

# *Out of Obscurity: The Emergence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in “That Vast Empire of Russia”*

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In June of 1843 the Prophet Joseph Smith announced the appointment of apostle Orson Hyde and George J. Adams to serve as missionaries in “that vast empire” of Russia, with which, he continued, are connected “some of the most important things concerning the advancement and building up of the kingdom of God in the last days, which cannot be explained at this time” (*HC* 6:41). Although months of preparation followed this announcement, the two men never served in Russia.

Much later, in 1903, the land of Russia was dedicated for missionary work by an apostle, Francis M. Lyman, who offered dedicatory prayers in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Subsequently, many Church leaders and members, professional men and women, statesmen, educators, and, significantly, BYU performing groups helped prepare the way for the introduction of the restored gospel to Russia.

It was especially during Gorbachev’s era of glasnost, beginning in 1985, that conditions gradually became favorable for establishing a mission in that country. In particular, Elder Russell M. Nelson, assisted by European area president Hans B. Ringger and Austria Vienna East and Finland Helsinki mission presidents Dennis B. Neuenschwander and Steven R.

Mecham, established vital contacts, opened doors long closed, and commenced the missionary effort.

By the time my wife and I, accompanied by our three youngest children—Betsy, Katie, and Jon—arrived to begin our missionary service in what was originally named the Finland Helsinki East Mission, three young, but already flourishing, branches of the Church existed: the largest in Leningrad, with nearly a hundred members; then Tallinn, Estonia, with almost fifty members; and Vyborg (located between Helsinki and Leningrad), with approximately twenty-five members.

Many of the earliest Russian and Estonian members joined the Church while visiting abroad in Europe and, especially, Finland. Finnish members of the Church, among them the Kemppainens, Jakkos, Laitinens, Kirsis, Lammintauses, Rotos, and Forsmans, were particularly active in friendship, teaching, fellowshipping, and training Soviet members and their friends.

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Soon President Meham in Finland received authorization to send the first fulltime Finland Helsinki missionaries—mainly Americans who had previously studied Russian—for a few days at a time to conduct home teaching and fellowshipping visits in the apartments of baptized members living in the USSR. While with members, these Finnish and American Church representatives answered members' and their nonmember friends' questions and taught them about the Church and, if requested, gospel doctrine.

Among the factors that inhibited our missionary work was the millennium-long and very rich heritage of the Russian Orthodox Church, so tightly interwoven into society's cultural, educational, and political lives. On the other end of the spectrum are over seven decades of official atheism, which left many with impaired spiritual receptivity. And, finally, the current punishing economic conditions complicate missionary activity by forcing many to work longer hours, often at more than one job, and depriving Russians of much of the energy and leisure required for reflection and the pursuit of lofty aspirations. Nevertheless, a golden layer of Russians remains, prepared by the Spirit and receptive to the gospel message.

Our mission began in July 1990 with sixteen missionaries transferred from the Finland Helsinki Mission and upwards of 175 Russian and Estonian members. By the time of the first division of our mission in February 1992 into the Russia St. Petersburg and Russia Moscow Missions, there were approximately seventy missionaries and over 750 members. Our family moved to Moscow with twenty-eight of these seventy missionaries to serve with nearly 200 of the 750-plus members.

By the time of our release almost a year and a half later in July 1993, the Moscow Mission included Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, Samara, Saratov, and Voronezh; the missionary force had grown to nearly 140 and the membership was approximately 750. The St. Petersburg

Mission and the Kiev, Ukraine (Russian-speaking) Mission had experienced comparable or yet greater growth.

Factors that did and continue to contribute to the growth of the Church in Russia include a dissatisfaction with ancient dogmas and rigid ideologies that forbade open inquiry. Further, favorable though limited press and TV coverage, the visits of the Tabernacle Choir and several BYU performing groups, General Authority meetings with members and friends of the Church, and superb missionaries, dedicated and competent, have been crucially important.

