an area the size of Indiana, with 1.7 million in the capital city of Budapest. Hungary is one of the more economically advanced of the Eastern European countries and is one of the first of the formerly communist countries to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The people of Hungary are primarily Roman Catholic, but there is also a strong Lutheran and Reformed presence. In fact, the Reformed Church in Hungary, with whom we partner, is many times larger than the Reformed Church in America and traces its history directly back to the Reformation and John Calvin. Because Hungary used to encompass a much larger territory, there are large Hungarian populations in what are now Romania (Transylvania), Slovakia, western Ukraine (known as Carpath Ukraine), and Yugoslavia.

RCA missionaries in Hungary work to empower the Roma (Gypsy) people, who are extremely poor and isolated from the rest of society. They also help to revitalize congregations through a new emphasis on mission, and they work with volunteers who teach and serve in Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine.

ITALY

Italy is the home of the oldest Protestant church in the world, the Evangelical Waldensian Church. Dating back to 1170, the Waldensians took the discipleship asked for in the gospel very literally, much as Francis of Assisi did a generation later. Named after Peter Waldo, an itinerant preacher, the Waldensians gave up their possessions and devoted themselves to caring for the poor and preaching the gospel within the Catholic Church. Unfortunately their efforts were not understood by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church or secular authorities, with the result that the Catholic Church and secular authorities both tried to suppress the Waldensian movement. The persecution continued off and on until 1848. During World War II the Waldensians did their best to rescue as many of Italy's Jews as possible from the Nazi death camps. Since the end of the war, the Waldensians have dedicated themselves to welcoming refugees from Africa and the Middle East and to working for peace.

The Reformed Church in America established a partnership with the Waldensian Church in 2002. Since then an RCA missionary has worked with Waldensians, first in an ecumenical center near

Rome and now on the island of Sicily. A number of other people have served as volunteers in a suburb of Rome and in the Sicilian towns of Palermo and Paquino. A key North American partner for the Waldensians as well as for the Reformed Church in America is the American Waldensian Society. A number of Reformed Church in America members and pastors serve on the Society's board of directors.

RUSSIA

Russia is home to more than 140 million people. After many years of soviet rule, many people no longer practice their faith or have given it up altogether. About 15 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, 10 percent is Muslim, and 2 percent is Christian. Russia stretches over 11 time zones and has more than 100 ethnic groups.

The RCA's involvement in Russia continues to develop. Currently the RCA, in cooperation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the American Baptist Church, supports and oversees the ministry of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy. This English-language congregation serves English-speaking Christians in Moscow—about a third of them from Europe and North America and the two-thirds from Africa and Asia. One important ministry of this congregation is its soup kitchens, one of which serves 1,500 meals each week. Most of the recipients are "pensioners" whose old age pensions have been dramatically reduced over the last decade. A number of single parent families and other needy people are also served. The church also has a food pantry, a program that assists students from Africa, and an anti-racism task force that documents frequent attacks against non-Russians in Moscow.

UKRAINE

Ukraine is a little smaller than Texas and has a population of over 46 million. It is primarily Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox, but there are Reformed churches in western Ukraine, a portion of the country known as Carpath Ukraine, which was formerly part of Hungary. There is also a strong group of Baptist churches in the country.

The Reformed Church in America, in partnership with the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Center for Christian Cooperation in Kiev, is training workers in children's ministries.

More than 3,000 new Sunday school teachers have been trained in biblical content, teaching principles, and curriculum development by RCA mission partner personnel. They teach more than 36,000 children about God's love.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

RCA Global Mission is committed to ministering to the whole person: spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially, and intellectually. RCA Global Mission is both evangelical and ecumenical, working in partnership with indigenous churches and with other churches and mission agencies.

Global Mission is committed to long-term involvement. While the Reformed Church in America provides opportunities for short-term work groups and volunteer service, it is always within the context of a significant investment of time, people, and resources that enables us to address root problems and real needs, not just superficial symptoms.

Seven unifying principles guide Reformed mission in Europe. More than just an intellectual construct, these principles actually guide decisions about Reformed mission in Europe. In brief, these principles are:

The indispensability of partnership

Every mission agency works with indigenous churches and church people; otherwise it would be very difficult to make contacts in the local society, secure visas and work permits, or even learn about the local health care system. Some mission workers say they have partners and mean only that they have local helpers. Partnership, as the word is understood by Reformed Church members working in Europe, means much more. It means accepting the right of the partner to share in making key decisions about the mission one wanted to do. It means taking guidance from the people one had come to help.

Of course, there are times when Reformed Church mission workers chafe against some of the burdens of partnership. It is easier not to consult with people who think and talk out of different cultural systems. Even when partners operate from exactly the same values, they usually don't have an intuitive sense for the wishes of American donors and thus they might push for projects that might not readily attract funding. Nevertheless partnership, at least as practiced by Reformed Church in American mission workers in Europe, generally means making decisions with partners even when it is not easy to do so.

The priority of relationships

For years most North American mission agencies have been under pressure to evaluate themselves in terms of results achieved: How many lives are actually being improved? How many children have been inoculated against some deadly disease? How many lay leaders have received training in Christian education? Even so, as important as achieving results are to Reformed Church in America mission workers in Europe, building relationships with members of partner churches is even more important.

A commitment to long-term mission

One mission worker serving in Russia for another Reformed denomination describes anyone who wanted to serve for less than six years in his mission field as an ecclesiastical tourist. His description of persons seeking to serve for shorter periods of time is more than a little harsh, but his attitude is nevertheless a natural consequence of the Reformed tendency to put the priority on building relationships. It is possible to build the kind of relationships that a mission partnership requires only when everyone understands that the relationship one is building is for a lifetime.

