

Welcome to Mission Sonlight. The Euro-Asian Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is based here in Moscow. In the eastern reaches of this territory is Irkutsk, Russia.

Irkutsk is one of the largest cities in Siberia. The city is situated along Angara Rive and near Lake Baikal. The landscape of Irkutsk is that of rolling hills with boreal forests, which are typical of eastern Siberia. This is contrasted with the flat, open steppe of western Siberia.

Irkutsk began as winter headquarters for gold-trading and collection of fur taxes in 1652. The first road, connecting Irkutsk with Moscow, was built in 1760 and was named the Siberian Road. This contributed to the economic growth of Irkutsk and allowed many new goods to be imported.

Siberia is known for it's harsh winters. Summers in Irkutsk are mild with the mean temperature during July, the hottest month, reaching 64.4°F. Winters are brutally cold with a mean temperature of -2°F in January.

Irkutsk was home to many exiles who were sent there as a form of punishment. During the time of Genghis Khan, soldiers who were condemned could choose their punishment-death or exile to Siberia. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, those who played a part in the Decembrist revolt against Tsar Nicholas I, were exiled to Siberia. These exiles included Russian artists, officers and nobles. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for every two locals living in Irkutsk there was one exile. They made the best of the situation and developed Irkutsk as a major center of intellectuals and social life. Today, much of the city's cultural heritage can be seen in the architecture that these people constructed during those dark years.

In 1879, Irkutsk suffered at terrible calamity. Fire broke out and destroyed many government buildings, the palace of the Governor General, libraries, the Siberian section of the Russian Geographical Society and 4,000 homes. Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the city was destroyed and yet the people rebounded and rebuilt. By 1900, Irkutsk was commonly known by its nickname, "The Paris of Siberia."

The Seventh-day Adventist church has a presence in the city of Irkutsk and our members are eager to have their own church home to worship in on a weekly basis. Ten years ago this congregation were recipients of a portion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Sabbath Mission Offering.

"We officially purchased the land for our church in 1995," says Pastor Alex \_\_\_\_\_, (Need his last name) associate pastor of the Irkutsk church. "In 1996 we had enough money to lay the foundation of the building. As funds came in we were able to construct the walls and the roof."

It is difficult and expensive for members in Irkutsk to attend church. Many of the members live in near the construction site for the church. However, since it isn't finished, they must travel across town to meet with another group and it is costly for them to do so.

The congregation is unable to rent meeting halls because most of buildings are government owned and Russian law will not permit them to be rented to religious organizations.

"The members in Irkutsk are working to do ministry for others as Christ showed us in the Gospel," says Pastor Roman \_\_\_\_\_ (NEED His last name and title).

"The people of Irkutsk have the same needs as all people. They need attention, care and love. They are hoping and waiting for someone to meet these needs." Pastor Roman

believes that many of these needs can be met when people learn of Jesus and build a relationship with Him.

Evangelism in Irkutsk faces challenges. According to Pastor Roman, some people are receptive to hearing the gospel while others are critical and even aggressive. For many years the Orthodox religion was the only one that was allowed to be practiced in the country. To break away from this means it is necessary to go against generations of family beliefs. Today, most of the Russian Christians are first generation Christians. The emotional toll of changing church membership as well as lifestyle can be devastating. Family members ostracize many of these young Christians.

Ellen is an example of how difficult it is for a person to change their belief system. “I have attended the Seventh-day Adventist church for 16 years,” says Ellen. “I want to be baptized, but my family will not hear of it.” Ellen continues to worship on Sabbath and tell her family what she is learning. She realizes that she must follow Jesus and hopes to be baptized soon.

Pastor Alex believes the new church building will help in uniting families. “When we are able to meet in our new church, parents and their children will be able to attend services together,” says Pastor Alex. “The children will have the opportunity to learn about Jesus. We are looking forward to the day when we can baptize the first official new member in our new baptistry.”

When citizens of Irkutsk take the step and join the Adventist church, they are ready to share their new beliefs with others. Fish and Nadia are a young couple who attend services each week, and have been members for about three years. “The Sabbath is so important to me. Before I became a Seventh-day Adventist I used to work all the

time,” says Fish. “Now I worship on Sabbath and am able to rejoice and rest in God and have fellowship with believers.”

The pain of not having their own church home can be heard in the words of Nadia. “We worship now but it is so hard to feel at ease and at home. We never know when we will be asked to leave where we are holding services. It will be such a blessing when my family and friends can come together to worship in our own church.”

Fish is grateful that he has found God’s truth and others who believe as he does. “I am so glad I learned about the Sabbath and a group of believers that I can worship with as a united family,” says Fish. “God has done so much for me and He has changed my life.”

As Pastor Roman looks back over the work in Russia he says that it’s amazing to see the difference in his country from the time when the property for the church was purchased. “Russia has seen a lot of changes in the past ten years,” says Pastor Roman. “We are able to witness to society in a way that we couldn’t before. People are starting to see that we are part of society and that we are a growing church which will make positive contributions to the community.”

The members in Irkutsk are thankful for the help they have received in the past. During the upcoming weeks, think about what your gift will be to these brothers and sisters in Irkutsk as you imagine not having your church to worship in each Sabbath.

Reporting from Irkutsk, Russia this is Mission SONlight.