

OVERLOOKED NO MORE: Peoples and Partnerships of the Caucasus

Helen Bruce

Five million people make the Russian Northern Caucasus mountain region their home. The Kavkaz (Caucasus) mountains rise majestically between the Caspian and Black seas, crossing eight oblasts on Russia's most southern border: Krasnodar, Adygheya, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan.

Imagine 40 language groups squished into a landmass the size of Great Britain, then add some very tall, steep mountains.

The ethnic and linguistic diversity of these original Caucasian peoples is astonishing! The "Papua New Guinea" of Central Asia is home to 40 ethnic groups speaking 70 distinct languages and dialects.

Though traditional Protestant and Orthodox churches base from the major cities, these culturally Muslim peoples have little regular witness to Jesus in relevant culture or language forms. Perhaps you've tasted Adyghe cheese, or seen beautiful Balkar sweaters, Tabassaran slippers, or Dagestani rugs? Certainly you've heard of the complex situation between Chechnya and Russia.

The Rumor: When the Great Horseman dispersed languages at the creation of the world, he came to the Caucasus Mountains, the horse stumbled, and many languages spilled out.

The Reality: the same mountains that contain such diversity still separate these peoples from clear gospel witness. Many of these nations, though only 1000 miles from Bethlehem, have waited 2000 years for the Good News of Redemption in Jesus Christ.

Is two years for every gospel mile the best the Church can do?

Yet ... did you know? God is blessing His Name and His Church as some from the Caucasus peoples repent and follow Jesus. In 1996 there were six North American mission agencies with 12 workers committed to the Caucasus (along with a handful of European missionaries). Today, there are hundreds of workers, from 60 diverse agencies, mission societies, churches or groups, from 25 different countries. Over half the workers are from Russia and Central Asian countries! This is Great News!

So who are the Caucasus peoples? They are indigenous peoples who have linguistic and ethnic histories thousands of years old. They are highly literate, educated, proud, clan-oriented, rurally-rooted peoples who have suffered and resisted migrations and intense efforts by Russians to purge or "integrate" them ("Russify" would be the pejorative) within the Russian Federation. In Chechnya, the term "Studebaker" is a swear word because Stalin used American Studebakers, donated during WWII, to relocate and disperse Chechens in his attempt to divide and conquer minority groups within the Former Soviet Union. Caucasian peoples have a long memory.

The complexity of the Caucasus increases when you add in geography and ethnicity, covered with a veneer of Sufism and folk Islam and peppered with Wahhabism (extreme Islamic theology originating from Saudi Arabia). Imagine 40 language groups squished into a landmass the size of Great Britain, and then add some very tall, steep mountains that can require six hours to travel ten miles to the next village! Add languages and dialects which have 74 consonants! Add the difficulty for foreigners to hold long-term visas in Russia! It's little wonder



that God's global Church hasn't made a dent among the rural clans of these peoples.

Why would these peoples remain unreached for so long? They are mountain peoples. (The same reason applies to the Pushtun of Afghanistan and the historical Picts of Scotland.) It's taken generations for God's love to break through. In this context, perhaps short-term mission needs to be redefined to mean 100 years, rather than 10 months. But the more important question is: How is God asking our generation to bless peoples who have yet to hear of Him?

