

## UNDERSTANDING UKRAINIAN YOUTH CULTURE

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### Introduction

My wife and I were shopping in downtown Kyiv in April of 2001. We were taking some time to get accustomed to our future hometown – the sights, the new smells, as well as the people. We were on our own, having left our Ukrainian companions for some “alone time.” We passed several individual stands in this post-Soviet economy selling their wares. People were buying clothing, food, home essentials, CDs, videos, and more. We stopped at a particular stand of very inexpensive Nike sportswear and noticed an interesting label. The label said, “Nike. Authentic Replica.” The label on that piece of clothing could describe the struggle modern day Ukrainians are facing with their identity. The people of Ukraine have been correctly described as one of the most loving and warm people in the world showing their *authenticity*. *Replica* could describe “a problem with constructing relative unity out of the past (since) the Ukrainians have not always existed as a nation” (Wilson, 2000:311). Ukraine desires to hold onto their Eastern roots as they step forward towards the West. The ramifications of a country still molding their national identity needs to be considered in attempting to understand their culture. Although I have lived several years in Ukraine, I am constantly learning about this culture from the “outside.”

*Ukraine is a Key State for the Russian speaking World.* Ukraine is located directly north of the Black Sea and on the southeastern edge of the European continent. The country borders Russia, Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova and Romania. Victor Kulbich, Director of

the Ukrainian Center for Christian Cooperation, said in a personal interview that the evangelical movement was centered in Ukraine in the 1990s, and that Ukraine desires to be an example for the rest of the Russian-speaking world. He also said that the communist party in many of the countries bordering Ukraine has already come back to leadership within their countries. These places are already beginning to close to Western missionaries. “Our desire is to reach out to their neighboring countries and beyond as missionaries” (Kulbich, 2001). Ukraine’s church planting movement in the 1990s has been described as a miraculous movement of God.

*Personal Background.* I have been a missionary with Youth Ministry International (Louisville, KY) for the past several years. In 2003, we founded the National Center for Youth Ministry at Kyiv Theological Seminary. We started the first Bachelors Degree program for youth pastors in the former Soviet Union. My wife and I had 15 years of stateside youth ministry experience when we moved to Kyiv. As of 2008, we had 50 students studying in our program and have opened two satellite schools in Western Ukraine with an additional 40 students. Youth ministry in Ukraine is starting to grow beyond its infancy.

*Our Biblical Basis.* Ephesians 4:11-13 is a key verse in our ministry: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>*to prepare God’s people for works of service*, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup>until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (NIV, italics added).” Since there is a strong evangelical presence in Ukraine, our desire is to be in the *equipping* process versus the *doing* process. Our youth ministry philosophy is based on Christ’s own ministry to his disciples since most scholars believe that Jesus’ disciples were in fact youth. We are being obedient to God’s commandment to “Go and make disciples ... (Matt. 28:18), and desire to assist

Ukrainian youth pastors with this mandate as well.

### **Current Religious Climate in Ukraine**

There are four factors in the current religious climate of Ukraine we must consider: 1.) the history of the Orthodox churches, 2.) the history of the Baptist Union, 3.) missions involvement since independence, and 4.) youth ministry.

*History of the Orthodox Church.* A form of Christianity has been present in the country since “AD 989 when Grand Prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kievan Rus, became a Christian and forced his people to accept his religion” (Herlihy, 1994:1). Vladimir chose Eastern Orthodox Christianity based in Constantinople versus Rome. Since that time, the land of Ukraine has been under the rule of the Mongols, the Turks, the Poles, the Austrians, and the Russians. This has affected the Orthodox Church and their current struggles. Today, there are three Orthodox Church groups including the Ukrainian Orthodox – Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox – Kyiv Patriarchate, and the Greek Catholics (also known as the Uniates, who are orthodox in practice yet acknowledge the Pope). Only the Russian Orthodox (combination of all Orthodox churches) and the Baptists were allowed to have limited function under Soviet rule. These churches have been arguing over territory and state rights since 1990 when the Ukrainian Orthodox and the Greek Catholics could resurface from the underground.

