

REPORT ON THE LEADERSHIP TRIP TO SOUTH RUSSIA CONFERENCE:  
SOUTH DISTRICT AND CENTRAL BLACK SOIL DISTRICT  
MAY, 2016

Introduction

From Saturday, 21 May to Monday, 30 May 2016 (inclusive), Rob Pierson and I traveled in the Russian Federation, for the purpose of making contact and holding meetings with leaders in the two districts of the South Russia Annual Conference; namely, the Central Black Soil District (DS: Rev. Alexander Pererva) and the South District (DS: Rev. Irina Mitina). The CBS District has been in a covenant ministry partnership with the Baltimore-Washington Conference since 2007. One of the reasons for the 2016 travel was to learn mutually about one another with the churches of the South District, with a view to making the covenant relationship inclusive of both districts in the South Russia Conference. The sequencing of the itinerary put the South District first.

In addition to Rob and myself, we were joined for the whole trip by Mrs. Elena Melnikova, who is Chair of the Administrative Council of the South Russia Conference as well as President of the United Methodist Women in Eurasia. She served as our main translator. In the South District, DS Rev. Irina Mitina and our driver, Alexander, who is a member of the Sevastopol UMC.

**Part I: South District**  
(Superintendent: Irina Mitina)

**Stavropol (Ставрополь).** *Located in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains and serving as the administrative center for the region (Stavropol Krai), this small city, with a population of about 400,000, is a governmental, transportation, and cultural hub in the Caucasus. It boasts three universities including a medical school and a program which attracts undergraduates from African and other countries for course work in engineering and agriculture. It also is a military training center, and was formerly the home of the pilot training school (now based in Voronezh) for the Soviet and Russian air forces. There is a substantial stadium in the city center, and a small but attractively modern airport a few kilometers from the city. Originally built as a fort town by the Russian Empire in 1777 to be a bastion against possible Turkish invasion, the downtown area boasts a charming historical park and a mix of architecture both traditional and modern. The city center is very neat and clean, graced with flowers and wrought-iron benchwork, testifying to the evident pride the local people feel in their hometown. A broad square in front of the administrative building for Stavropol Krai is adorned with a large statue of Lenin. During our visit, the central square and other parts of the city were decorated in honor of Victory Day (9 May<sup>1</sup>), and political posters were evident representing several candidates and parties for the Russian version of what we call a primary election, which took place on 22 May.*

*It is worth noting that the Stavropol Krai (Region) is located near areas which have been the locus of conflict or controversy in the recent past; in particular Chechnya (which has had a violent separatist movement) and North Ossetia (which borders the Republic of Georgia).*

*The name "Stavropol" comes from the Greek stauros (cross) + polis (city), so that the name means "City of the Cross". This is memorialized with a statue in the city center. During the Soviet period, from 1935 to 1943 the name of the city was Voroshilovsk, in honor of the Soviet general and party leader Voroshilov.*

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<sup>1</sup>Victory Day, celebrated on 9 May in Russia as a national holiday, and on the same day in some other central and eastern European countries, is known variously as Victory Day or V-E Day and celebrated in 7 or 8 May in the rest of Europe and the Commonwealth of Nations. The date has less to do with politics than what the date was in various countries when the instruments of surrender were signed in France and in Germany in 1945.

*Stavropol is the location of the lead church and is effectively the district center for the South District.*

We arrived in Stavropol on Saturday night on a flight from Moscow (Rob and I having departed the previous night from different cities in the USA). After a wonderful pizza snack in the city, we checked in to our accommodations, the Hotel Stavropol, which is within walking distance from the church.

On Sunday, 22 May, we worshiped at the Stavropol UMC, which Irina Mitina pastors in addition to her superintendency duties, and where Rob was invited to bring greetings and summarize our purpose for being in Russia, and I preached the morning message. Following the service, we enjoyed lunch with the congregation in their fellowship room. The church people were very welcoming of us, and clearly very devoted to Pastor Irina. The fellowship room has tables piled with clothes, as the church also does relief work in the city itself through the collection of lightly-used clothing for redistribution.

The church building is a two-story structure originally conceived as a house. The ground level holds, in addition to the entrance way, the fellowship room and kitchen and a room which is being used as housing for a couple of women university students. The second floor has the worship room, pastor's office, and room which is serving as the pastor's quarters. Outside is a courtyard with garden space, and a gated car park and driveway (with a steep incline from the street). The building is not handicapped accessible and cannot readily be made so; therefore there is some discussion of selling it and buying another building with greater accessibility to use as a church's facility. No decision has been made at this time.