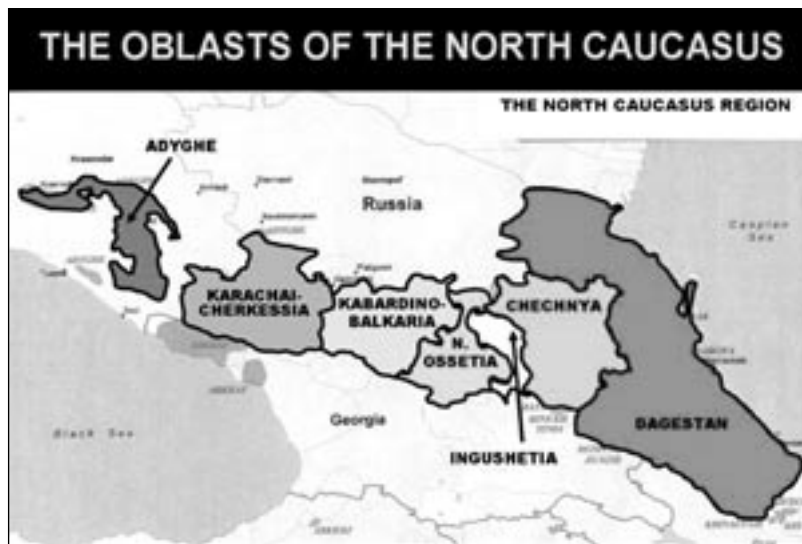
Romans 10: 14-15 is a screaming reality for this part of God's earth...."And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?" (NLT)

Getting sent to the Caucasus is a challenge in its own right. Few agencies know the region, few have experience with a non-Arab Muslim focus within Russia and former Soviet countries, and few are willing to allow workers to be subjected to the risks of the region. Getting to stay and live there is another unsolved challenge. Succinctly: few agencies and potential missionaries have the will to spend their lives on this part of the world.

Today's fruit results from years of Christ-followers persevering in the crucible of the Caucasus. A handful of workers have given 10-30 years of their lives towards loving these peoples. It would be no exaggeration to compare them to the families of Hudson Taylor, William Carey, or Adoniram Judson—who served God to cross into new cultures in spite of global and civil wars, kidnappings, and beheadings. Though not extraordinary individuals, husbands, wives or families, they were extraordinary in their submission to Christ and held strong beliefs in eternal reward which helped them

persevere through depression, disease, death and despair.

It's *not* the superheroes who make it in the Caucasus. It's



not the ones who set out to be like Hudson Taylor or any of the others. In fact, it's probably just the opposite. It's the men and women who set out to fully submit to Christ and become fully themselves. They set out to be God-fearers and people-lovers. They set out in love, rather than to make a name or legacy for themselves, their church, their family, denomination or organization. They *know* in the core of their being that Christ is all.

Today, the walls of geographic and ethnic separation are being breached with love. Dedicated Jesus-followers are raising a wall of prayer. God's people are living messages of love in action. God's people come from Sweden, Norway, Germany, South Korea, Switzerland, Russia, Ukraine, Kirghizstan, Kazakstan, Jordan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, America, Canada, and Great Britain. They often surrender the blessings of their extended families, their career ambitions, their hopes of marriage, and even their nationalities to find creative ways to stay in Russia for the long-term as ambassadors of God's truth.

Probably the most difficult challenge for cross-cultural workers is to find ways to work within Russia for the long term. Non-Russian passport holders often live like itinerant, urban nomads. They go in and out of Russia, carrying their important documents with them, merely hoping that they will get back to their apartments. These faithful urban nomads are being used by God, and the Church is growing in depth and number!

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Although geographically small, ethnically very diverse and with few believers in any one people group, the Caucasus reveals how God operates for the glory of His name. Here are a few examples of God's love and blessing among these peoples:

- The Dagestani believers are exploring the effects of living out Acts 2:42-44 ["And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common...."]. Dagestani church leaders are being provoked through situations of difficult church disunity to explore the practical implications of the "John 17 church." The power of God through the relational unity of his followers speaks volumes to unbelievers within Dagestan. They will convene a forum later this year to pray, discuss (and probably argue in full Dagestani style) what this means and looks like for the believers, fellowships, and churches in Dagestan. They are a new generation of Church, discovering Biblical doctrine applied within their context.



can be counted. Believers from this group are researching their own diaspora populations in order to begin addressing the need for reaching them with Christ's Good News. They also now have contextual training in place for some who will then serve as messengers to their own people.