A willingness to invest in mission personnel

Once one believes that relationships should have priority in mission, then it is important to invest in mission personnel so they are able to relate with people in the partner church. At the very least a mission worker needs to learn the language of the people with whom he or she works. The Reformed Church in America generally but not always expects its mission personnel serving in Europe to learn the language of the people among whom they serve. Sometimes asking mission personnel to learn the language entails sending them to a language school before they began their assignment. Sometimes it means ensuring that mission workers have time to learn the language while doing their basic assignment. In most cases, it means designating funds for language learning for the mission worker as well as for his or her accompanying spouse and children. A missionary who speaks the language of the people where he is serving shows his interest in and commitment to the people with whom he is serving every time he joins in a conversation. He or she is more

likely to be regarded as a valued colleague, more likely to be seen as a trustworthy recipient of information that is rarely shared with outsiders but which would be very helpful for his or her work.

Mission that reflects the gospel's bias for the marginalized

In missionary letters back to Reformed Church in America congregations, Reformed mission workers serving in Europe frequently cite Matthew 25:40—"Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me." For them this verse describes many of the people to whom they have been sent.

Mission that is holistic

Even as the foci of Reformed work in Europe continue to evolve, it remains almost always holistic: wherever they go, Reformed missionaries support the local church in the proclamation of the gospel. But nowhere in Europe do they limit their work to just proclamation of the gospel.

The Roma work done by RCA mission personnel in Hungary embodies the kind of holistic mission that addresses simultaneously evangelism and church planting, addressing the needs of the poor, and assisting marginalized people to advocate for their basic human rights.

A willingness to embrace innovations

The history of Reformed work in Europe since 1995 reflects the willingness of Reformed people to try new methods, even if doing so entails risks.

The importance of ecumenism in the formation of Reformed mission

Unlike in much of the rest of the world, where Reformed Church in America missionaries began work in places in which there was often no existing Christian church, RCA mission in Europe is built mostly on partnerships with long-established Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In most cases, the Reformed Church in America already enjoys a relationship with these churches through the World Alliance of Reformed Churches or the World Council of Churches.

The next challenge for RCA work in Europe

The next challenge for RCA work in Europe is to develop trusting relationships with Muslims and Jews who can authentically represent their respective faith communities. At the end of World War II, Europe was predominantly Christian. What had just happened to the Jews led Christians and Jews to see their relationship in terms of prejudice reduction. Both Christians and Jews understood that they had not responded early enough or strongly enough to the pestilence of anti-Semitism.

In 1945, there were large Muslim populations in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia but nowhere else in Europe. Muslim-Christian relationships in the late 1940's and for many years thereafter could focus on theological dialogues about the nature of God, the role of Mohammed and of Jesus in the two religions, and the differences and similarities between the Koran and the Bible, all interesting questions for which the two sides would never be able to reach a common answer.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, large numbers of Muslims from Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, and India and later from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and elsewhere in the Islamic world began to come to Europe. Europe had a shortage of workers and many Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian countries had a surplus. At first everyone believed that these new workers would just work for a few years and then return home. This didn't happen, of course. Guest workers, just like missionaries, inevitably form attachments and relationships in the countries in which they work

and often end up staying far longer than they or anyone else would have expected. As a result there are now millions of Muslims in France, Germany, Italy, England, and the Netherlands as well as large Muslim minorities in every other country in Western and Central Europe.

Necessarily, however, both Muslims and Christians sometimes find it difficult to live so closely together. The problems are no longer just theological. Today Muslims and Christians disagree about the role of religion in public discourse, where and how Muslims should be allowed to erect mosques and sound the call to prayer, whether Muslim women should wear a *hijab* or other religious head covering in public places, not to mention whether it is morally legitimate for Western nations to intervene politically or militarily in conflicts in the Muslim world. These are not only theological disagreements; to the extent that they remain unsolved, they have the potential to become serious threats to civil society not only in Europe but also in the United States. These continuing disagreements also make it much more difficult for Christians to offer an effective witness to the gospel among Muslims.

The next challenge for Reformed mission in Europe is to design ministries that make it possible for Christians to building trusting relationship with people of other faiths. Only in this way will the gospel be offered in a credible way to a new generation in Europe.

If you would like to know more about the RCA's philosophy of mission and the wide variety of opportunities available to serve and support through the RCA's mission program, visit www.rca.org/mission or contact Nancy Ellens at nellens@rca.org or (800) 968-3943.

YOU CAN BE A MISSION PARTNER IN EUROPE

There are many ways you can become a partner in the worldwide mission of the Reformed Church in America:

- Commit to a Partnership-in-Mission share.
- Include the RCA mission program in your will.
- Make designated or undesignated gifts.
- Serve as an RCA mission volunteer.
- Assist your classis in forming a partnership with an RCA global church partner.
- Commit to pray for RCA missionaries and church partners.

For more information about any of these ways to support RCA mission, please contact Nancy Ellens at nellens@rca.org or (800) 968-3943.

To donate to support a missionary or mission project, mail your check—made out to “Reformed Church in America” and with the memo line clearly designating the project or missionary you would like to support—to Reformed Church in America; P.O. Box 19381; Newark, NJ 07195-1938 or, in Canada, to Regional Synod of Canada; 201 Paradise Road N., Hamilton, ON L8S 3T3.

Donations for many mission projects can be made online. Visit the RCA donation page, www.rca.org/give, and click on “Missionaries,” “Featured Projects,” or “Reformed Church World Service” to find mission projects that need your support.

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