Later on Sunday, we were taken by Pastor Irina to visit a Roma ("gypsy") family living in the village of Novotroitskaya, about 70 km (50 mi) from the Stavropol, with whom (and another family, since departed) Irina has been in ministry, helping with basic needs like food and clothing, and encouraging the education of the children. The Roma live on the margins of Russian society, and often have a very difficult time accessing basic services such as medical care and education, due to their lack of proper legal paperwork (i.e., in American parlance they are often "undocumented"). Very poor, they are enterprising in their own way, and form clans of extended families marked by the practice of very early marriage for girls and boys (as young as 13, if not younger). The needs of the Roma represent a significant, though often frustrating, field of ministry for the Stavropol church, which has also intervened to help ensure access to obstetrical care for one Roma Family.

In the village with the Roma, Irina took us to a piece of property which she has been able to acquire that has a small house on it that she is refurbishing. There is a substantial parcel of property with the house, and the possibility of acquiring more. Irina's hope is to be able to construct a facility which could be used as a school for Roma children and adults, and also to house teams, camps, and other activities for the district.

Sunday evening, we were able to enjoy a folk music and dancing concert in the Cossack style (featuring the Kubansky Kazachii Chor) in the city's Concert Hall. It was a sell-out performance, and a great experience. On Monday morning, 23 May, we did a bit of touring including seeing the site of the original fortifications, and visited an Orthodox Church festival which was being held in the city, complete with a wide variety of vendors of religious goods, foods, clothing, jewelry, and craft items.

Notes:

Church: Stavropol UMC

Pastor: Rev. Irina Mitina

Key Outreaches: International Students, Clothing Ministry, Ministry to the Roma people.

Ministry Needs: Support for local ministries (especially with Roma). Building support for ministry center out from town. Possible building support for a new church facility (future).

Getting There: Stavropol is served by air service from Moscow and select other cities, the main carrier being Aeroflot. Anticipate tight connections and arrival late in the day.

Accommodations: The Stavropol Hotel is a comfortable bargain, around \$50 / night for a room with two twin beds and its own bath, buffet breakfast and in-room wifi included.

**Krasnodar (Краснодар)**. Like Stavropol, Krasnodar was founded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a fortress town to defend against the Turks, and is the administrative center of the Krasnodar Krai. The original name of the city was Yekaterinodar, "Catherine's Gift", in honor of Empress Catherine II ("the Great"), and dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria as the patron saint. Renamed Krasnodar ("Red Gift" or "Beautiful Gift") after the October Revolution, the city has a population of over 850,000 and is home to several universities, museums, and one of the largest shopping malls in Russia. We were told that the city, which has a very modern and attractive appearance, has been a magnet for affluent Russians from other parts of the country.

We gathered with the Krasnodar church late in the afternoon on Monday the 23<sup>rd</sup>, for a time of worship together and fellowship afterwards. This congregation is made up of about a dozen people, almost all seniors, and meets in the basement rooms of a building in town. Several members shared their testimonies, which were moving. Nina K., the church's lay leader, came from a home with a believing mother and a "neutral" father, and as a seeker started attending church secretly while in school. She got connected with the Methodists after 2003, choosing it out of several options open to her. Natalya N. felt a call to monastic life as a young woman, but asked God to be able to live in the city. During years spent in Estonia, she repented and became a believer; her prayer was, "Teach me as you taught Magdalen." Now known as "Believer Natasha", she loves hymns and sings with her friend Yuri, who also writes songs. Sergei as a seeker started studying the Bible but couldn't understand it, so he stopped; now, as a Christ-follower, he seeks to bring the words of Jesus to bear on life's problems. He doesn't argue other teachings; he just presents Christ.

After worship, we were invited to share "tea and coffee", which was a full supper spread with potatoes, bread, vegetables, fruit, candy, and of course tea and coffee.

Notes:

Church: Krasnodar UMC

Pastor: None at present; congregation is led by Nina Krainukova

Key Outreaches: Music evangelism in the park

Ministry Needs:

Getting There: Krasnodar is served by an international airport (main carrier: Aeroflot) and a recently-refurbished central railway station, as well as good highway access. Heading west, it is the last major city before the Sea of Azov / Black Sea and the link to the Crimean Peninsula. It is about four hours west of Stavropol by automobile.