- Over the last few years deliberate (though ad hoc) prayer networks have proven successful, so that local believers and foreign workers in the region may regularly circulate their prayer needs and have them securely forwarded into 25 countries (European, North and South American). God seems to make creative ways for further circulation among churches, organizations and individuals praying for the work and people groups in the North Caucasus.

- It's important to note the handful of women who are persistent, godly follower-leaders. It is often said that

Russia moves because of the women. This is no less true in the Church. The question of "if" women have a role in ministry in Russia is moot. The question is *how* and how to *appropriately* partner God's use of women in the Muslim context, particularly in the local church family. They persist in prayer and prayer recruitment. They coordinate praying people to invoke God's blessings across the Caucasus. This prayer network touches many churches, pastors, and ministry leaders across the theological spectrum of believers in the North Caucasus.

- We can rejoice that today a number of ongoing meetings (forums) take place where local and expatriate mission workers gather to pray, worship, plan, dance, share information (sometimes loudly with arguments in love), share resources and even collaborate on specific projects. Russian is usually the primary language, with some translation to English or Korean.
- Efforts are underway to develop affordable-housing projects for displaced (homeless) Chechen families. The Chechen are viewed as the enemy within Russia. The prejudice against them is extreme. They cannot get jobs easily, and are not welcomed by landlords or local administrative officials. Local people

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missionaries and Muslim-background-believers in a Central Asian country, today the whole Bible is in print and there is high demand for this Scripture revision

in the North Caucasus. This has helped solve the ongoing challenge of prioritizing which Caucasus language needs a Scripture revision the most, because most of these peoples are highly literate in Russian, even though they converse in their mother language or dialect.

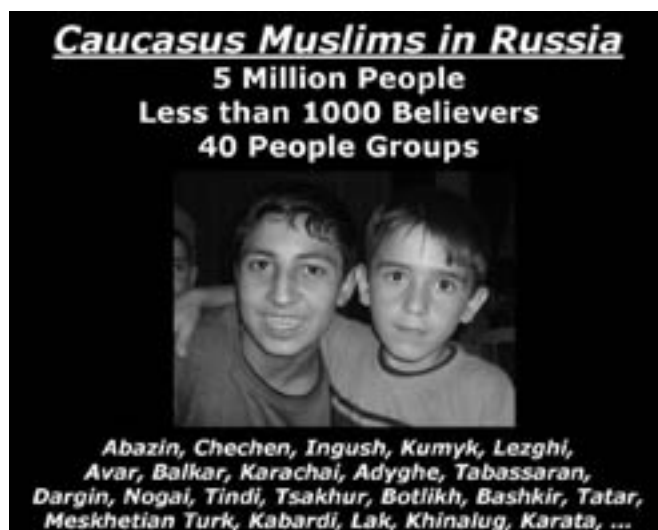
- One people group has a very small number of Jesus Followers among them. About 100

often warn: a friend of the Chechen will be the enemy of the Russian. The 1991 Chechen cause for independence was hijacked by Wahhabi missionaries, and now the global war on terrorism and the Chechen people are inextricably mixed in the quagmire left by a power vacuum. The Chechen and Ingush cultures are very difficult to break into. Yet God seems to be building bridges by using dreams, visions, powerful spiritual experiences, and the horrors of the war with Russia to turn them to Jesus. Chechens are desperate for the Good News. They can't get enough of it, when they are free to inquire. 85% of Chechen children have been psychologically traumatized by the wars since 1994. Many women who didn't escape Chechnya have been raped, or have had to observe a sibling getting raped. Many women have lost a brother, father or uncle to barbarous Russian attacks on civilian villages. Few children in the last 10 years have had consistent access to basic education.

- Throughout the region, Christian workers share their expertise, experience and training with one another in their desire to free families from the downward spiral of alcohol abuse, drug addiction, HIV and AIDS, and tuberculosis. The local governments have limited funding for social services of any form, and that's where the churches are often invited to step into their local communities. Churches in the larger cities are often welcome to minister within the prisons as well. The difficulty is effectively training local workers in short-term increments because expatriate workers often cannot stay for longer than three months at a time. This might merely be God's way of forcing the missionaries into a discipleship paradigm, rather than an empire-building paradigm. It seems that God routinely undercuts the propensity for Christian leaders to

fall prey to the Soviet style of leadership control, which is often harsh and vindictive. The spirit of control is pervasive. Power-sharing models of ministry are effective antidotes and are attractive to the younger generation.

