

Needed: A Revolution in Pastoral Training

Pitfalls of Western-Created Leadership Training in Russia

by Mark Harris

During the 1990s, pastoral training ministries were springing up all over the former Soviet Union. This training frenzy was fueled by a sense of urgency promoted by at least the following factors:

1. A rush to meet the demands of the many newly planted churches (as well as the vast needs in an area of the world where formal training had been denied for many years).
2. A “time is short” motivation, the fear that the window of opportunity for ministry in Russia might close at any time, due to the potential for renewed persecution, closed borders, or a drop off in Western giving.
3. The tendency of Western churches, denominations and para-church organizations to desire their own independent training programs (the resulting lack of partnership causing much duplication as schools proliferated).

Unfortunately, the rapid response to the training needs (real and perceived) was accompanied by a lack of missiological reflection. One reason for this was that the prime movers were often Western leaders who understood theology and training from a Western perspective only. These leaders were often backed by Western businessmen who had very little appreciation for foreign culture, and tended to have a “franchise mentality” as they established schools and programs.

God is gracious, and the lack of wisdom on the part of Western workers did not prevent their loving and zealous intentions from being at least partially realized. For example, many young Russians were exposed to much good biblical teaching. Still, many programs fell short of fulfilling their mission to train leaders for a new generation of Russian churches. Several specific aspects of their strategies and methods were at fault. Here we will focus on deficiencies in *student selection*, *training substance*, and *training methods* that I discovered through my reading, experience and interviews in Russia.

Student Selection

First I offer the following partial list of the wrong kinds of students. Such students often completed Western training programs without being able to advance the cause for which the program was created. Some fit into several of these categories, and the categories themselves are not mutually exclusive.

1. *The neophytes* In many leadership training programs were found new believers who were in need of basic spiritual formation. They had very little grounding in their faith, little or no church experience, and

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had often entered training for the purpose of receiving initial discipling.

2. *The inexperienced* Other students may have been believers for some time, but had never been involved in ministry. The younger of these also lacked in critical life experience (family, work, etc.). Those lacking experience were unable to apply much of what they were learning—especially those topics related to practical ministry.
3. *The unqualified* Many who had time and experience on their side were not qualified for leadership for other reasons (I Tim. 3:1-13). Again, they mainly needed basic spiritual formation or correction.
4. *The purposeless* Other students had no particular intention or desire for ministry, but rather had just seized the opportunity to grow spiritually or get answers to some of their questions. Some of these simply had nothing better to do, and felt that they “might as well study.”
5. *The unsent* This was a common problem among the well-established Russian churches. Young men from these churches would get training, then return to their churches, only to find no openings for leadership. Furthermore, church elders were suspicious about the nature of the training (due to important theological differences between the churches and the schools). Existing leaders often felt threatened by the fact that the graduates had much more formal training than they had. The rift was made worse by the common attitude of those trained that they now “knew better” than the existing leadership.
6. *The professional academics* Students often had career motives at variance with the goals of the training program. It was common to find students who preferred teaching to pastoring. Many wanted to study simply so that they could teach in the same institution.
7. *The status seekers* Existing church leaders often ended up in training programs, and many had ulterior motives. Denied

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training for many years in the Soviet system, they were often more interested in the prestige of a diploma or certificate than they were in internalizing the principles they were being taught.

8. *The linguists* In the early 1990s the ability to speak English was a prized skill in Russia. Many young Russians crowded around Americans for this purpose, and some of these saw the training programs as the best opportunity to gain English fluency. A percentage of these were believers who were looking to become translators rather than spiritual leaders.
9. *The hirelings* One of the saddest situations was the presence of young people with few job opportunities in Russia who jumped at the chance to have the paid “job” of studying the Bible (since many schools paid stipends). Others considered the program a stepping stone to further study or work in the West (from which they had no intention to return to Russia). Most of the new churches and their connected organizations had paid staff positions, and students were often attracted to the opportunity for a job that was better than other options they had.