As all who have served a mission know, hardships and disappointments are a prominent part of the experience. Chief among ours was the dearth of Church materials and our own meetinghouses, although through the efforts of many, progress is being made in these and other areas.

On the other hand, the missionary visa obstacle, one of our most vexing and persistent problems during the first half of our mission, was addressed and solved. The first missionaries entered the USSR only on expensive tourist visas for short periods of time, returning often to Finland for renewals. Later, members, at tremendous cost to themselves from long hours lost while standing in lines, secured private invitation visas for missionaries for longer periods of time—months rather than weeks. In March 1991 Church attorney David Farnsworth completed arrangements to establish a Russian Religious Association with Russian leadership. This association eventually was granted the authority to issue invitations to missionaries, resulting in visas for the full time of their residence in the country.

Similarly, severe problems with arranging for adequate health care, missionary living quarters, telephone and mail communications, banking services, and office procedures were lessened or overcome through time and, particularly, through the efforts of two heroes in the

mission, our Moscow office couple, Elder and Sister Dewey of Logan, and their predecessors in Helsinki, Elder and Sister Warner, now presiding over the Bulgaria, Sofia Mission.

In Moscow the first group of members became a branch with a Russian branch president in March of 1991, nearly five months after full-time missionaries arrived. One year later, in March of 1992, the Moscow branch was divided into six small branches. Not quite a full year following, fifteen Russian-speaking branches were organized in Moscow, with a branch conveniently located along each subway line radiating from the center.

Rapid growth and relatively inexperienced members meant that timely and intensive leadership training was essential. Initially that was accomplished through monthly branch leadership meetings which I conducted and, especially, through one-on-one contact with the more experienced missionaries. In some branches, young missionaries served with simply astonishing skill and wisdom as branch and Relief Society presidents and as other leaders.

Eventually a Mission Training Council was formed, led by Americans working in Moscow embassies and businesses. Regular training meetings were held for branch presidents, clerks, leaders of priesthood quorums, Relief Societies, Primaries, and Young Women, teachers of all organizations, members preparing for the temple or missionary service, and members of branch social and cultural committees. For instance, our own Professor Barbara Lockhart contributed significantly to the success of social activities in Moscow during her recent tenure on the training council.

Now the Moscow member districts are gradually assuming more of the training function, with relatively experienced and remarkably successful Russian leaders training others.

Challenges abounded in the mission, but so did treasured moments of spiritual refreshment and affirmation. For example, I was deeply moved as I attended church meetings in

Vyborg on the first Sunday of my mission. Since 1963 I had visited Russia fairly frequently. In my heart I had felt that the restored gospel would be shared with this deserving people whom I had come to love dearly, but in my mind I could not imagine how our Church could ever be established with that country's government and ruling party so opposed to religion.

On that day early in July 1990, I walked into a small music school and was greeted by two legendary missionaries and by nearly two dozen recently baptized members of the Church.

Before my sacrament meeting talk, six little girls, from about three to nine years of age, sang in Russian "I Am a Child of God." The singing was angelic, as were, especially, their radiant, broadly smiling faces. As I watched and listened in awe, my heart filled with "hosannahs" for the blessing of this long-awaited day.

Further, I recall with delight the words of a relatively new Saratov member teaching a priesthood lesson on the importance of the family. The lesson was fairly standard, except for a few moments when he soared in spirit as he related experiences from his own family. He spoke of his young, grade-school son who had returned from school one day with a bruised face. His son had objected when a bully was tormenting a girl classmate. For his trouble, the young member of the Church had been hit very hard. His classmates saw what happened and ran up to him, offering to join him in teaching the tormentor a lesson. But the boy replied that he had been reading the Bible and attending a church where he was taught not to do mean things, even to those who do mean things to you. His friends were dumbfounded, as, especially, was the father, who generally had followed a different, far harsher ethic all his life, and who that day personally experienced Jesus' teachings powerfully and deeply for the first time.

