

# HOUSE CHURCH PLANTING IN BASHKORTOSTAN, RUSSIA

*Christopher Carr*

The present study outlines nine three-hour training sessions designed to encourage and prepare Russian evangelical leaders and believers in Russia's semi-autonomous Republic of Bashkortostan to adopt house church models for church planting, models that also may be described as organic or cell churches. Implementation began before completion of the study, with 20 new house and cell groups and churches launched by the end of the nine-week project.

## UFA DEMOGRAPHICS

The study was undertaken in Ufa, Bashkortostan's capital, located 725 miles east-southeast of Moscow and just west of the Ural Mountains, which divide Russia between Europe and Asia. The city has a population of over 1.1 million, which is approximately one quarter of the region's four million people.<sup>1</sup> Bashkortostan's capital consists of 48 percent Bashkir and Tatar (528,000), 39 percent Russian (429,000), and 13 percent divided among smaller minorities including Chuvash, Udmurt, Mari, Mordvinian, and Ukrainian (143,000). Over 100 ethnic groups are represented in Ufa's population.

## CHURCH DEMOGRAPHICS

Ufa is home to approximately 2,500 evangelical believers. In 2009 Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) representation in Bashkortostan included 15 churches and 5 small group fellowships, of which 7 were in Ufa, with a membership of 940, including 387 in Ufa, and 15 Bible study groups, including three in Ufa. Churches that are part of the Russian ECB Union in Bashkortostan include Good News, House of Prayer for All Peoples, Grace, Holy Trinity, Light of the Gospel, Resurrection, and two Baptist churches both named Grace. ECB pastors in Bashkortostan number 15, with 7 in Ufa, but with only 4 serving in specific church-type buildings, one of which is in Ufa. Nineteen churches meet in other structures (houses, apartments, cafes, and theaters), including 6 in Ufa. Twenty Southern Baptist missionaries have served in Bashkortostan since 2000, with most of this number serving in the capital.<sup>2</sup> Also, ECB evangelistic Bible study groups meet regularly in Ufa and may emerge as churches in the near future. Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Ufa include Life of Victory, Rock, Union of Christians, Light of Truth, Vineyard,

Bethel, Central Pentecostal, and one additional unnamed congregation.<sup>3</sup> All combined, Ufa, then, is served by nine Baptist churches and multiple evangelistic Bible study groups, ten charismatic and Pentecostal churches, plus one Lutheran and one Catholic congregation.

## CHURCH SITE RESTRICTIONS

In light of the fact that most Protestants, at least for the foreseeable future, do not have resources to purchase or build churches, pragmatically speaking they must reappraise church planting and evangelism and actively consider using house church models. Because of Ufa's unique position as one of the main centers of Sunni Hanafi Islam in Russia, thus presenting serious impediments to the purchase of land and buildings for churches, it would appear that the house church model will best fit church planting needs in Ufa and Bashkortostan for years to come.

## TRAINING PREPARATIONS

Of the 25 project participants, 15 completed a basic values survey, a measurement tool adapted from East-West Church & Ministry Report • Spring 2013 • Vol. 21, No. 2 • Page 5 (continued on page 6) Sherwood G. Lingenfelter's and Marvin K. Mayer's *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003). Participants also completed a theological values instrument adapted from *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches* by D. Michael Lindsay and George Gallup, Jr., (Omaha, NE: Gallup Organization, 2002).

## PUBLISHED TRAINING RESOURCES

In addition to the Bible, the writings of Neil Cole, Bruce Carleton, and Frank Viola provided the rationale for the Bashkortostan house church training project. Church planter and pastor Neil Cole is founder and executive director of Church Multiplication Associates and is also part of Leadership Network. His seminal work, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), is now also available in Russian. It is one of the most influential books among Southern Baptist International Mission Board church planters in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. One of Cole's key theses is that the Lord's church should bring God's message to people where they are rather than expect

1. "About the City of Ufa," <http://www.ufacity.info>.

2. "2009 Russian Baptist Union Statistical Observations for Bashkortostan," email from Arkadi L., administrative assistant for the senior pastor for Russian Baptists in Ufa and Bashkortostan, 6 May 2009.

