



## Indigenous Mission Project Planting Ethnic Churches

### **Changing face of Europe**

Europe has been changing rapidly since the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). Several countries which used to be hidden under the cover of the Soviet Union have reappeared on the map. Numerous nations which had been suppressed and indoctrinated by the communist ideology have become wide open for the Gospel. An unprecedented spiritual movement has resulted in massive conversions to Christianity and planting of thousands of new churches.

The European Baptist Federation with the generous help of its Mission Partners has developed a mission project (IMP) to facilitate evangelism and the planting of new Baptist churches in the economically deprived and spiritually potential nations of Europe and the Middle East.

The IMP provides funding for suitably gifted people to work as evangelists and church planters in their own countries. The project has been the response of the EBF to the needs of nations which are open to the Gospel. It is very much in accord with the current paradigm shift in global missions towards indigenous-led evangelism and church planting.

### **IMP beginnings...**

The project to support indigenous missionaries was launched in April 2002 in Moldova. In January of 2003 the IMP was extended to five other countries of Eastern Europe: Armenia, Belarus, Latvia, Russia and Ukraine.

In the beginning of 2004 it was possible to expand the project to the Middle East, and thus - to answer some requests from the needy Arab-speaking countries of the Middle East. In 2005 EBF approved several candidates to be missionaries from the following countries: Azerbaijan, Egypt, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania and Serbia.

EBF Executive approved several new missionaries in March of 2006. Some of them are from war-torn Iraq. According to the current reports of Baptist leaders who know the local situation, the Iraqi people are now much more open to the Gospel than ever before.

### **IMP presently**

Currently (Summer 2006) EBF with its mission partners are jointly supporting over 50 church planters in 20 different nations of Europe and the Middle East. The detailed list is on the EBF web site [www.ebf.org/imp](http://www.ebf.org/imp) The indigenous missionaries serve in various, contexts, both urban and rural, and in very different circumstances.

Some of them work in the colds of Russian Siberia above the Polar Circle and others are a part of fast growing Baptist Unions in the mountainous Caucasus region. Some toil in spite of legal obstacles in Belarus, while others work with the exceptionally mission-minded Baptist Union of Moldova. Still others take the timely opportunities afforded in Baltic countries which have recently joined the European Union, as well as in the Baptist Union of Ukraine, the largest in Europe in terms of membership figures. Indigenous missionaries are also successfully planting new churches in the disadvantaged Arab-speaking nations.

Encouraging reports from mission fields inform us that young churches double in number every year. The indigenous missionaries are the most effective in the evangelistic ministry

among their people. They achieve their success because they know their people, culture and language.

## **Selected case studies of indigenous mission and ethnic churches**

### **1. Armenia – unprecedented growth**

There were only four Baptist churches when Armenia regained its long desired independence in 1991. Many Baptists left their country due to the persecution from the communist regime, which tried to destroy anything that was religious. The Baptist leaders were harshly persecuted and church buildings destroyed in the country known to be the oldest Christian nation (Armenia accepted Christianity in 301 AD). Nevertheless the mission continued in spite of difficulties.

Spectacular growth has been taking place in Armenia during the last 15 years (1991-2006). The nation has opened up to the Gospel and Baptists have planted more than 100 new churches. The number of Baptists during the same period has grown from 350 to 3,500. It was possible because of the indigenous church planters who dedicated themselves to this ministry. Some Foreign Missions have been involved in a supportive way, but the initiative is on the part of the indigenous leaders.

The Baptist Union of Armenia has developed numerous ministries:

- a theological Seminary in Yerevan with 50 students in two faculties (Bachelor and Christian Education – over 50 students have graduated from the Seminary and are involved in ministry since 1998);
- children's ministry - each summer several camps for about 1000 children are organized;
- a special program of charity work among orphans.

### **2. Ukraine – the largest Baptist Union in Europe**

New spiritual opportunities came to the Ukraine with “Perestroyka” in 1985. It resulted in the astonishing growth of Baptist churches: in 1990 there were 89,113 members in 1,100 churches, in 1995 – 110,552 members in 1437 churches, in 2002 – 141,338 members in 2,600 churches. The people are usually bilingual – the Ukrainian and Russian languages are popular though the Ukrainian is prevalent in the western part of the country.

The Baptist Union of the Ukraine has purposefully planted several hundred new congregations during the time of independence from the Soviet regime. It has been quite a natural process, since people could have been able to read the Bible available to them (it had been forbidden during the communist time). Thousands of indigenous missionaries are actively working in cities and villages – they implement a variety of methods in order to reach out. They freely preach the Gospel and distribute the New Testament and Christian tracts, show “Jesus” films, and organize Christian concerts and other special events to attract people. They teach English language with the help of native speakers and organize youth camps etc. however most important of all are personal relationships in the follow-up of new converts.

The Baptist leaders have a vision to double the number of Baptists and local churches in the Ukraine.