**Yuzhny (Южный).** Our visit to Yuzhny was really a brief overnight one; the pastor, Tatyana Azyavina, and members of the congregation were away on retreat. We were hosted by the pastor's husband, Nikolai Azyavin in their home, and treated to a wonderful Cossack-style meal and very comfortable accommodations.

Notes:

Church: Yuzhny UMC

Pastor: Tatiana Azyavina

Getting There: Yuzhny is along the main east-west highway (A146 / E115) across this region of the Caucasus.

**Kura Tse-tse (Куря Це-це).** On Tuesday, 24 May, we set out for the Black Sea coast and the ferry to the Crimea and Kerch. On the way, we passed through the western Caucasus Mountains. These are very reminiscent of our Blue Ridge Mountains. In the mountains, in the village of Kura Tse-tse, Irina Mitina has been able to acquire a piece of property with two small buildings on it. These, partly finished in a do-it-yourself fashion, she sees as having the potential to become the hub of a center for monastic-style retreat and spiritual programming. It is a lovely site, with a substantial creek passing by it, remote enough to allow for some devoted seclusion but with relatively easy access to highway and the outside world.

Ministry Needs: Team support for refurbishing buildings and grounds for use as a monastic-type retreat and ministry center.

During the course of the day, we passed by the shoreline of the Sea of Azov, where we stopped to wade a bit in the water. It was late in the evening when we went through security and embarked for the 10:00 departure of the hourly ferry to the Crimea, from Port Kavkaz to Kerch.

**Kerch (Керчь).** *The gateway to the Crimea from the east, Kerch lies at the eastern edge of the Kerch Peninsula, itself part of the Crimean Peninsula. Currently linked to the rest of Russia by a ferry only, the Kerch Strait Bridge project has been fast-tracked to provide a four-lane highway and dual-line rail link and is set for completion in late 2018.*

*Founded 2600 years ago as the Greek (Miletan) colony of Pantikapaion, the city has long enjoyed regional prominence because of its strategic location. It has been the site, in turns, of Greek, Byzantine, Kazar, Mongol, Turkish, and Russian settlements. It was the scene of heavy fighting during World War II, and suffered heavily under Axis occupation. The remains of the ancient Greek city are an important heritage site, adjacent to Mt. Mithridat (Mithridates), which has a commanding view of the city and the port, topped by an obelisk and an eternal flame to honor her defenders during the Second World War. The population of the city is approximately 150,000.*

*Like the rest of the Crimea, it is disputed territory between Ukraine and Russia, having been ceded to the Ukrainian SSR (one of the republics of the old Soviet Union) in the 1950's, and then declaring its independence in an internationally-disputed plebescite in 2014 and united with the Russian Federation.*

We arrived in Kerch late in the evening on Tuesday, repairing to the church building. We had a light supper (though a full meal had been prepared, we were still full from earlier and very tired from the trip) before retiring for the night.

We were afforded the opportunity for a tour of the building, which is a substantial facility with two large rooms on the ground floor, one of which is used as the worship space and another one as a meeting / class room. A third room is taken up with storage. On the second floor is a kitchen and

fellowship room, a room for the night watchman / super, a children's ministry room and three rooms which can be used as dormitory space. There is also a basement space which is unfinished. There are bathrooms on both main floors. The space, though not elegant, is therefore spacious and, if somewhat basic in its appointments, would be comfortable and sufficient for housing a normal-sized ministry team. The exterior walls of the building, however, having been outfitted with many windows, were losing heat in the wintertime; therefore they were substantially bricked up to conserve heat and energy. This has caused some cracks to appear in the walls, a matter which should be looked into for the long-term health of the building. Some small support for maintaining the building comes from other congregations who meet in the facility, which take on building-related projects in lieu of paying rent.

On Wednesday, 25 May, we had the opportunity to see something of the city of Kerch. First I should note that the church building itself is adjacent to a large "hotel" or apartment building, which reportedly houses a number of families, but is also a site known for being a bit on the noisy and rowdy side. The whole neighborhood apparently is home to a number of children, with whom the church has some outreach ministry, though its identity as United Methodist (i.e., not Russian Orthodox) proves an obstacle.