3. Email from Stas K., 2 May 2009.

people to appear in church. His approach is also in keeping with the message of Jesus who lived among the people. According to Cole, "If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section."<sup>4</sup> Bruce Carleton, a former Southern Baptist International Mission Board church planter and currently professor of cross-cultural ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma, has written a church planting training manual, *Acts 29: Practical Training in Facilitating Church-Planting among the Neglected Harvest Fields* (Radical Obedience Publishers, 2003). (Carleton's material is not to be confused with the Acts 29 Network, an association of emergent, postmodern churches that espouse "Christian freedom" in connection with the use of alcohol.) Each trainee received Carleton's Acts 29 materials with instructions to complete the reading in advance of nightly training sessions. Frank Viola provided a third, major influence upon the Ufa training program. Project participants received two of his books translated into Russian: *Rethinking the Wineskin: The Practice of the New Testament Church* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministries, 2011) and *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008).

## OTHER TRAINING RESOURCES

Time was also allocated for a handout describing POUCH, an acronym representing a specific approach to house church development: Participative Bible study; Obedience shown daily on the basis of what Scripture teaches (not to a leader, church, or tradition); Unpaid lay leadership; Cell groups or small congregations; and House churches. After a 30-minute discussion led by group member, Maxim M., regarding Frank Viola's texts, *Reimagining Church* and *Rethinking the Wineskin*, this author previewed for the group a document entitled, "A Jesus Manifesto," co-written by Leonard and Frank Viola, stressing its implications for the house church planting model and an overall definition for church. Another program resource, a film clip, "Corpus Christi," illustrated the concept that believers and God's church are like a lifeboat throwing out a lifeline to those drowning, rather than a cruise ship devoted to creature comforts and entertainment for its passengers.<sup>5</sup> Each trainee also received a copy of the evangelistic tract, "I'll Do It Later," as an example of a tool to use in witnessing, especially because of the pattern of procrastination among many Ufa citizens.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the author presented the discipleship model,

4. Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvii.

5. Produced by Reinhard Bonnke, Full Flame Film Series, <http://www.bonnke.net/fullflame/>. An English-language version may be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7945138045913570814&ei=6KRfS8KBCJQqALvsZnVBw&q=full+flame+video#>.

6. Published by Fellowship Tract League, a ministry of Fellowship Baptist Church, Morrow, OH, [www.fellowshiptractleague.org](http://www.fellowshiptractleague.org). An English-language version may be viewed at this website.

Training for Trainers (T4T), and gave copies in Russian to those present and also within a few days to regular attendees who could not be present because of sickness or their own group's meeting. As a means of encouraging a continuing witness to atheists, intellectuals, and university students, training sessions also made use of Volume 15 of *Intelligent Design*, a bimonthly journal published by Dimitri Kurovsky, Kyiv, Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Other resources for the project included Thomas Wade Akins, *Pioneer Evangelism* (Rio de Janeiro: Home Mission Board, Brazilian Baptist Convention, 1999); David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004); and *Caring Via Mutual Discipleship*, developed by Biblical Education by Extension (BEE). Seminar proceedings were videotaped and DVDs were prepared for future training sessions.

## A CHANGE OF PLANS

Original project plans called for Bruce and Gloria Carleton to lead an entire week of hands-on Acts 29 training. Unfortunately, they were unable to come. Two additional and unexpected supplementary training opportunities came to light quite soon. First, I learned of the house church planting work of Pavel S., assistant to the senior pastor for missionary work for the northwest Baptist region based in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He accepted an invitation to share his experience as one component of the training project. Pavel led an entire day of training based upon his experience planting house churches in Kazakhstan and across Russia. In addition, three Moscow believers (Brad S., Gennadi K., and Dima S.) led a day-long training session regarding the biblical basis for cell groups and cell churches, sharing their practical experience from two years of practice in Moscow.

