

5 PANDEMIC LESSONS from Eurasia's Evangelical Churches

How congregations in the former Soviet Union are responding to the coronavirus challenge can help the global church think better about buildings, young professionals, and persecution.



For many Western Christians, Eurasia is uncharted territory, and no less so amid this pandemic. In the midst of troubling COVID-19 tallies from the US and Europe, little is heard about what is happening in this strategically important region, situated with Europe to its west, China to its southeast, and the Muslim world to its south.

Yet the way local evangelical churches are responding to coronavirus challenges speaks volumes about their way of life and ministry, as well as their future missions potential.

National church leaders testify that the situation in Russia – with more than 640,000 confirmed cases, the third-worst reported outbreak in the world after the US and Brazil – and other Eurasian nations is alarming. Health systems, economies, transportation, and security systems are on the verge of collapse. Mass testing for COVID-19 is not happening. Governments deny access to reliable information. And all the while the war in Ukraine continues, and restrictions on religious freedom and human rights increase in Russia, Belarus, and Central Asia.

The former Soviet Union is a gray zone where hybrid systems have emerged which imitate the developed world while using talk of democracy, free markets, rule of law, independent media, freedom, and human rights to mask their absence. Given these circumstances, evangelical churches are under constant pressure both from government authorities and wider society, which are dominated

by either aggressive Orthodoxy, Islamism, or a secular Soviet mindset.

However, the challenge of the pandemic has lit a spark which casts light on the little-noticed but active and essential role of evangelical churches in this gray zone. Based on my extensive conversations with local leaders, here are five lessons that Christians worldwide can learn from their brothers and sisters in Eurasia:

LESSON 1:

When the government is helpless and public institutions are paralyzed, the church is on the front lines.

Under the circumstances, people have no one to turn to other than the church and volunteers. And this creates unprecedented opportunities for sharing the gospel beyond church walls. Regular church members serve as agents or angels of hope for thousands of people paralyzed by fear and poverty. When regular church activities come to a halt, it prompts many young Christians to begin thinking about what they can do for others.

For example, Sergey, a young Russian pastor from Buryatia (a region of Siberia bordering Mongolia), shares his experience:

“Jesus said, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations,’ and our government said, ‘Stay home.’ We were faced with the question of how to help people without breaking the law. Our team registered as volunteers and received

special volunteer movement permits. Some of us sewed masks, others collected and distributed food donations to those in need, and others answered calls to a hotline, offering much-needed counseling and encouragement.

“One day we were asked to visit a woman who had been severely beaten by her husband. She had gone blind and was alone. We expected her to have a lot of questions about how God could have allowed this to happen to her, but instead she eagerly listened as we told her about Jesus and she prayed to accept Him as her Lord and Savior. We prayed for her, for healing for her soul, spirit, and, of course, her eyes. She is very lonely and would like us to visit more often to tell her about God. After encounters like that, you begin to appreciate things you almost didn’t notice before and took for granted: your ability to see, hear, walk, and live.”

These positive examples serve to introduce many people to the church and change their attitude towards it. “All non-Orthodox churches are considered illegitimate in Russia,” said Sergey. “However, now a lot of good things are being written about us online and on TV. While before the evangelical church was considered a sect, now we are practically heroes!”

LESSON 2:

In addition to formal church structures, it is important to have parallel networks of informal leaders.

In critical moments when church structures are paralyzed, these leaders in the field – not the office – can take the lead. For example, Mission Eurasia began training young leaders in 2004 from 14 countries through its School Without Walls program, which emphasizes serving beyond the church building. It is an invaluable resource for local churches to have relationship-based regional networks of young leaders with experience working together, especially during a crisis of large institutions and structures.

Another important group is young professionals. Normally churches overlook them; however, now churches are praying specifically for doctors and teachers. Now that churches are closed, everyone understands that it is Christian professionals out on the front lines. They have become more visible. And this experience should change us forever.

