

Russian Woman building church, bonds with Massillon congregation

By Amy L. Knapp

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So far, it has four walls and no roof.

But the church that Galina Kolesnikova is building from the ground up with the help of her husband and church community seeks to serve the Lord, and that's enough.

Kolesnikova, of Voronezh, Russia – who has a master's degree in engineering and accounting – decided to become a pastor of the United Methodist Church in 2000, spreading the Word of God to people including inmates at a maximum security prison and orphans and the 25 or so members of her United Methodist Church Revival in Latnaya, a small town of about 12,000 people.

Before there was a church, Kolesnikova and her congregations worshiped anywhere they could. In 2005, she rented a small house to hold services. Now, the group is building a more permanent home.

While on a recent visit to the United States, the 49-year-old Kolesnikova made a stop in Massillon to visit with old friends, including Pastor David Kimberly and his congregation at Faith Community Fellowship.

The pair met while Kimberly was in Russia teaching at the seminary Kolesnikova attended.

"They are very starved for any type of Biblical training," said Kimberly, who has taught



Galina Kolesnikova is building a church for her congregation, United Methodist Church Revival, in Latnaya, Russia.

in Russia on three different occasions. "They welcome any kind of training."

The pair's friendship has flourished over the years, with Kolesnikova visiting Massillon when she comes to the U.S. and Kimberly and his congregation making mission trips to Russia.

"Our friendship has really grown since then," he said. "We have sent two teams (from the church) over in 2002 and 2006 to visit her church."

Kimberly said during the first trip in 2002, he and Faith Community's lay leader of recovery ministries – who leads the Alcoholics Anonymous group – traveled to different alcohol recovery projects throughout Voronezh.

"Alcoholism is very prevalent," he said. "Russia is one of the few first world nations that by mid-century, their population will decrease because of health problems and quality of life."

On the second trip, which didn't include Kimberly, church

members visited with Kolesnikova's congregation and community.

"Alexander (Kolesnikova's husband) went out and invited people he knew to tea," Kimberly said. "He told them there were going to be Americans there. People came because they were curious. When they asked why they (Americans) were visiting, it gave them the opportunity to talk about our ministry."

Kimberly explained that there was as strong Methodist presence in Russia but it was wiped out during the Revolution. Since the fall of communism in 1992, the Methodist church has re-emerged.

Russia is predominately Russian Orthodox, he said. But because of the Methodist history in the country, the religion has been able to thrive.

Other religious sects have not been so lucky.

"Russia was very open (in 1992). However, I think it is changing a little bit now, and groups that are new, the government is becoming more restrictive with," Kimberly explained. "The truth is that western intelligence agencies have used religious and non-profit groups to infuse agents. The parliament has given local authorities the authority to clamp down on any group that's come in since 1992. But the Methodists are OK because of their history before the Revolution.

"The Orthodox church is very much with the government. If you lose the good will of the local Orthodox priest, it can become complicated."

Kimberly said what Kolesnikova and her husband have been able to accomplish is astounding.

“Most Russian people see themselves as Russian Orthodox but don’t go to church very frequently at all,” he said. “If a person becomes involved in the Protestant church, it is because of a personal relationship.”

In Russian culture, there is a totalitarian history with a strong political authority. So people expect the government to do everything, he said.

“The idea of people gathering together voluntarily – something we take for granted – and then for a pastor to mobilize those people to do something is astounding,” he said.

Kolesnikova, he said, has been able to engage people and introduce them to faith.

She has worked for the past nine years in a maximum security men’s prison, ministering and holding Bible studies.

She also visits an orphanage to minister.

“This gal and her husband have a lot of initiative,” Kimberly said. “She has been at a maximum security prison with 2,000 prisoners for nine years. That is unusual.”

While in the states, Kolesnikova visited fellow Methodist churches in Mississippi that she has a relationship with.

On her trip to Massillon, she networked with area Methodist churches including First United Methodist and she met with the bishop.

Kolesnikova hopes that her church will continue to add new members, noting that her

sanctuary will hold 70 -100 people.

While the building progress is forging ahead, Faith Community Fellowship continues to support Kolesnikova’s effort to bring her church to fruition.

His congregation has agreed to tithe funding from the church’s building fund to Kolesnikova’s church as well as other churches that are starting out across the world.

“It is very gratifying as a pastor that the people have voted to tithe (for the building project),” Kimberly said. “We received help from other churches (when we started out); now we are returning the favor.”