## FIRST FRUITS

Surprisingly, many of the project group participants themselves began asking how to continue the group, its energy, and the emerging movement, before the final training session. Moving the training sessions' venue from an office setting to the author's apartment created an environment that turned out to be conducive to the effectiveness of the training project. The initial intent of using the apartment was not for the goal of modeling a house church, but that is how the situation progressed. Some of the early skeptics emerged as enthusiastic supporters and practitioners of house church planting. Three project participants (Timur Y., Vatali S., and Marcel K.) started new house groups on Wednesday evenings near the end of training sessions, precluding their involvement in the project to the very end but providing a real-time example of the fulfillment of church planting. If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section. Some of the early skeptics

7. <http://www.origins.org.ua/index>

emerged as enthusiastic supporters and practitioners of house church planting. Page 6 • Spring 2013 • Vol. 21, No. 2 East West Church & Ministry Report The eighth session began with a time of sharing victories and prayer needs, including one person (Marcel K.) relating that his unbelieving relatives in a village about three hours from Ufa had invited him to come start a new group in their living room. By this time in the project, every trainee was either leading or directly participating in new house groups or house churches, with four participants (Andrei D., Ilgam M., Naeel A., and Maxim M.) having started and/or leading two or three new groups.

#### **PAVEL S.**

The participation of Pavel S. proved invaluable to the overall project's effectiveness. His extensive prior experience planting house churches, coupled with his ministry responsibility for missional work for an extensive region of Russia, including the megacity of Saint Petersburg, brought critical credibility to the project. His involvement and leadership cannot be overestimated. His effectiveness with house groups, along with his ability to communicate the scriptural basis for such an approach and endorse it in a culturally appropriate and challenging way, provided one of the key moments in nudging church leaders, such as Peter Z., to a more supportive position regarding the project. Having the determined involvement of a national believer of Pavel's stature and influence helped to "de-Americanize" the project further and to insure more enthusiastic acceptance and relevance of the training project. Pavel's presence took on especially vital importance since Bruce and Gloria Carleton were not able to come to Ufa for the planned Acts 29 segment of the project.

#### **OTHER RUSSIAN TRAINERS**

The involvement of national believers from the capital of Moscow also added weight and value to the training project experience. They brought their practical experience of real-life, cell church planting to bear upon the training needs of Ufa believers. They found a willing audience with not only project group participants, but also among more than a dozen other Ufa believers who participated in a day-long presentation regarding the efficacy and place of cell groups and cell churches in church planting. Their involvement built upon the strategic input of Pavel S. and added further impetus to prod local leadership into deepening involvement and blessing of the overall training project. The participation of the Moscow cell church planters served as a further tipping point that contributed to the paradigm shift that eventually led to the emergence of new house groups by the official end of the project. Twenty-one new house groups and churches were launched in Ufa and Bashkortostan as of late December 2009, as well as

many new believers and a growing number of longer-term believers involved in the emerging movement.

#### **RESISTANCE**

The project has not been accomplished without disagreement or tension. As mentioned previously, the ECB senior pastor for all of Bashkortostan, Peter Z., was not substantially supportive of the project and the principles and philosophy behind it. Thankfully, he did not try to obstruct it, instead leaving it to individual churches and pastors to decide whether or not to pursue house groups as tools for church growth. Unfortunately, at a meeting just before Christmas 2009, Peter Z. spoke strongly against much of what various Western contemporary church planting practitioners and researchers propose, including Neil Cole, Frank Viola, and George Barna.

---

**The participation of Pavel S. proved invaluable to the overall project's effectiveness. His extensive prior experience planting house churches, coupled with his ministry responsibility for missional work for an extensive region of Russia, including the megacity of Saint Petersburg, brought critical credibility to the project.**

---

He stated that much of what they wrote was incorrect. On 26 December 2009 project member Maxim M. wrote to the author on furlough: The meeting was very difficult. Andrei and I, especially me, made a mistake in citing books which you gave us to read. Peter Z. does not agree with most of their arguments; he almost announced a ban especially on the books by Frank Viola. He does not want us to give these books to our believers to read. But all the brothers supported house churches themselves as a mission project. Therefore, we will carefully and quietly work and cite only Scripture. Otherwise it will take 100 years to experience support for this. It is the author's hope that Pavel S. will be able to return to Ufa annually for the next three to five years for one- or two-day training seminars to help keep the project group (and its expanded circle of influence through new trainees and new disciples) focused, forward-looking, and risk-taking in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, and house church planting. In future meetings and presentations regarding house churches and the biblical philosophy behind them, the author will instruct group participants to avoid citing heavily from the writings of Western church planting practitioners. Although this author believes strongly that such writers have made a solid, biblical

case for the validity of house church planting models, it became evident by the end of the project that quoting from such authors created a stumbling block, especially for older Russian Evangelical Christian-Baptist leadership in Ufa. A wiser approach will build a strong biblical case and show from experience that house churches work, rather than relying heavily on Western authors.