We should not wait for the next crisis; we should mobilize churches now to strengthen ministry to young professionals, through training, caring for, and supporting them. If they are the front-line workers of the church, then they deserve better treatment and better resources. In the coming years, we should focus on helping those professional communities which are critically important to the life of our whole society – that could be called

to the front lines at any moment. At Mission Eurasia, we call this movement “Mission in Profession.” It is a new, fresh initiative which could change our way of thinking about missions, vocation, the church, and young professionals’ place within it.

LESSON 3:

Christian communities need to develop their own internal culture of generosity.

When the whole world is in crisis – when borders are closed, and giving to global missions declines – we need to count, first and foremost, on local resources.

I remember back in 2005 when the Russian government refused to recognize Samaritan’s Purse’s Operation Christmas Child gifts as humanitarian aid. Authorities claimed, “Russia is rich and can take care of its own children.” That same year, Russian evangelical churches began their own Christmas gift distribution project called Gift of Hope. It turned out that churches were glad to put together gifts for orphans and children from needy families. Since then, the ministry has continued to grow. It is not well known in the West but is well known in Eurasia, and many churches have even developed their own local initiatives – the idea has become contagious. Today, as the lockdown continues, instead of Gifts of Hope for children, churches are putting together “iCare” grocery packages for hungry families.

All this is not to say that churches in Eurasia do not need help. Help is needed more than

ever, especially in the dark corners of Eurasia such as the Russian-controlled separatist regions of Ukraine or the far-flung regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia. However I am convinced that when we in the West know the extent of local generosity, we will be happier to support churches in Eurasia – adding our international assistance to their sacrificial giving, thereby sharing in their needs and blessings.

LESSON 4:

Churches without comfortable, well-equipped buildings are more flexible and creative in missions outreach.

In Russia and many other countries of Eurasia, the government can easily confiscate, bulldoze, or shut down an evangelical church’s building. Therefore a majority of churches have faced difficult choices, weighing the risks of continuing to actively reach out to their community or calmly enjoy a comfortable church life in a well-equipped location with no external outreach activity. During the pandemic, churches without buildings responded more quickly, because they lost less. They were able to mobilize to serve others instead of grieving over their empty building.

Media attention has been fixated on the Orthodox churches, which continued public services during lockdown in defiance of government restrictions. In the Orthodox tradition, the temple is everything, and without the temple and sacraments there is no church. In contrast, evangelical churches which have

learned to live and serve “without walls” are in a much better position. While Orthodox churches fight for their traditional liturgy formats, evangelical churches are reaching new missions fields – online and in homes.

Many call themselves “Church Without Walls,” putting an accent on their flexible format and missional nature. For example, pastor Igor says that the quarantine has not in any way limited his congregation’s activity: “We were not tied to a particular location or ministry format, therefore we do not feel that we have less work or fellowship. In fact, the opposite has occurred, because during lockdown everyone wants to hear about God and no one refuses assistance or prayer.”

LESSON 5:

Ministry during lockdown serves as a valuable lesson for future periods of repression and persecution.

This is not the first time the church in post-Soviet Eurasia has been in lockdown. It survived 70 years of aggressive atheism, when almost all churches were closed. While Soviet communism feels like the distant past, the lessons of that history – learned through underground ministry, personal evangelism, and a battle for freedom – are still relevant today.

For example, pastor Sergey serves in a Russian-controlled area of Ukraine, and he said when church services were forbidden, he wasn’t discouraged – because he still remembered church services in Soviet times:

“I realized that now was the time for individual meetings and family visits, for speaking without a pulpit or microphone but rather heart to heart. In the very first week of lockdown, two people confessed their sin and made peace with God. They had never attended church before the lockdown. But God found them. I am grateful for the new opportunities created by this situation.”

The church of post-Soviet Eurasia was cleansed through trial by fire, and the current challenges are unlikely to limit its ministry but instead serve as a powerful stimulus to renew its mission and to grow in leadership, generosity, and creativity. These lessons from evangelical churches in Eurasia during this pandemic serve as a reminder that in times of external difficulties and limitations, God renews the church, activating its young and creative powers for ministry “without walls.”

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