- Due to a specific mentoring program over the last four years, small business development is maturing across the region, as students are becoming business owners, teachers and trainers in their own right.



- One worker moved out of Dagestan after missionaries were kidnapped in 1998 and again in 1999. He struggled as God broke his pride and his belief that the ministry was about his own performance. God gave his family a creative, itinerant model to mentor twelve men and their wives, using a biblical discipleship and leadership development

curriculum. He has joked, "I'm a Presbyterian, teaching Pentecostals, using a Baptist program!" Every two weeks he traveled to one of these men's homes, where they gathered for a few days, to go over the next lesson. Over time, he routinely hosted the men and their families in his home, as a way to model Christian family life to them even though he wasn't allowed to live near them because of visa and registration difficulties. This kind of model was grueling for his wife and children, who said goodbye to him so often and who had to host so many visitors in their home. Yet this worker employed good use of rest and retreat to protect his family. Their relationships with the local people will be remembered for a lifetime.

If God is working in the Caucasus, what might God want you—or your church—to do?

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The first answer is to imagine you are on a relay team running a marathon. Each member of the team has a part to play, but it might be seasonal and our roles may change over time. Most of us will hold the baton for a short while, but we have to pass it along for a variety of reasons, and we may have to wait months or years to carry it again. Ministry to Muslims in Russia is like a Caucasian dance: we partner-up for a bit, then dance out again, while others have a turn in the circle. Though on the sidelines, we still clap, we hear the music, and we are still part of the dance!



When it comes to the Caucasus, most missionaries would suggest that before you do anything, you get as cozy to the Living God as you possibly can. Then you re-define short-term to mean years, rather than months. Then you pray for the greatest measure of perseverance the Lord will give you. After that, a worker does well to learn Russian language and culture, Caucasian cultures, and Islam in non-Arabic forms. It would be irresponsible to oversimplify what it takes to minister in this part of the world, yet God equips those who are willing, even if it takes 5-10 years to do so!

Ministry to Muslims in Russia is like a Caucasian dance.

More specifically, the serious inquirer can connect with a number of mission agencies who are now engaging work in the Caucasus. Prayer networks exist in North

America, Europe and South Korea. Partnership forums exist, and a North American network for the Caucasus is emerging. The great news is that no one has to start from zero anymore! You can join existing work, or learn from others to gain insight for new work.

The dance goes on, and the peoples of the Caucasus are overlooked no longer!

Few agencies and churches make public their specific connections and work in the Caucasus. However, following a screening process, friends at the following E-mail contacts are willing to assist you:

IDRACA@Telus.net
 NCPP@XC.org
 Ncaucasus@ywamsfi.org

For Further Reading

To fall in love with the peoples of the Caucasus (in Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), here are some resources to help you:

- *National Geographic*, February 1996, Volume 189, Number 2.
 Article on "The Fractured Caucasus" (about conflicts in Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Georgia and Armenia). Article includes a political map and a language map of the region.
- *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, Yo' Av Karny (ISBN 0374528128).
- Excellent bibliography concerning Caucasus history and ethnolinguistic detail:

<http://www.geocities.com/eureka/enterprises/2493/circbibliog.html>

Helen Bruce (a pen name) has been active within the Caucasus mission community since 1997, when she exchanged her military officer commission for God's Great Commission. She finds her military service and bachelor's degree in biochemistry to be a great foundation for mission family life and making play-dough. With young children, Helen dances between life roles as wife, Mum, kitchen chemist, pray-er, host, friend, writer and consultant, while her husband dances his life roles and engages in full-time, collaborative mission work on behalf of the Caucasus.