A short drive from the church is the Black Sea strand, which we visited though the day was windy and the sea was rough, and very few people were in the vicinity of the beach. We passed by a number of large buildings which are apparently shuttered factories, though whether the decline in industrial activity is a temporary disruption or the sign of a deeper economic disruption in the town, we did not discover. We strolled along the town's waterfront, taking in not only the Crimean shore but also the various monuments and a very festive atmosphere, it being the day when those graduating high school were out and about, meaning there was a large number of young people out and about (the new graduates wearing their best clothes and sashes of red or blue). We also visited the main town square with its statue of Lenin and large TV screen, and the primary (and very charming) shopping street of the city, where we enjoyed a nice lunch. Following this, we took a trek up the nineteenth-century stairs to the monuments overlooking the city, which include a memorial obelisk and eternal flame, and memorial tributes to the "hero cities" of the USSR, of which Kerch was one. We also took in the ruins of ancient Pantikapaion, which are preserved as a national monument site.

In the evening, we had the opportunity to share Bible study with the members of the Kerch congregation, who were very welcoming. Again, they are largely older and small in number. However, Vitali Shelkovich, a local pastor, serves as the *de facto* leader of the congregation, along with his wife Polina, who cares for the children's ministry. They are very dedicated to the care and outreach of the church, which they support sacrificially and largely at their own expense, taking nothing in terms of remuneration for their ministry. Asked about their priorities for ministry, Valery quotes John Wesley, saying, "The world is my parish." They have already endured weeks without electricity, bitter cold, and a sense of isolation created by the detachment of Crimea from Ukraine and its gradual incorporation into the infrastructure as well as the political structure of the Russian Federation. They have a particular desire to reach out to young people, and are hopeful that a mothers' fellowship will aid in the effort.

To our eyes, Kerch shows exceptional promise as a potential site for evangelism and children's ministry, and a base of operations for teams in the Crimea. The building, if retained, also needs significant work. With the completion of the Kerch Strait Bridge, the city will most likely have a renaissance as a commercial hub for the eastern Crimea, with many people passing through on a regular basis in addition to its regular residents.

Notes:

Church: Kerch UMC

Pastor: Vitaly Shelkovich

Key Outreaches: Children's ministry, Prayer ministry, Outreach partnership with drug rehabilitation

center

Ministry Needs: Building rehabilitation. Support for local outreach (especially to children).

**Sevastopol (Севастополь).** *With a population of about 400,000, Sevastopol lies in the southwest corner of the Crimea, at the point closest to the Balkan countries and European Turkey across the Black Sea. It is therefore a strategically very important place, and is home to the Russian (formerly Soviet) Black Sea Fleet, boasting the deepest water of any base in Europe. As such, it was a closed city to foreigners during the Soviet period, and enjoyed a special status even under Ukrainian control. Sevastopol has a lovely waterfront, with shops and restaurants. A beautiful promenade is dominated by a monument column commemorating the sinking of ships to deny access to the harbor to German ships during World War II, and a modern review stand used for ceremonial occasion involving the fleet. The name of the city (from Greek “Sebaste”, equivalent to Latin “Augustus”) is not ancient, but comes from the nineteenth century, in honor of Empress (Augusta) Catherine II (“the Great”).*

Having driven around the south coast of the Crimea (via Feodosia and Yalta) through some very lovely country as well in the Crimean Mountains, we arrived late in the afternoon at the apartment of Aleksei and Lena — in Sevastopol, which is also the meeting place of the United Methodist congregation in that city. Aleksei and Lena (a former teacher) are both retired from their previous careers; and Aleksei’s story is a unique one, as he became involved with Methodism after studying about it online and contacting Bishop Khegay over the Internet. The little congregation is extremely enthusiastic, with a robust ministry of worship and mutual encouragement. Aleksei is definitely on fire for the Lord, and dreams of acquiring property so as to construct a church building as a base of operations in the city. They currently have three home groups, one of which is unable to attend services at the apartment because of the ages and location of the members. In addition to their times of worship and home group meetings, they have a Sunday ministry of visitation. They are also hopeful of acquiring a vehicle (a minivan, to accommodate their musical instruments) to aid in their work.