Why did the institutions accept such students? Again, here is a partial list of reasons:

1. Most of those with the maturity, experience and qualifications for church leadership simply could not fit the programs into their lives. They had families and jobs, and were not available for the daytime and/or residential programs being offered.
2. Young people were more open to new teaching and thus were attracted to the programs. Existing leaders often didn’t trust Western teaching, and in

some instances were reluctant to study even if their circumstances had allowed them to do so.

3. The proliferation of schools by “lone ranger” organizations led to unhealthy competition to attract students. As a result, mature, qualified candidates became fewer and farther between.
4. Organizations that were pouring money into Russia (often from Korea as well as the West) needed students to justify their programs. Often, anyone available for training was accepted.
5. Programs designed to train the more qualified students were often hindered when potential donors were indifferent to supporting for extended periods programs that would make training accessible to church leaders that have families, jobs and ongoing ministry responsibilities. They were thus limited to working with students that were available for the more daytime and residential programs based upon traditional models of higher education.

The presence of the wrong kind of students led to a loss of potential in these training programs. To be sure, many high-quality students did complete these programs and are now committed to their ministries. But other qualified students were discouraged about their programs which had enrolled so many ungifted or immature students. We should not underestimate the motivational effect of being among a group of others who are qualified and committed to the Lord, nor the demotivating effect when the opposite is true.

Graduates of a training program will never be successful in ministry if they lack credibility among those to whom they would minister. Western trainers often took for granted that simply graduating from their program would cause their students to be automatically accepted. In Russia this was often far from the reality.

While too often training programs have wasted much time with the wrong students, a growing number of newer programs are focused on the practical mentoring of adult leaders sent by their churches. Working slowly and carefully at first to establish solid relationships with the churches—and having built trust by their words and deeds—these programs are now having fruitful ministry. While zealous amateurs will often rush ahead of those seeking to apply sound missiology to a new situation, the latter group proves its value in the lasting fruit of wise cross-cultural ministry.

Training Substance

Even when the proper students had been selected, the material used for the training commonly was not fully suited to the purpose of the program. The primary deficiency was a lack of Russian contextualization. Western training programs were simply imported and installed, with the assumption that they would be adequate to prepare people for ministry. A great deal of discussion would be required to flesh out this topic, but here are a few factors that I observed:

1. *Frantic Assemblage of Material*
This was another result of the “time is short” mentality mentioned above. Western workers would often establish a new work in Russia, come to the realization that training was needed, create an outline of courses based on their Western understanding of what was needed, and then start asking around for anything that had been translated into Russian.
2. *Low Quality of Texts* Although some solid theological texts were translated into Russian, the quality of translation and editing was often poor. There were also many American books that, in the words of Russian leaders, “should never have been translated into Russian.” Western organizations often rushed to get their books translated into Russian, spending thousands of dollars to do so, even though many of these books were too

shallow or faddish to be used in any kind of serious training.

3. *Orientation to Western Reality*
This problem follows from those above. The texts translated were less effective the more “practical” the subject matter. Books were translated because they had been so helpful to people living in America—few suspected that this would be the very factor that would render them less helpful in Russia. People love books that “speak to” them, which means that they are aimed at their particular context. For a book to speak to Russians, it must likewise be oriented to their particular context. As one example, missionaries putting together pastoral training would often end up with books on how to pastor—in a Western church, that is, with Western assumptions and values. Such books do not equip leaders, and in fact can even handicap them for service.

4. *Ignorance of Russian History*
Several times I heard calls by Russians to include Russian philosophy and history in the curriculum used to train evangelists. Unfortunately, Westerners often didn’t consider these topics of sufficient importance to include in their training. Such attitudes betrayed an anti-cultural bias, as well as an assumption that the church could be planted in a vacuum. Was 1,000 years of Russian Orthodox history irrelevant to the training of Russian church leaders?

One very common problem in Russia was that many trainers were not at all trained in missiology, and thus knew little about how to contextualize their training. They were either theologians or minimally trained workers. Even those trying to think in terms of “contextualizing” the material often were satisfied to simply attach Russian illustrations to their Western teaching, instead of completely retooling the training to fit the Russian mindset, which is what was needed.

