

# Russian Baptist urges American believers to pass the torch

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DULUTH, Ga. (BP)—As a child, Peter Mitskevich attended a lot of birthday parties when there wasn't a birthday to celebrate.

It was part of being in a Christian family in the Soviet Union, where evangelical gatherings were illegal, including Sunday School or Bible studies for children. If one were being held at a home, it was common to receive a knock at the door by the local police who suspected the children were gathered for a Bible lesson.

When questioned, adults would say the group was celebrating a child's birthday.

Mitskevich, executive director of the Russia Baptist Union and president of Moscow Theological Seminary, recounted such stories in an interview with Baptist Press at the Georgia Baptist Missions and Ministry Center.

"When I was about 16 years old, the police came to our apartment during a Bible study," he said. "They didn't arrest us then but took names of everyone there. It created many problems for the apartment owner."

Mitskevich, who also is pastor of Golgotha Baptist Church in Moscow, recalled how the fall of the former Soviet Union and Iron Curtain in the early 1990s ushered in a new era for evangelical Christians.

"There had been many churches planted in the early 20th Century, and about 2 million came to Christ," he said. "But then Russia turned to an atheistic movement, and all the churches were destroyed. In the '90s we were grateful that schools could once again be established and churches

planted.”

## **Embrace challenges to become emboldened**

In his role, Mitskevich leads roughly 1,650 churches and church plants spread across 11 time zones. The geography, not to mention Russian politics, has led to challenges for church leaders. However, he encouraged his “Baptist brothers and sisters” to embrace those challenges as ways to become more emboldened in their work.

“The Lord will teach us some lessons, and we have to be faithful students and disciples to learn those lessons,” he said. “I’m grateful to the Lord I live in Russia. He’s teaching me a lot about some issues that, in another context, I would be relaxed about.”

To make his point, Mitskevich related the expectations of American mission teams who visit his, or any other, Russian Baptist church. The men are expected to be able to stand—on the spot—before everyone in attendance and give a testimony or lead a devotion on what they have been reading in the Bible the week before. At least once, Mitskevich was disappointed in the result.

“This brother came to the pulpit, and I am sorry to say, said, ‘Uh, greetings from America. Uh, greetings from my church. (Pause) Amen.’

“I expect that every man should be able to give his testimony. Do they know Christ? Do they know what they believe? We’re men. We’re responsible for that.”

# Called to follow Christ

The admonishment for men to be spiritual leaders in the home goes against what Mitskevich heard as a youth. Both of his parents were Christians—his mother a physician and his father a pastor—in their village outside of Moscow. His father also served as a pastor in those times it was dangerous to be a Christian.

In his early teens, Mitskevich heard from peers and authority figures how the church was make-believe and something for old ladies. He wanted to be a *nastoyashy muzhshina*—a manly guy, like his friends who excelled on the hockey team.

“Here, I was at a crossroads,” he said. “I knew my parents, especially my mother, prayed for me.”

Mitskevich renewed his devotion to the church and Bible study. However, his heart didn’t yet belong to Christ. That changed when his grandfather, a man Mitskevich described as a “hero” who spent more than 10 years in prison because of his faith, asked him directly if Jesus was Lord of his life.

The moment changed everything for the youngster and led to his leading numerous churches and training future pastors today. His trip to the United States focused on visiting Baptist conventions in order to build partnerships.



Peter Mitskevich (right), executive director of the Russia Baptist Union and president of Moscow Theological Seminary, speaks with Buck Burch, missions catalyst for the Georgia Baptist Mission Board,

at the Georgia Baptist Missions and Ministry Center. Mitskevich and his wife, Tatiana, were visiting the country to promote partnerships with American Baptists. (Photo courtesy of Buck Burch)

Buck Burch, missions catalyst for the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, accompanied Mitskevich to help establish relationships with Russian churches in the Atlanta area associated with the Georgia Baptist Convention. The two are close friends going back to Burch's years as an International Mission Board missionary from 1998 to 2011.

As he has had to do in his home country, Mitskevich urged American Baptists not to be swayed by the culture.

"Do not criticize each other, but confess your weaknesses and grow spiritually. Be evangelists. Help each other. Love each other. Forgive each other," he said.

"All of us have to be faithful in the place where we've been called. Be faithful to the Lord of lords and King of kings. He's the top priority. Don't let the state rule your life, but let the Lord rule."

The urgency to remain committed to Christ, he added, will become a signal to those watching. In particular, it will connect with the younger generation as it did with him so many years ago.

"What will we leave for young people?" he asked. "We have to not only carry the cross, but pass along the torch of faith, like a baton.

"This is exciting. We will experience some challenges, but it is all a joy."