## IN SUMMARY

The inability of one expert to participate initially caused the author to start rethinking the training session schedule. Within two days of the cancellation, the Lord orchestrated a series of events leading to an invitation for experienced and respected Russian house church planters to assist the author during two training sessions. Funds miraculously became available to cover travel and lodging expenses to the glory of God.

Notes: \

1 "About the City of Ufa," <http://www.ufacity.info>.

2 "2009 Russian Baptist Union Statistical Observations for Bashkortostan," email from Arkadi L., administrative assistant for the senior pastor for Russian Baptists in Ufa and Bashkortostan, 6 May 2009.

3 Email from Stas K., 2 May 2009.

4 Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvii.

5 Produced by Reinhard Bonnke, Full Flame Film Series, <http://www.bonnke.net/fullflame/>. An English-language version may be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7945138045913570814&ei=6KRfS8KBCJQqALvsZnVBw&q=full+flame+video#>.

6 Published by Fellowship Tract League, a ministry of Fellowship Baptist Church, Morrow, OH, [www.fellowshiptractleague.org](http://www.fellowshiptractleague.org). An English-language version may be viewed at this website.

7 <http://www.origins.org.ua/index>.

## Author's Postscript,

January 2013 I have learned by experience since the completion of my doctoral dissertation that we should have appointed a coordinator for the emerging house church network. At least a dozen evangelistic Bible groups still meet in and around Ufa, with many more spawned farther afield in cities and villages across Bashkortostan. I also see now that not providing consistent, ongoing training was a weakness. Still, several key churches that participated in the doctoral project and which are now in more strategic leadership positions are jointly coordinating ongoing training. We are having a follow-up house church training event in March 2013 in Ufa at the House of Prayer ECB Church, and other similar training events in fall 2013. Grace ECB Church, of which I am co-pastor with Zhenya Vasileev, a former drug addict,

is quite active in outreach, including evangelistic Alpha courses, English-language evangelistic clubs, men's and women's monthly evangelistic picnics from April to October, holiday parties, rehab recovery groups, weekly street kid meetings, and special-needs projects. Believers from Grace Church, House of Prayer Church, and Ufa Bible Church go on monthly trips to outlying villages and small towns to start new Bible study and outreach groups. A zeal exists within these churches. For some, it is a new zeal; for others, it is a recovery of the zeal triggered during the doctoral project by God's grace, and for others, it is a steady continuation of what God began in fall 2009 here in Ufa. We are expecting a leadership transition by March 2014 and are cautiously optimistic that the new ECB presbyter will be supportive of Bashkortostan's house church movement.

*\*\*This article was previously published on East West Church and Ministry Report, Vol 21, No. 2, Spring, 2013. Published with permission from Dr. Christopher Carr.*



Chris Carr  
[christopherc@globalgates.ca](mailto:christopherc@globalgates.ca)

*Dr. Chris Carr has served as Executive Director and Co-Director, respectively, of Global Gates Network of Canada since arriving in the Greater Toronto Area in Sept. 2017. Chris and his wife Eileen previously served cross-culturally in Russia and Ukraine from 1999-2015 with the International Mission Board primarily as strategy coordinators for the gateway city of Ufa, Russia. They are both graduates of Oklahoma Baptist University (Eileen in 1997—Christian Studies, and Chris in 1986—Pastoral Ministry and Sociology). Chris earned a Master of Divinity (with Biblical Languages) degree in 1997 from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, a Doctor of Ministry degree in International Church Planting Leadership in 2010 from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, and a PhD in Biblical Missiology in 2021 from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City. Chris served as a pastoral leader and elder for churches in Oklahoma and Russia. The Carrs have five children: Nathan (25), Tim (23), Heather (21), and Stephen & Seth (20—twins). Tim, Heather, and Stephen live/work/study in Shawnee, Oklahoma; Nathan lives/works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Seth lives with Chris/Eileen and with Holly, the family cat in Brampton, ON and recently completed an electronic music production course of study at Metalworks Institute in Mississauga."*