May I tell you of a few of the leaders of our Church in Russia in order for you to appreciate the strength they represent to members and missionaries. Boris Mokhov, now one of Moscow's district presidents, came to the Church along a path many have followed. Growing up in an avowedly atheistic society and home, and, after the 1985 institution of Gorbachev's glasnost, unable to respond to the appeal of the Russian Orthodox Church, he was surprised when his oldest daughter met LDS missionaries. Two young elders had visited her high school class and made a presentation about the Church, inviting any interested to attend church services with them the following Sunday. Several of the young students did visit the church, among them, Natasha Mokhov.

Natasha told her older brother about this church, and he agreed to attend meetings with her. In time the missionaries taught them the missionary discussions, secured permission from the Mokhov parents, and baptized the two oldest children. Eventually the two younger sisters in the family also began going each Sunday to the meetings and were baptized. The parents were pleased to note a very positive change in the children's attitudes and behavior. They had worried earlier about some of their older children's choices of friends and activities. Now they felt increasing admiration for their resolution and integrity.

On occasion the Mokhov father and mother also attended church services. The children, many missionaries, and Church members helped the parents gain an assurance that they belonged with the children in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Finally their baptismal day arrived, and church service and growth followed. Approximately two months ago, the Mokhov parents and their four children were among thirty-one Moscow members of the Church to visit the Stockholm Temple, where they were sealed as a family for time and for eternity.

The first family in Russia to receive the temple endowment and sealing ordinance was the Semionov father, mother, and son from Vyborg. Two years earlier the father, Andrei, a young medical doctor of surgery, had met a devoted and generous Finnish family, the Jakkos, on a canoe trip. The Jakkos gently but persistently explained Church values and teachings to Andrei, and, sensing his genuine interest, maintained contact with him over a period of months. Eventually missionaries were able to present the discussions to the Semionovs and, as they were prepared, baptize them. The Semionovs were especially active in sharing the gospel with their neighbors, a considerable number of whom made the same decision that the Semionovs had to affiliate with the LDS Church.

One of Andrei's friends told a former classmate, Yelena Petrov, about his positive impressions of Church teachings, especially about the emphasis on family ideals. Yelena and her small daughter were then visiting Yelena's mother in Vyborg for the summer, seeking relief from the heat, pollution, and bustle of Moscow and her tiny, one-room communal apartment, where bathroom and kitchen facilities are shared with two other families. When her husband, Andrei Petrov, then a Ph.D. student completing his degree in radio telecommunication engineering, came for a visit, they attended the Vyborg branch of the Church.

The Petrovs, too, were favorably impressed by the spirit and liberating teachings of this new and, as yet, largely unfamiliar church. Missionaries offered to help them learn more. Following weeks of meetings, the Petrovs were baptized. As they returned to Moscow, the embryonic church was meeting in the none-too-spacious but spiritually expansive home of the Thorntons. The year was 1990 and Dohn Thornton was employed at the American Embassy. In his free time he shared his knowledge and testimony with Russians, several of whom were to form the nucleus of the first

Moscow branch in 1991. Having accepted various opportunities for growth through Church service, Andrei Petrov became the first Russian president of that branch and, in 1992, the first Russian Moscow district president.

President Petrov, his wife, and now two children are currently living in Wymount Terrace while Andrei attends the Marriott School of Management, studying in the MBA program, thanks to the vision and generosity of professors Scott Smith and Heikki Rinne and their colleagues and donors. After two years the Petrovs will return to Moscow to continue their groundbreaking work in establishing the kingdom in that choice land of Russia.

The Moscow Mission was and is blessed immensely by Americans living in Moscow, who virtually all told me at one time or another that they had set aside other appealing professional opportunities to come to Moscow and help build up a new Zion.

Dan Souders moved from employment at the U.S. Embassy to Aeromar, taking a position of administrative leadership in a joint venture between Aeroflot and Marriott, providing meals on international Aeroflot flights. President Souders served as original Moscow group leader as Russians began to attend meetings and become interested in the Church. He currently again is a branch president living in Moscow with his fine Russian wife and daughter. Albert Walling, recently deceased, headed Huntsman Chemical in Moscow and served with unparalleled devotion and sensitivity as second group leader of the Moscow Russian Saints, and as one of the first two Moscow district presidents. Through his example and teachings, he prepared a very substantial number of Russians for success in their Church service. Now the Matthews and Bennett families ably continue the work of the Wallings.