Aleksei says that “every day, something happens”, as people come to them for help with various problems. The congregation (which numbers between a dozen and seventeen people) also engages with other ministries in the area; for instance, they aided in putting on a camp for handicapped persons within the past year. Aleksei says that his vision, given to him by the Lord, is to “widen your tent”.

Notes:

Church: Sevastopol UMC

Pastor: Aleksei Komaritsky

Key Outreaches: Prayer ministry, Visitation, Music

Ministry Needs: Minivan. Property and building.

**Simferopol (Симферополь).** *Simferopol is the administrative and transportation center of the Crimea, and home to its main airport. Occupied since about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., when it was known as Scythian Neapolis, it was known as Aqmescit (“White Mosque”) when it was the seat of the khan of the Crimean Tartars. Refounded in 1784 after its annexation by Catherine the Great, the town was renamed Simferopol (from Greek Sympheropolis, “City of the Common Good”). During World War II, the town was under German occupation for about 2½ years, during which time it was the scene of one of the worst massacres of local citizens perpetrated by the Nazis, totalling some 22,000 persons. Today, Simferopol is the capital of the Crimean Republic and boasts several universities and technical colleges.*

Viktor from the Sevastopol church was kind to drive the three of us (Elena, Rob, and me) to Simferopol in his car, with Irina Mitina riding along to accompany us. Our time in Simferopol was a late-night visit with the pastor, Aleksandr Merzlyakov and his wife, Olga, who provided us with a delicious supper about 11:00 before we headed to the airport to catch our flight bound for Volgograd. The congregation in Simferopol was founded about 2 years ago, and started with a dozen people. It still numbers about that, though there has been some change, as a few of the original congregants have relocated to other places. Pastor Aleksandr and his wife are originally from Simferopol, though they spent some years ministering in other places, such as Bratislava (Slovakia) and Lugansk (eastern Ukraine).

According to Pastor Aleksandr, evangelism has become more difficult in recent times; it doesn't work as well, he says, "just to invite people". He also indicated that they are trying to broaden their outreach as a community.

Notes:

Church: Simferopol UMC

Pastor: Aleksandr Merzlyakov

## **Part II: Central Black Soil District** (Superintendent: Aleksandr Pererva)

**Volgograd (Волгоград)**. *In many ways, Volgograd is a city in a league of its own. Though at just over a million in population it is far from being the largest city in Russia, it may well be the longest, stretched out over 80 km (about 50 mi) along the Volga River, whence its name. Founded in the sixteenth century as Tsaritsyn (from its location at the confluence of the Tsaritsa and Volga rivers), it was called Stalingrad (after the Soviet leader) in the period 1925-1961. It was also the scene, in 1942-1943, of a five-month battle between Axis and Soviet forces which proved to be the turning point of World War II in Europe. One of the longest non-siege battles in the history of warfare, it was also the largest (with around 2.2 million combatants) and the bloodiest, resulting in between 1.5 million and 2 million casualties.<sup>2</sup> In other words, nearly 1 in every 20 casualties from the entire Second World War was at Stalingrad. The focal point of the battle was the Mamayev Hill, where today the colossal statue of Mat' Rodina ("Mother Russia" as it is known in English) dominates the landscape and commemorates the massive struggle where once a water tower stood. Like Kerch, Volgograd is one of the "hero cities" of Russia.*

*Modern Volgograd is a bustling city and transportation center, and the capital of the Volgograd Oblast. An international airport serves the city, linking the Russian heartland to the north, to transcaucasian and Central Asian destinations to the south, east, and west. Shipbuilding and other heavy industry are the heart of its economy, with a special emphasis on military manufactures. The city has also been the target of three terrorist suicide bombing attacks within the past 15 years.*

We landed at Volgograd on Friday morning the 27th, and were met by Pastor Valery Patkevich of Transfiguration Church, one of the two UM congregations in the city. After situating ourselves in our quarters for the night (Elena in her old flat, and Rob and I at the nice hotel immediately adjacent to the church building), we had lunch with Pastor Valery and discussed the ministry in the city, including the

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<sup>2</sup>The Normandy invasion of 1944 (Operation Overlord / D-Day and its aftermath) was comparable in size, with approximately 1.6 million combatants; its casualties were approximately 235,000.

challenges for outreach posed by being Protestant, having limited budgets, and the social realities of contemporary Russia. In the afternoon we divided up, with Rob and Valery going one direction and Elena Melnikova (who until recently was a Volgograd resident) and myself going to Mamayev to see the monuments to the battle there. Later in the day Valery took Rob and me to the museum of the Battle of Stalingrad, a very modern museum with sophisticated diorama and video exhibits related to the city and its massive struggle.