In the midst of some numerical discrepancies in regards the number of professing Christians currently within this former Soviet republic, there are some interesting statistics. Eighty-eight percent of the population claims Christianity (62%- Orthodox; 12%- Catholic; 2.7%- Evangelical) (Johnstone, 2001:644). This is up from 7% confessing Christians before independence. “Yet research conducted in 1997 by Sotsis-Gallup ... asked ‘How often do you

attend church?’ the following results from a sample pool of 1200 respondents: 1% frequent church daily, 11% weekly, 12% monthly, 30% once/few times per year, and 46% hardly ever” ( Filipovich, 1999:37). These statistics have not changed much in the past 10 years. Even though this shows a great deal of apathy, there is a growing awareness of the spiritual. A recent USA Today article talked about the “post-communist revival” in regards to Eastern Orthodox monasteries. Where there used to be 9 monasteries in 1990, there are now 120 in Ukraine. (Hale, 2001:10A)

*History of the Baptist Union.* The Baptist Union is a significant evangelical presence in Ukraine. This group of 900 churches in 1990 grew to 2,236 churches with near 400,000 in attendance nationwide in 10 years(Johnstone, 2001:644). The denomination was started in the middle 1800s; founded by German Mennonites who had a great missionary zeal. “This group brought with them a Bible-based gospel ministry, and invited Russian peasants to their simple meetings. Their focus on prayer, preaching, singing, and communion spoke directly to the hearts of the Russian people who had been used to the strict liturgical style of the Russian Orthodox Church. (Harris, 1999:2)” During this same time, the Mennonites were also planting churches in Georgia, another former Soviet republic. Gradually, the Baptists fulfilled the Great Commission in bringing the gospel to all areas of the Russian Empire. In 1929, a new law put a stop to future evangelism by limiting the number of churches. Following World War II there was another spurt of evangelism among the Baptists’ alerting the Soviets. Their communist agenda to wipe out this faith had not succeeded so far.

Thus, under Krushchev, there was a new wave of repression with higher levels of control over the churches. In Soviet times Baptists would lose their jobs for doing any kind of open evangelism. Many of them were also sent to prison, especially the leaders and most active members. People were forbidden by law from visiting Baptist churches, and members themselves were forbidden from visiting churches other than their own.... In the Soviet Union, when it was

discovered that someone was a believer, he became something of a low-class citizen and was not allowed to receive higher education. This form of persecution kept the Baptists largely separated from educated society, limiting their ability to reach that segment with the gospel (ibid., 3, 12).

For the most part the churches remained stagnant until Ukraine's independence. Since then, theological training and a church planting movement propelled the Baptists' forward in reaching their own country for Christ. Since 1995, other evangelical, non-Baptist churches have also been growing in numbers, especially to the younger generation.

*Missions Involvement since Ukrainian Independence.* "From the perspective of world missions, the 1990's could be called the 'Russian decade.' There was perhaps no other time in church history when such a large number of short-term Christian workers flocked to one country to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Harris, 2000:1). Currently there are 463 missionaries in Ukraine from 22 countries and 70 different mission agencies. (Johnston, 2001:647) This does not include the thousands of short term missionaries that come every year with evangelistic campaigns, service and building projects. Some groups team with the national Christians and others do not. A great deal of good has happened with the establishment of Bible seminaries, music colleges, camps, and more churches. There has been more fruit in Ukraine than in Russia where "some Russians estimate that only 1% of the reported 'converts' from American evangelistic efforts ended up in evangelical churches" (ibid.) Yet the situation is not completely dissimilar.

A recent development has been the formation of at least two Ukrainian mission sending agencies in 2008. The goal of both the Baptist Union and International Teams missions agencies is to send additional Ukrainians to foreign countries as missionaries.

*Youth Ministry in Ukraine.* "Under the more restrictive laws (of the Soviet Union) after 1960, registered churches were not allowed to have Sunday schools, and no new young people

were allowed to come to church. At some times it was even against the law for a young person to be in a service” (Harris, 1999:10). During my own visit to Kyiv in the spring of 2001, I spoke with Ukrainians who met in underground youth meetings during the Communist regime.

According to my Ukrainian colleagues, if a stranger came to a youth meeting within a flat, they would be told it was a birthday party for a designated youth. Their secrecy was due to the reality of KGB informants who did not allow youth within the church services. Youth leaders and youth continued to be quietly evangelistic, but the persecution greatly affected youth and children’s ministry. The number of current youth ministries is hard to obtain, yet one estimate of 3000 people currently ministering with youth in clubs, churches, or camps is not unrealistic. Since most youth ministries in Ukraine are less than 10 years old, the need for training and leadership development is critical. Even though denominational leadership is encouraging the development of youth ministry within the country, many churches are not in complete support. Mark Harris, a missionary ministering to youth in Russia in the 90s wrote, “This is a generation unlike any of the older ones that remember life in Soviet times, and most of the churches are unprepared to alter their approaches in order to reach them. Indeed, most of the churches would reject such methods as being worldly....The younger and more flexible Baptist churches are going to be in the best position to reach young people for Christ” (ibid., 16). This has been true of Ukraine in the past 5 years.