Westerners tended to underestimate the cultural differences between Russia

and America, and many even constantly disrespected Russian culture. The Eastern influence on Russian thinking was invisible to them, and they tended to assume that proper training would help the Russian to think like an American. The substance of the courses reflected this American ethnocentrism, and the Russian students were not in any position to question the substance even when they felt uncomfortable with it.

What if Americans in the early 1990s had invested in giving biblical training to new and established Russian thinkers, setting them to the task of applying it to their own culture, and then been willing to publish their writings? I believe that we in the West would today be blessed by the richness of their work. By now the training of Russians would have matured to a higher level (and at a much faster rate) through home-grown talent. Instead, dollars are being poured into translating popular American books, hindering the development of a truly Russian library of materials.

Training Methods

Westerners were perhaps slowest to recognize that effective training methodology is not uniform across cultures. But the problem here is complicated by two factors: First, our own Western training methods are questionable and not necessarily the best means of creating church leaders, even in our own culture. Second, it was the demands of the Russians themselves that often drove the methods used.

For example, Russian church leaders often regarded the residential model of pastoral training as the more “developed” model, and were ready to jettison church-based models as soon as they had the freedom and ability to do so. In such cases, the central problem paper was reversed—when some Westerners wanted to promote extension training based in the churches as a better model for Russians, they were told that such a model was only good for training that was not “serious.”

Another problem was the piecemeal nature of some programs. Models of

training were often patched together by Western missionaries from whatever components were available. They would gather students and materials, then find some Western professors willing to make short trips to Russia. They would rent locations for classroom instruction and build the program itself “on the fly.” It may have never occurred to most of them that a very different—and more effective—model of training could be conceived for Russia.

Westerners tend to approach any model-building with a highly structured and ordered template in mind. This is one feature of Americans that Russians were quick to speak out against. One young Russian told me that the mechanical programs that Americans brought to Russians didn't feel right. These programs were like big machines that churned away and spit out products, devoid of the deep relationships that would truly minister to Russians. They would submit to the program (what choice did they have?) but could not enthusiastically endorse it, nor did they feel truly ready to minister to their own culture as a result of the training. The model was simply not designed for them. Rather, they had to adjust themselves to the model.

In this article I have only scratched the surface of the difficulties of church leadership training in Russia. I have said little about the more successful programs, since my goal was to “troubleshoot,” rather than to offer alternatives. I have offered such an alternative in a paper entitled “Contextualized Education for Russian Leaders,” available at www.markharris.us I don't claim that my alternative is the best one—it is simply an attempt to move in the proper direction.

I would also encourage anyone interested in pursuing this topic in further detail to look at two doctoral dissertations that have dealt much more at length with the issue:

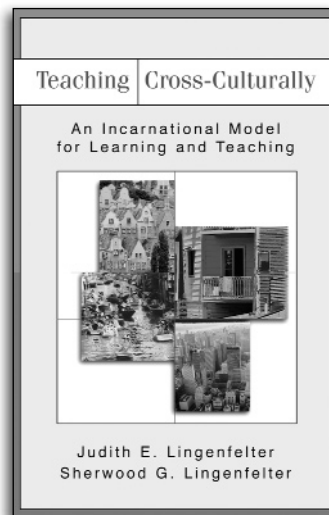
1. “Theological Education for New Protestant Churches of Russia: Indigenous Judgments on the Appropriateness of Educational Methods and

Styles,” by Miriam L. Charter. Ph.D. dissertation at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, June 1997.

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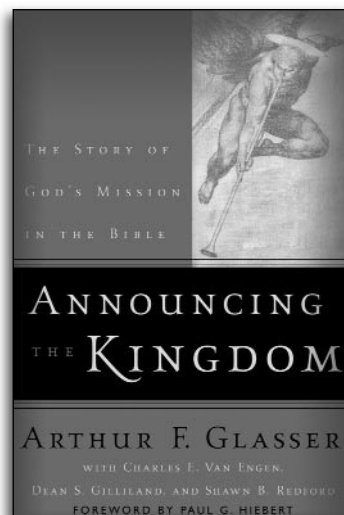
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