### **3. Moldova – the poorest and the most mission minded**

When Moldova had declared its political independence, in 1991, there had been about 11,000 Baptists worshipping in 130 churches. One and a half decades later (in 2005) the statistics registered 22,000 baptized members in 521 churches and church plants. Indeed it shows an excellent growth rate. And the Baptist Family of Moldova represents one percent of the population, which is the highest percentage in Europe.

Currently Baptists enjoy freedom to preach the Gospel, train leaders and engage in mission, and they have a very good reputation in their nation. People of Moldova are still eager to hear the Gospel all over the country. They are searching for some deeper values after so many years of atheistic indoctrination.

The nation of Moldova is considered to be the poorest in Europe – nearly 80 % live on the edge of poverty, but spiritually it is thriving, and many new congregations are being planted. Some of the indigenous missionaries work among the Gagauz people - Turks living in Moldova.

The Baptist Bible College in Chisinau trains over 160 students – a group of about 40 students from the Central Asia who are preparing for ministry of church planting and leadership.

Baptist churches in Moldova are exceptionally mission minded. They are sending missionaries to the Russian speaking world – even to Siberia, above the Arctic Circle. Moldovans are also involved in missionary activities where the Muslim religion is predominant (Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan etc.).

#### **4. Russia – missionary work among the Njentse people (Jamal, Siberia)**

There are about 90,000 Baptists who worship in 1,400 churches and more than 200 new churches are being planted all over the vast territory of Russia. The Baptist leaders regularly organize missionary expeditions which are aimed at numerous 'nations' of Russia. The expectation is that mission tours will help the Union in their efforts of sharing the Good News, planting new churches and consolidating Baptist work all over the wide-spread Russian territory including the remote and huge Siberia.

The finding of gas and oil in the Jamal Peninsula has changed the life of indigenous Njentse people for ever. They used to live in harmony with nature; hunting and fishing were not only their traditional occupations, but the basis of their life style. The dramatic industrial changes made these quiet people feel virtually lost. Big oil companies took away their land, built huge factories and brought hundreds of foreign workers from many places, tempted with high salaries.

These indigenous people would find these changes very difficult if not for the dedicated work of some missionaries who committed themselves to the Njentse, helping them meet the challenge of increased social problems. By discovering the eternal truth preached to them from the Bible they can find peace in a situation of fast-moving change.

#### **5. Hungary – prospective work among the Roma people**

Hungary has enjoyed political freedom since 1989 and became a member of the European Union in 2004. According to the latest census, about 17,000 of its citizens (total population is about 10m) are related in some way to the Baptist Union. The Baptist leaders noticed that the fastest growing segment of the Hungarian society is the Roma people, comprising about 8% (800,000) of the total population.

There are 12 Roma churches that are part of the Baptist Union. Roma churches are packed with people who sing joyfully and play numerous instruments during their services. Several testimonies would be shared between the songs. Their musical skills are very useful in evangelism.

The first contact is usually initiated by some Christian relatives. A church plant begins from a small group that would meet in a home even a couple of times a week. When a core group is established, an organized outreach in the open air is possible. Roma people change dramatically after conversion to Christianity – violent crimes drop in number, children start attending school etc. which is a very good testimony to the others. The Roma people value greatly an extended family and numerous kinships - their society is organized in clans.

## **6. Central Asia – mission in the Islamic dominated nations**

The Central Asian nations are now more open to the Gospel than ever before. During the 70 years of the communist rule these nations have been effectively alienated from the rigid orthodox Islam. They represent its cultural form which doesn't hinder them from accepting the Gospel if it is presented in a contextually friendly manner.

The nation of **Tajikistan** received the Bible in their own language for the first time in 1992. There were some problems with the import of the Tajik Bibles into this predominantly Islamic nation and loads were held at the border for months. Eventually, however, thousands of Bibles in Tajik language are being distributed every year. Planting of new churches can be expected as a natural outcome among the people who have free access to the Word of God.

A very interesting cross-cultural cooperation has occurred between Baptists in **Azerbaijan**, where Baptist churches that are Azeri speaking cannot be officially recognized by the state. Therefore they cooperate really well and are often supported by the Russian-speaking churches which have much more freedom in this nation dominated by Islam. Eventually it often happens that a Russian speaking mother church is rather small (15-20 members) and an Azeri daughter church may be ten times bigger.

Baptists in Azerbaijan are growing in spite of numerous difficulties. Often Azeri believers lose jobs and suffer because of their faith. For example, one pastor was harshly persecuted for the Gospel in 1999. The ever-present secret service had come with a hidden camera into his growing church. Later, pictures were shown on a national TV several times a day for at least two weeks and nobody asked for the pastor's permission... Instead the police broke the service of that Baptist church and arrested its pastor and a deacon. Both leaders spent 15 days in prison accused of being enemies of the Azeri nation.

## **7. The Middle East - historic opportunity for the Gospel**

The Baptist leaders of the Middle East agree that now is an urgent and decisive time for the Arab countries. With this in mind, the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut has been reopened in 2004. ABTS is the only Baptist theological school in the Middle East, training people in the church to work as active community leaders. More than 50 students from several Arab speaking countries are diligently studying there; as they want to be missionaries and pastors among their own people.