### **Ukrainian Youth Culture**

The term *youth* is defined differently in every culture. Most Ukrainians define the Russian term for youth as anyone who is between 17 and 25 and is still single. In 2008, a new ministry focusing on teenagers has developed to minister to those between the ages of 12 and 17.

For the most part, this age has been considered to be part of children's ministry. Our ministry defines youth as those between the ages of 12 and 25. In order to truly understand Ukrainian youth, we must consider the following areas: 1.) Ukraine's violent history, 2.) Family structure, 3.) the Educational system, 4.) Youth problems, 5.) and Trust issues including Communism, Corruption, and Chernobyl.

*Ukraine's History.* It would take volumes to summarize the past 1000 years of Ukrainian history. The greatest number of people dead in a war (World War II), the worst man-made famine in history (Stalin's collective farm plan), and the world's largest nuclear disaster (Chernobyl) have all happened on Ukrainian soil. These three major world events have all happened in one generation. History has had an incredible effect on Ukrainian culture.

The people of Ukraine have rarely had their own national freedom through the years. In 1240, the Mongol army captured Kiev; in 1362, it was the Lithuanians. In 1686, the land is split in half between the Poles and the Russians, and in 1773, the Austrians took over the Western half. In 1918, the Red Army captured Kiev again. This is a very simplistic summary of the nations which have ruled Ukraine, but it gives a general idea. Anna Reid writes, "Though they rebelled at every opportunity, the few occasions on which they did achieve a measure of self-rule – during the Cossack risings of the seventeenth century, the Civil War of 1918-1920, and towards the end of Nazi occupation – were nasty, brutish, and above all short. Moreover, until very recently Ukraine's neighbors did not see it as a separate country, or Ukrainians as a separate people, at all. To Russians it was part of Russia; to Poles, part of Poland. And many Ukrainians, Russified or Polonized by centuries of foreign domination, thought the same way" (Reid, 1999:2).

This history has certainly brought an attitude of fatalism to the culture, and in some ways

to its national identity. Yet the Orange Revolution in 2004 began to change this attitude.

*Family structure.* The majority of the urban population lives in flats consisting of 2 or 3 rooms with a kitchen. The flats are found in 5 to 37 story tall buildings and are kept clean, but you may have to pass through hallways and elevators that are dirty and may even smell of urine. Security at apartment building entrances is common. Thirty percent of the country lives in a rural setting. Their housing consists of cottages, some without indoor plumbing or heating. Rural families will have a garden for sustenance and may be fortunate enough to have a cow. “Youth in the country do not have the level of culture and possibilities to build own their own life,” said one nineteen-year old Ukrainian (Makarick, 2001).

It is still common for a newly married couple to live with one set of their parents for the first few years of marriage. “Ukrainians are accustomed to communal living. Private ownership of apartments is a distinguishing feature of independent Ukraine, yet for economic and practical reasons, communal living remains very much a part of Ukrainian culture. Communal living exacts a high price on family relations and marriages” (Dalton, 2001:68) Flats often contain more than just the immediate family. Older children cannot afford to live outside their home. Like the west, family strife is common. The divorce rate is high in Ukraine, and some divorced couples live together out of economic necessity (ibid., 68). Divorce is very rare among evangelical believers.

*Educational System.* No study would be complete of any youth culture without an understanding of the country’s educational system. They start at the age of 5-7 years old depending on whether they go to kindergarten or not. The child continues to the end of high school at the age of 16 or 17. The U.S. educational system concentrates more on creativity and research writing skills. The Ukrainian system focuses more on math and science. “After wading

through a whole barrage of finishing exams, they select an (interest-specific) college they wish to attend and then begin to wade through entrance exams....If a student wants to be a doctor, he goes straight from high school to medical school. If he wants to be a teacher, he goes to pedagogical school, (etc.)..." (Schimmels, 1994: 124). There is a great deal of stress during the time of examinations. Reports of students who have committed suicide to avoid the pressure of the test are not uncommon. Most Ukrainians desire to go to the university because it will effect their job opportunities.

Cliff Schimmels, a missionary who taught 10 months at the Kiev State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Language, wrote some insightful words concerning the educational system he observed in Ukraine.

One of the contrasts between our system and theirs is that our hidden purpose is to promote and produce individuality, and their first hidden purpose is to produce conformity. In class, students stood as one group when the teacher entered the room, not anything showy, and not particularly relevant except there was a certain mark of obedience, getting in step, going with the flow....