The Gibbs played a starring supporting role in strengthening the Moscow branch while Daryl, a computer specialist, helped colleagues at Moscow's leading language university

master state-of-the-art computer technology and language-learning applications. William Atkin is a leading international attorney with Baker-McKenzie. He and BYU law professor Cole Durham have been centrally important in steering the Church's fragile frigate through the rough waters of discriminatory legislation and unresponsive bureaucracies. The Neuberts, U.S. Embassy employees, provided successful youth conferences and Primary leadership training.

Here I would mention BYU Professor Trevor McKee, who brought dozens of BYU and University of Utah students to teach English in Russian kindergartens. Their sterling example stood and stands in stark contrast to the pornography, violence, and vulgarity entering Russia from the West through tawdry films and TV. These students and their leaders helped a considerable number of Russians form positive impressions about the USA, Utah, and the Church, promoting, consequently, missionary success.

Dedicated Russian Church members and those who strengthened them paved the way for what I consider the highlight of the Moscow mission through July of 1993. The event occurred on February twenty-first of this year.

It had been a considerable trek from Moscow member-missionary work by Americans in early 1990, to the arrival of the first six full-time missionaries in October of 1990, to the organization of the first official Russian Moscow branch in March of 1991, to the establishment of fifteen Russian-speaking branches this February. On that day, February 21, 1993, over 500 members and friends were seated comfortably in the newspaper-publishing house Izvestiia Building in downtown Moscow, across the street on one side from the famous Pushkin statue to Russia's most beloved poet and on the other from McDonald's, a must-visit cultural mecca for Western tourists.

The fifteen branches had just been organized and their presidents sustained. Now

the ten new branch presidents were bearing brief testimonies. Most of us were enjoying a particularly delectable spiritual feast. When the eighth or ninth president began speaking, I started to review in my mind the main points of my talk, which would conclude the conference.

I was prepared to speak on the blessings of attending a large, established ward of the Church, as I had done as a preteenager living in what was for me the comparative metropolis of Pocatello, Idaho, after spending my earlier years in Notice, Coltman, Rigby, and Jerome. I would recall our full Church program and lovely meetinghouse facilities, like our Pocatello building with that inspiring mural on the wall behind the podium. The mural depicted heroic pioneers crossing the plains, struggling and, on occasion, disheartened, but attended always on their journey by unseen angels. Maybe these pioneers could not see the angels, but every week I and others saw them plainly above the pioneers' heads, and I learned well the lesson that a loving Heavenly Father is aware of our burdens and strengthens us just enough to bear them. And I would draw a parallel to the Moscow pioneers crossing to their eagerly anticipated spiritual Zion.

Then I wanted to emphasize how much I learned and benefited in other ways from living during my junior and senior high school years in the small northern Idaho town of St. Maries, where our fledgling branch of the Church met in a modest, two-room Grange Hall, similar to facilities of many of the new Moscow branches. But there as a teenager I had the opportunity to serve with Weldon and David Tovey, two other very young men, in the Sunday School presidency and to grow through the warm encouragement of humble, generous Saints who overlooked our inadequacies and loved us for what we were and what they believed we could become.

As I was mentally reviewing these and other points, suddenly and unexpectedly an intimation, a thought, a sensation filled my consciousness and in an instant encompassed my whole being. I no longer thought about my talk or listened to the speaker.

I had felt a distinct and powerful impression that the spirit of the Prophet Joseph Smith was rejoicing with us in this historic meeting. I believe for a moment my spirit felt his spirit of youthful buoyancy, joyful enthusiasm, and expansive vision.

As I reflected on this feeling, I realized that in 1993, 150 years had passed from the 1843 appointment of the first missionaries to Russia, and that this day of fulfillment must be an occasion for heavenly rejoicing and grateful recognition of the efforts of so many over fifteen decades who made the emergence of the Church out of obscurity a reality in Russia.