In the evening, we dined at very nice local restaurant, where we had the opportunity to meet with three women (Lyubov, Elena, Olga) who are key leaders in Pastor Valery's congregation. We had an opportunity to learn about their service through the church, and to share a bit about our own ministries back home. It was very good relationship-building time as we prepared for meeting with both congregations the following day.

On Saturday, 28 May, we shared in a special joint service with the pastors and congregations of the two Volgograd churches, during which time Rob shared about why we were there and I offered the sermon for the day, followed by remarks from Pastor Valery. After the worship service, we enjoyed a fellowship meal with the congregation. Then Rob and I were taken on a tour of the facility by Valery. The church is a three-storey building with the worship and fellowship space on the ground floor, Valery's apartment on the next level up, and (as often is the case in our churches in Russia) a dormitory / program space on the third level. This area has accommodated teams in the past, and could easily do so again.

The basement of the church building is unfinished and very rough, and Pastor Valery's dream is to make it into a recording studio that can be used to create professional-quality ministry materials (particularly music) in-house, as well as be available for hire for outside groups as a revenue source for the church. At present, Valery and two of his members record and mix music in his apartment, but the situation is not optimal for the purpose. Valery estimates the cost of the project to be around \$12,000 - \$15,000 to complete the basement work, but it could be done in two parts as funds are available. The outside yard of the church is completely enclosed for the safety of children, keeping them secure from intruders as well as shielding any who might be prone to wander into the very busy thoroughfare just outside the churchyard gate.

The church has the largest collection of books I have seen in any church in Russia, perhaps one-quarter to one-third the size of the library at the Moscow Seminary when I last saw that (2011). The church also benefits from the volunteer service of a professionally-trained school librarian from Ukraine. Ministry with families is clearly one of the strong suits of the church, which has been something of a creative pacesetter in this area in Eurasia. While we were there, we saw Valery have occasion to counsel with one of his couples over some issue they were seeking to work through. The church has in the past also been involved in outreaches to the business community in Volgograd, and regularly sends groups to Camp Kristall for work and ministry.

The second congregation, Hope UMC, is an outgrowth of Pastor Valery's church, and their pastor was at one time Valery's assistant. They are still obviously personally and professionally close.

The Volgograd churches are clearly anchor congregations for the ministry in the southeast part of the Central Black Soil district, and the lynch pin for outreach in the Volga basin from Saratov to Astrakhan, and west to the vicinity of Rostov.

Notes:

Churches:           1. Transfiguration UMC  
                          2. Hope UMC

Pastors:             1. Valery Patkevich  
                          2. Vladimir Ilyukhin

Key Outreaches:   1. Family ministry, Music  
                          2. Visitation, Orphanage, Abandoned babies, Homeless (?)



Ministry Needs:     1. Financial support for finishing basement of church building.  
                           2. ?

Accommodations:   The hotel next to Pastor Valery's church building is very comfortable and expensive. The church building also has dormitory space.

**Voronezh (Воронеж).** *The administrative seat of the Voronezh Oblast, the city of the same name is an important government, transportation, education, manufacturing, and cultural center in southern Russia. Closed to foreigners when part of the Soviet Union (one reason why most Americans have never heard of it), it is nonetheless a very substantial metropolis of over 1 million and growing: it has increased by over 150,000 during the past decade alone. The city has three United Methodist churches, and is the administrative center of the Central Black Soil District.*

*Founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a settlement of Kievan Rus', it was under the control of the Mongols (Nogai Horde) prior to coming under the control of Moscow. Straddling the Voronezh River about 12 km (7.5 mi) from its confluence with the Don (one of Russia's major waterways), the city's waterfront was the place where Tsar Peter I ("the Great") built Russia's first fleet, which is commemorated with a memorial park and church building. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city became an important manufacturing center for the Russian Empire. During World War II, the Axis advance was stopped on the western bank of the Voronezh River and could not cross to the eastern side, though at a terrible cost to the city, which was over 90% destroyed. Voronezh, though not one of the "hero cities", was awarded the Order of the Soviet Union for its brave resistance.*