The teaching styles themselves seemed to be designed to demand conformity. Knowledge was presented in a factual manner, point upon point, and the students were expected to memorize it word for word. In foreign language classes, students were given a dialogue that they memorized and recited upon cue. In my university classes we read novels. When I asked the students what the novel *said*, they were much quicker and more precise in telling exactly what had been said than American students would be. But when I asked what it *meant*, no one would venture an opinion....

I was asked to consult with one college that wanted to revise its curriculum.... I asked, "Well, what is your goal? What do you want your graduates to be able to do?" They stared at me with blank faces, so I decided to make the test a little simpler. "Let's say that you graduate a student prepared to teach math. Another university graduates a student prepared to teach math. The local village needs a math teacher. Which one should they hire?" The deans and department heads stared at me a long time and finally the rector spoke for them.

"Well," he said, "which student is most likely to find housing in the village? Does one have a grandmother or someone else there he could live with?" Suddenly I saw at least one difference between American education and

Ukrainian. At the college where I teach, our goal is to prepare our graduates ... for the job market. And we would like to think that it does make a difference which graduate you employ. (ibid.: 126-127)

The *high group oriented* society of Ukraine's communistic past did not consider the individual first. They first considered his place in society. The group orientation of the past has been replaced by a commercial, individualistic approach that is prevalent in Ukraine's modern culture today. Yet the old ideas are still present.

Bribery has been a way of life in Ukraine and it seems that the only way to get an education in this land is to pay the professors with gifts or money. Some would look down on this practice completely, but when you recognize that the average wage of a university professor with a master's degree is below the U.S. poverty level, you look at it differently. As colleges begin to charge more to the students, these practices should become less and less.

*Youth Problems.* Problems of youth culture seem to all stem around the lack of hope for a good future. Economic concerns seem to be at the top of the list. A nineteen year old Ukrainian said that the number one problem facing youth was, "Education without payment and opportunity to find a job" (Makarick, 2001). I asked another Ukrainian 20-year old, "What do Ukrainian youth do with their free time?" She answered,

Nowadays a lot of young people have plenty of spare time. And as it seems to me, they spend it for nothing. Many of them just wander the streets with their companions— smoking, sometimes drinking. Some (who have more money) go to the clubs or discos. *I think one of the reasons is that it's very difficult to find a job in our country*, and if you want to study in higher school (institute, academy or university) you must pay money (though education is considered to be free in our country). So, if your parents don't have enough money to pay for your studying in the institute, you just sit at home watching TV days and nights or walking with friends. And as a result of that, there are many young thieves and burglars now. They like entertaining themselves in clubs, discos, theatres, concerts of famous singers (Italics added for emphasis, Tin-shan, 2001).

From an anthropological standpoint, the economic outlook can be blamed for many of the

horrendous problems Ukrainian youth are getting into today. From a Biblical standpoint, the source of these problems center on a future without hope in Christ.

One result of this hopelessness is that sexual promiscuity is at an all time high. The first study ever done concerning sexual activity among Ukrainian youth was completed in 1999. The study was done at Donetsk State Medical University. Six hundred and eighty-nine 18 year old medical students took the survey. The survey showed that 59% of the girls and 83% of the guys have had sexual intercourse. The same study said that 10 % of the same students had already had an abortion. The fact that this survey was done on future leaders in public health does show “the urgent need for more prevention strategies and reproductive healthcare education in Ukraine” within the secular world (Mogilevkina, 2001: 270-271). We conducted a street survey with 120 youth in Kiev in 2005. Over 80% of those interviewed saw no problem with sexual freedom before marriage.

Another study done between 1992 and 1994 had alarming results concerning abortion. A census of all diagnosed pregnancies was conducted in two study sites (the Left Bank region of Kiev and the city of Kniproderzhinsk—approx. 400 km SE of Kiev.) The study was conducted over a period of 19 months. Both sites had over 250,000 people living there in 1993. The results stated that 60% of the 17,137 pregnancies were terminated before the 13<sup>th</sup> week when abortion is free.

Another result of hopelessness is crime and drug abuse. One social action study recently completed said, “The population of homeless, runaway, or street children has increased in recent years due to the breakdown in family relationships and economic pressures on families. Drug use is an increasing issue amongst young people, though one which is still largely hidden” (Fleming, 2000:169). Some say the problem is so large that no study could possibly see anything but the tip

of the iceberg (ibid.). Drug use is also affecting the next youth problem.

