

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.

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. The goal of the EBF mission project is to facilitate evangelism and the planting of new Baptist churches in Europe and the Middle East.

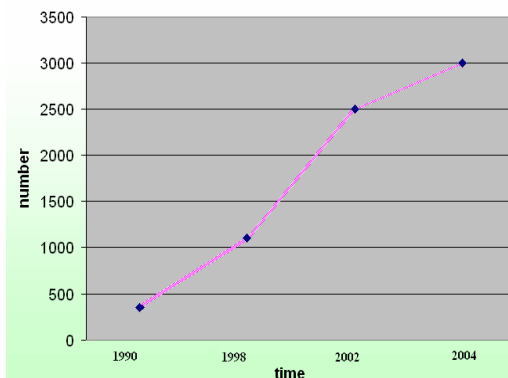
Selected case studies of indigenous mission

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.

The growth has been 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.



Growth of Baptist Union in Armenia

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 2600 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).



New church plant in Kiev, Ukraine

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 in fact helps them to gradually accept 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.

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. According to the current reports of Baptist leaders who know the local situation 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 and they would deserve our attention. Most of them have not been even mentioned in this report.

Mission partnerships can influence contemporary Europe and the Middle East

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 member unions.

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.

Daniel Trusiewicz
EBF Mission Coordinator

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