Many Baptist churches have been praying for a major revival in this part of the world, i.e. the growth of the church in Lebanon and neighboring countries where the Arabic language is spoken (Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and Sudan). There is a good prospect with the new generation of leaders becoming involved in this important ministry.

Great spiritual needs seem to appear in **Syria** which is the largest nation of the region (17 mln inhabitants). Some indigenous missionaries initiated work among the Bedouins, who are usually illiterate, homeless and have no permanent work. They do temporary jobs, live in tents and move from one place to another simply looking for some work. Bedouin families are large and they have many children. About 20 % of Syrian population are Bedouins.

The **Iraqi** War has brought violence and misery to so many in that land, but somehow they have become more open to the Gospel now than ever before. Thousands of Bibles for adults

and children have been distributed and new churches are being started. There is a thriving Baptist Church in Baghdad that has the vision to plant two daughter churches.

These are just a few case studies although there are hundreds of nations in Europe and the Middle East where the Gospel is advancing and they would also deserve our attention. Most of them have not been even mentioned in this report.

### **Mission partnerships can influence contemporary Europe**

How can Baptists have an influence on contemporary Europe? There is no better way than mission partnerships between churches, unions and individuals. Therefore EBF organizes the Project in cooperation with their member unions. The unions select their church planters and oversee the project. They often arrange missionary conferences, which provide excellent opportunities for training and fellowship, and refocus the vision of church planters.

The annual support of one church planter and his family is approx. € 3,600 which is the equivalent to \$ 4,300 (it may vary in different countries).

### **Very encouraging...**

The indigenous missionaries are highly motivated and they eagerly implement contemporary methods of evangelism, using Bible study guides, tracts, Christian concerts, Jesus film, English language courses, summer camps, sport activities, etc. They utilize present opportunities skillfully, teach biblical doctrines diligently, and form new groups effectively.

The experience of IMP shows that 2 years may be enough to find people for a church plant but the process of discipling them is much longer and takes minimum 5-7 years. It is reckoned that bringing someone to faith takes only about 20% of the total effort, but the follow-up requires the remaining 80%.

The Baptist Unions' leaders are greatly appreciative because the IMP helps to maintain the quality and regularity of the missionary work.

### **In spite of obstacles**

The mission work is not without hindrances. There are some outside obstacles, like the repressive law in Belarus requiring churches to re-register. In Russia great distances between inhabited areas of this vast territory is a natural impediment to Baptist work. Prevailing poverty and high unemployment hamper evangelistic activities in all post-soviet nations. The occult and secularism play their disturbing role to some extent too.

There are also inner obstacles, like resistance to change. A ghetto syndrome prevails in some churches. Church buildings are not used sufficiently – only two or three times a week. Younger people would like to use traditional church buildings not only for prayer but also for other meetings.

The indigenous missionaries effectively use contemporary opportunities for evangelism and church planting. They endorse a personal approach in evangelism and want to avoid "church jargon". They have a pioneering spirit and make conscientious efforts.

Church planters need regular training from more experienced pastors and leaders. The ultimate success of new church plants depends a lot on mentoring relationships and implementation of effective models. Therefore established mature churches need to build and develop relationships with new church plants.

### **Increasing local involvement**

The vision is to provide needed support for indigenous missionaries who are involved in the ministry of planting new Baptist churches. The Project is designed for 5 years, with the outside support gradually decreasing, and the local involvement increasing.

In the second stage reductions of the outside support is being implemented and thus further growth of the project is possible. At the same time, support from the local sources should increase proportionately. Eventually the indigenous missionaries/church planters are expected to be fully supported financially by local sources.

The process is not easy, especially in regions stricken by poverty. In spite of that, unions initiate nationwide annual collections of funds dedicated for missions, and also local sponsors are emerging.

### **Goal of reproducing church planting**

From the beginning of the IMP there has been a vision to support indigenous church plants which are able to reproduce. The goal for reproducing churches is to give birth to daughter churches in the neighboring areas. Desired multiplication is possible through the concentration of attention on those missionaries who have a vision of growth and are supported by local churches. This is the vision of regional mission centers that have spiritual influence on their vicinity.

The multiplication mission centers should provide: training of leaders, strategy of growth, appropriate training materials, recommended models of activity and local resources. Their role would be to share the vision of multiplication and facilitate other churches in their regions by equipping them for evangelism, discipleship, leadership and church planting. It seems to be natural that such centers ought to be located where nationwide mission coordinators are.

Multiplication centers should be able to organize church planting courses and create possibilities for new candidates to practice. Urban locations for such centers seem to be recommended because they provide larger nets for evangelism and numerous opportunities to teach. Besides, they can train leaders among students and professionals. Rural locations, however, are not disqualified. The multiplication process should happen naturally.

The primary mission of the Christian Church is to go into all the world, preach the Gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). The Great Commission can't be fulfilled without church planting. The nations and societies need to be saturated with the Gospel. Church planting is a natural way to enable this to happen.

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To help planting reproducing churches!

To help growing healthy churches!

For the glory of God!

[www.ebf.org/imp](http://www.ebf.org/imp)