This problem is the AIDS epidemic. Studies are being conducted yearly concerning “the epidemic in Ukraine, which today is considered to be an epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemics in Eastern Europe, and of the social and economic consequences of the epidemic which are developing in Ukraine.... If the epidemic develops according to the worst case scenario and an inexpensive and easily available medicine is not found, the total number of AIDS deaths will reach 0.8-1.9 million people in 2016” (Steshenko, 1999). Those that are testing positive with the HIV virus are between the ages of 18-28 years old. AIDS has been spread mainly through the sharing of needles in drug use (70%), yet test results have been showing that there is a dramatic increase in the disease being spread through sexual contact among young people (ibid.)

*Trust Issues.* During my visits to Ukraine I found the Christians to be very warm and accepting, yet I sometimes did feel the question of “trust” that permeates Ukrainian society. Several factors have led to their distrust. These factors could be labeled the three “C”s. These would include - Communism, Corruption, and Chernobyl. The first “C” is *communism*. Under communism, propaganda was the only form of news the people received. “If (Stalin) told them that American workers were rioting in the streets every day, that children were running around homeless, and that thugs lived on every corner, the Lyudmilas and Sergeis had no other choice but to believe all that was true. So all the time, they for the most part, believed that they were living in the only country that worked at all. (Schimmels, 1994: 94) The government controlled all the information coming to the people. Once Ukraine declared independence, they discovered the lie of the government. The Soviet leadership also monitored the people constantly. Undercover party members were part of church services to make sure everything said was concurrent to the communist authorities. One Ukrainian family shared story after story of the

persecution and ridicule Christians received from the government. The question was always on people's minds, "Can I trust you?"

The second "C" that has added to a lack of trust in Ukraine is *corruption*. Bribes and unofficial activity are a way of life in Ukraine. A major study was done in 5 countries including Ukraine and Russia with registered businesses of each country in Eastern Europe. They were trying to determine the state of the unofficial business activity that is happening. The study was done with 300 businesses in each country and Ukraine turned out to be worst offender. It appears that as much as 47 % of all business in Ukraine is not reported for tax purposes. This is considered illegal. The major reasons appear to be high taxes, lack of security, a poor business court system, and a heavy Mafia presence. Many of these business owners are doing what they are doing just to survive (Johnson, 2000:495-500). The economic situation has added to the lack of trust. The latest issue regarding corruption concerns the promises given during the Orange Revolution in 2005. Young people rose up and their voices were heard. The peaceful demonstrations overturned the old regime. The government made some dramatic changes, yet corruption continued to be a dominant force. Youth have also seen rampant inflation in the past 5 years. They continue to have hope for change, but continue to be disappointed.

The final "C" of trust is *Chernobyl*. In 1986, 40 miles North of Kiev, the world's largest nuclear reactor blew up. Hundreds have died; thousands have physical problems; and the far reaching effects of long term radiation poisoning is unknown. But one of the largest problems is actually emotional. The following story illustrates the trust problem:

Apparently Natasha has been something of a special person all her life ... She became the class leader (in school) and the leader of all the communist children's groups – the Pioneer Club. She rose to the top and became an instructor .... During her college days she continued her good work for the party and gave dynamic leadership to the Comsomol group on campus.... After college she went back to her hometown to teach. She was dynamic in that role, too and was moving up. As a

part of special privilege, her own children were permitted to attend the best school in town along with the children of the established party leaders.

One day Natasha's daughter came home and innocently reported a high rate of absences....Natasha thought of that list of children with the mysterious illness and realized that they were the children of party leaders.... Natasha, with all her exuberance for life, marched down to City Hall, barged into an office, and demanded to know a reason for those absences. "A small accident," they told her, "nothing to worry about. We're just giving our children a short vacation." The next day the American scientists came with the news.

"Twenty years in the party," Natasha said. "I believed in it, and I believed in them. I truly believed that this was best for me and my family. And they would have let them die." She has a teenage daughter and a small son. The girl has a serious stomach disorder, and the boy has a blood disease. (Schimmels, 1994:116-117)

Chernobyl was the straw that broke the camel's back in regards to trust. In the summer of 2000, our group took a tour of the Chernobyl museum in Kiev. The tour guide's first words were, "Chernobyl is the reason that there is no longer a Soviet Union. In some ways we are thankful for what happened there." In 2006, I was able to join 10 bus loads of Ukrainians to visit the reactor and its neighboring ghost town, Pripyat. I will never forget the haunting experience of walking through those empty streets.

These are a few of the issues that help define the Ukrainian youth culture. I believe God is raising up a generation of Ukrainian youth to spread the gospel throughout the Russian speaking world. I know that God has used many Ukrainian youth pastors to challenge me in my own walk with Him. May God cause you to be challenged as you grow in your understanding of the Ukrainian youth culture.

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