I close with a more personal experience that, I hope, will contain lessons of benefit to you. Like you, I too have observed that life presents challenges to everyone of us. Some struggle in certain areas, others in different ones, but we all face difficulties. In my case, for example, I have experienced problems with my eyes for years. Progressive myopia has caused strain on my eyes' tissue-thin retinas. My vision continued to deteriorate while I was on my mission, especially during my final year. In March of this year I was referred by a local Moscow doctor to the highly regarded Fiodorov Eye Institute of Microsurgery in Moscow.

Following a thorough examination, the doctors there recommended a surgical procedure called scleroplasty, which is not uncommon in Moscow, although not well known or accepted in the West. The procedure was intended to stabilize my eyes and forestall further irreparable damage to my retinas. After receiving somewhat differing opinions from consulting specialists whom the Missionary Department and area presidency recommended, and after studying as much of the professional literature

as the institute could make available to me, my wife and I prayed earnestly for inspiration to know whether I should have this operation. We prayed with all our hearts and often to know the Lord's will.

In my life I have found that, following prayer, for me it is best to remain on my knees with my eyes closed and my mind and heart as open to inspiration as I can make them, and to wait on the Lord. During these moments as we sought answers regarding my eyes, I felt only the tiniest kernel of tender confidence that I should have the operation. We continued to pray and I continued to feel only barely assured.

Finally I decided to act on this faint confirmation and scheduled the operation. From that time my confidence grew quickly and held firm. I asked my wife how she was feeling and learned that her experience closely paralleled mine. As we made our decision, we had not known in every fiber of our beings; some of our fibers still had questions. We did not receive the specific assurance that the operation would end my eye problems, but we felt confident that it was in accordance with the Lord's purposes for me to proceed.

This process of perceiving spiritual communication is beyond my ability to define in certain, unchanging terms. But I do feel that, while we should never disavow the possibility of angelic appearances or heavenly voices, neither should we remain insensitive to gentle enlightenment to the mind and quiet assurance to the heart. This was another confirmation to us to trust the deep, calm feelings in our souls.

Before the surgery I desired a priesthood blessing. I was surrounded by many of surpassing spiritual plenitude. I would have been honored to have any two of dozens bless me. As I continued my work in the mission, I felt certain that I would recognize the opportunity at the appropriate time to invite someone to provide the blessing as a complement to the moving and effectual prayers of my faithful wife.

It was when I was meeting with two members of the two Moscow district presidencies that I recognized I should ask these brethren to be the participants in this ordinance of blessing. After our meeting I invited the two men present, President Martynov from the north and President Petrov from the south, to give me a priesthood blessing. As they laid their hands on my head and spoke with humility and power beautiful words of comfort and blessing in the Russian language, I understood a remarkable truth: in my moment of need I had come to two worthy Moscow priesthood holders, neither of whom had been a member of the Church when our mission was begun in 1990. Further, I had been among those who had had the opportunity to teach them to anoint and bless the sick and disconsolate.

The operation itself was quite simple. The virtually painless procedure involved rotating the eyeball downward to expose the back of the eye. Small rectangular strips of human donor sclera, the white part of the eye, were carefully placed on the thinned back wall of my eyes.

Much of my life I have felt or wanted to believe, romantic that I am, that part of my soul, my aspirations and dreams, my cultural preference was Russian. Now I can proudly acknowledge that a portion of my physical being is Russian. Someone gave part of her- or himself that I might have the possibility of better health.

That is what we missionaries around the world hope to do—share something of ourselves, of our faith and conviction, that part of us which is most needed by others to affirm heartening meaning in this often perplexing life, in which we all see as though “through a glass darkly.” For the sufficient light I do receive and can impart, and for my inestimable opportunity of laboring with beloved Russians and Estonians, and with splendid missionaries from the USA, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Finland, Sweden, and Nicaragua, I express my deep appreciation, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.