

Gospel Advance in Caucasus



Baptists of the Caucasus are actively taking their opportunity in spreading the Gospel in their societies. God's mission is advancing in the economically deprived but spiritually very potential nations that inhabit the mountainous lands between the Black and the Caspian Seas.

Armenia is known for being the world oldest Christian nation – since 301 AD. The majority of population (about 3 mln) is part of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The first Baptist congregations in the land of Noah were established in the beginning of the 18th century.

In the early 20th century a series of traumatic events struck a severe blow to a well growing Baptist movement. Armenian national genocide along with the Soviet communist regime attempted to destroy Christian faith.

The atheist system has eventually collapsed and a great number of people have turned to the living faith in God. The particularly spectacular growth was registered in the 90s of 20th century.

In 1990 there were only 4 Baptist churches with total membership 350. Five years later this number had doubled. In 1998 there were 1100 Baptists in the land of Ararat. In 2002 the statistics registered about 2500 members in nearly 100 churches and church plants. The data for 2006 is: 3800 members in 137 congregations.



Church planting team – Ijevan, Armenia

Asatur Nahapetyan, the general secretary of Baptist Union of Armenia says: *“The BU runs a theological Seminary in Yerevan - since 1998 over 50 students have graduated and are involved in ministry. The BU organized successful children’s*

ministry - each summer several camps and Vacation Bible Schools draw thousands. There is also a special program of charity work among orphans."

Armenian Baptists are very active in the mission work. Galust, the missionary supported by EBF, writes in his report: *"every time when I visit our people I see that they express great interest in God; they ask many questions about faith, gladly listen to the good news about Christ and some want to join our church. We are very happy because God answers our prayers. We pray for more New Testaments and Bibles for children in our language, musical instruments and transportation."*

Georgia accepted Christianity in 326 AD, the first translation of Bible into Georgian was done in the 5th century, the first Baptist church was founded in 1867 and Tbilisi is considered one of the cradles of the Baptist movement in Caucasus. Georgian society has tribal structure.

Majority of Georgians consider themselves Orthodox – about 85 % of population claims allegiance but only about 5 % attends church regularly. Religious intolerance is a serious problem. There have been registered several attacks against religious minorities including Baptists. Orthodox priests often lead aggressive and nationalistic riots.

Georgian people have been bothered for dozens of years by poverty, corruption, social injustice, violations of human rights and religious freedom. Most of population is unemployed.

Malkhaz Songulashvili, the presiding bishop of Evangelical Baptist Church says: *"The vision of the EBC of Georgia is to begin a Baptist movement in each Georgian Tribe, especially in Adjara, which is populated by nominal Moslems. Baptists would like to seek the lost souls and to reach the unreached in every corner of Georgia. Baptists understand the need to be sensitive to the cultures of the many people of Georgia while sharing the Gospel with them."*

At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were only 10 Baptist churches in Georgia, with the total membership of 2000. In 2006 there are 75 Baptist congregations with 5080 members.

The Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia has developed several thriving projects. One of them is the "School of Elijah" – its 3 years education program aims at preparing ministers, Sunday school teachers and missionaries. The new Baptist Center "Beteli" was dedicated in 2005 providing space for a Baptist seminary and conference center as well as care home.



Indigenous missionaries work in various places of Georgia. They usually start church planting in private homes. Baptists share Good News and basic Christian doctrines with their neighbors and relatives. It is impossible to organize the mass evangelistic meetings in Georgia.

Baptism in Georgia

Gela, the EBF supported church planter organized a music festival in April 2006. About thirty young people came and were actively involved in singing and Georgian traditional dancing. This event made a great impact on the congregation's life. 14 young people accepted the Lord and one person got baptized on the Easter night. Several others were baptized in the end of August.

Azerbaijan's population is predominantly Muslim. The Old Testament part of the Bible was translated in the Azeri language (similar to Turkish) and published for the first time in history only a few years ago.

The first Baptist Church was planted in 1890 in the capital city of Baku but only in 1905 it was officially registered. About the same time the first Baptist church building was erected. It served Baptists for about 40 years but was confiscated in 1946 and turned into a cinema.

Presently there are 22 local churches with total membership of 3000. Three congregations are in the capital city of Baku, two of them are Russian speaking and one is Azeri. The Russian congregations are rather small but have an official recognition while Azeri church has been growing particularly fast and is much larger though without state registration.

Elnur Jabijev, the general secretary of BU is happy that new Baptist churches are being started in Azerbaijan. He explains that the most popular method is to begin with home meetings. Baptists of Azerbaijan are involved in social work as well as ministry with homeless, orphans and immigrants.

One Azeri church planter became Christian about 10 years ago. He completed course of inductive Bible study and has been actively involved in sharing the Gospel with many people with support from the mother church of Baku. Missionary would like to reach out towards unchurched Azeri people since he has many contacts with indigenous people who don't have affiliation to any church.



Baptist service in Azerbaijan

Life of Christians in Azerbaijan is not easy. Some Azeri believers loose jobs because of their faith. For ex. Elnur Jabiyev was a police officer and attended church secretly. One day he was called by a police security and a picture – evidence for attending church was shown to him. He eventually was fired from his post.

Baptist leaders admit that their churches in Azerbaijan have many successes but also face numerous difficulties. Baptisms are often performed secretly and pastors of growing churches are being threatened by enemies of the Gospel. Therefore international contacts are very important to them & belonging to a large world wide family is their strength.

European Baptist Federation together with its mission partners supports 9 church starts in the Caucasus Region.

Daniel Trusiewicz - EBF Mission Coordinator

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