*Since World War II, the city has emerged again as a leading technical and educational center. It has at least 11 universities and several technical and professional schools, and is a major manufacturing center, in particular for the aviation industry. Prototypes for the (discontinued) supersonic Tupolev-144 were built in Voronezh, and the first wide-body Ilyushin passenger planes were constructed there. It is a major railway hub and highway junction, and has an international airport that has just been refurbished with a new terminal (2015-2016).*

We arrived Saturday evening from Volgograd (via a Moscow connection), and batted down for the evening, with Rob and I staying at the Resurrection UMC. On Sunday, we grabbed a bite of breakfast and returned to share in the worship service at Resurrection where again, Rob shared and I preached the message for the day. Having been to Resurrection Church numerous times beginning in 2006, it is very much like being at home and always good to visit with friends. Clearly, the music ministry (led by Deacon Oleg Pechersky) and the international student ministry are continuing to thrive. Aleksandr Melnikov (Elena's husband), who was a delegate to the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, gave a report concerning his time there, which was upbeat and encouraging.

Following worship, we enjoyed a brief bit of fellowship with the congregation before repairing to a café where we had a meeting for over an hour with Pastor / D.S. Aleksandr Pererva and Irina Efremova, who is the Director of Camp Kristall, located by the village of Ramon' in the Voronezh Oblast, about 45 minutes from the city center. Topics of discussion ranged from renewal of the covenant, ministry priorities and needs of the district, the church and the camp, and catching up on news since our last visit there. Elena Melnikova interpreted for Rob and me.

There is much to be done; and we stressed again our commitment to the Central Black Soil District, and that our increasing the scope of the covenant partnership to embrace both districts in the South Russia Conference did not imply a pulling back on our now 8-year-old formal relationship with the CBS District.

In the evening, I was privileged to have the opportunity to dine very pleasantly with Pastor Aleksandr and his wife, Galina, as well as their daughter Ira and granddaughter Tori.

The following morning, Monday, 30 May (Memorial Day in the USA), Rob and I departed Voronezh very early for our flights back through Moscow and to Washington Dulles.

Notes:

Church: Resurrection UMC (One of three UMC's in Voronezh)  
Camp Kristall (= Camp Crystal, Camp Voronezh)

Pastor: Aleksandr Pererva

Key Outreaches: Music Ministry, International Student Ministry, support of Camp Kristall

Ministry Needs: Material support for music ministry (handbell repair). Program and building team support at Camp Kristall.

Accommodations: Resurrection UMC has some limited space which can be used for team accommodations. There is also space at Camp Kristall (about 45 minutes away).

**Summary.** Our travel to Russia was blessed in every way. First, there were the logistical blessings: safety, no missed connections, good weather, adequate funds for the job (we came in under budget and returned with money left over), great food. Second and more important were the relational and missional blessings: brand-new visits or contacts with five congregations and two sites (plus one pastor's family) in the South District, and the making or renewing of contacts with three congregations and the Camp Kristall leadership on the Central Black Soil District, including time with both District Superintendents. We were not able to visit with the congregations at Yuzhni or Sochi (South District), or other churches besides those mentioned on the CBS District. In particular, I think we want to attempt to re-establish meaningful fellowship with the Peter & Paul Church in Voronezh, and the ministry project at Ertil.

There are plenty of opportunities for ongoing relationships and projects on both districts. In CBS, Camp Kristall continues to provide a place for both construction work and ministry teams, besides fellowship with the congregations in Voronezh. Volgograd likewise can use physical labor, financial support, and personal fellowship contacts. In the South District, there is what appears to be a pressing facilities and ministry opportunity at Kerch, along with physical facilities projects at Kura Tse-tse and Stavropol, and an outreach opportunity to the Roma at the latter. Sevastopol's needs are more financial at the present, with the possibility of longer-term facilities support.

Prioritization of projects is essential, and we will need to be in close contact with the Superintendents to ensure that what we do reflects their priorities and those of the Bishop and Conference leadership. Meanwhile, it is my opinion that there is more than enough to connect the love and absorb the labor of the IMT - Eurasia group at the Conference level, and the work of more than one team per year. For this reason, we will be best served if we also cooperate closely with Virginia and other conference groups and the national / global IMT - Eurasia leadership, as well as the Bishop's office in Moscow.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles L. Harrell  
Solomons, Maryland  
5 & 27 July 2016