

THE “THREE R’S” - A REAL LIFE EXAMPLE IN THE FORMER USSR

By John Gagliardi



In my previous writing, I talked about the “Three R’s”, and how God often uses this pattern as He works through imperfect human beings in fulfilling His will, and restoring His perfect Kingdom back to planet Earth. In this last piece for the year, I will tell – in some depth – a personal testimony that illustrates the principle very well.

The Three R’s of course are **Revelation, Reversal and Restoration** – the *Revelation* as God gives us a vision and a dream, the *Reversal* as everything seems to go wrong as we try to forge ahead in our own strength, and the *Restoration*, as God restores the vision, and fulfills the dream in His way and in His time.

My “R1” came one night some 10 years ago, as I stood worshiping in a church service in Brisbane. Suddenly, seemingly “out of the blue”, I heard a clear voice in my heart say to me: “Go to the Soviet Union, and hire the biggest stadium in the land for a Christian crusade”.

I stood there for several minutes while my mind went through all the usual machinations and cycles of denial and acceptance – “Can’t be God” – “Wow, I heard from God” – “That’s stupid – it’s Communist and Atheist, it’s impossible, it can’t be God” – “It might be God – because what is impossible with men is possible with God”. Etc etc. The only thing that made any sense at all, was that I had learned to speak Russian during my studies at Queensland University.

I didn’t hear anything else at the time, and when I got home, I went straight to my Bible to see if God would confirm the “word” in THE Word. And as I opened to my routine reading for that day, this is what I read in Deuteronomy 2:24 – “Rise, take your journey, and cross over the River Arnon. Look, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to possess it, and engage him in battle.”

I knew that the “Amorites” were symbolic of the enemies of God – and in those days, during the Communist regime, there was no greater enemy of God than our “Cold War” foe, the Godless and much feared Soviet Union!

Then as my “Revelation” really built up steam, it was like I couldn’t turn around without some reference to Russia or the Soviet Union. I knew that in the “multitude of counselors is safety”, so I

asked a few mature Christian friends, including my pastor, what they thought – and to my amazement, they all said “Go for it”. My pastor at the time even suggested I go to Moscow and start a church!

My wife Kay and I prayed and prayed – and prayed - and I felt the growing peace and joy of the Spirit in my heart; and I realised that it was time to put my “TRUST” in God, and “OBEY” Him – even if it made no sense at all in my conscious mind.

How could you possibly go to the Soviet Union, right in the middle of the Communist era, and book the biggest stadium in the land for a Christian revival crusade? Madness – foolishness. But the foolishness of God, is wiser than men (I Corinthians 1:25).

But – a practical problem. I was at that time General Manager of a large advertising agency, which was growing and expanding, and I could not see how I could take off the time to obey God. Think of the steps – travel there and make arrangements, raise money, gather together the people needed, print advertising material and leaflets, buy thousands of Bibles in Russian – my head spun with the complexities.

But God started to move – He brought a dedicated couple who committed themselves to the project; He started opening up contacts in the illegal underground churches in Russia; and most amazingly, He told me clearly one morning during my early “quiet time” to resign from the agency that very day!

I was stunned – resign? But I went to my Chairman, who was also a Christian, and incredibly, he told me that God has spoken to him too, and he was expecting my resignation.

But – without a job, how was I to raise the money for the crusade, and travel to Russia, and do all the things needed? Aha, I thought! Sell my house. So I telephoned a real estate agent I knew, and put my house on the market for sale.

During all this day, my wife was teaching school, and couldn't easily be contacted. So the first she knew of the latest developments, was when I came home that night, and she said: “How was your day? Anything interesting happen?” My reply was “ Just one of those days – resigned my job and sold the house”.

Believe it or not, Kay was quite accustomed to unusual things happening, and her response was simply that if God had told me, then that was fine with her.

Ultimately, I did not need to sell the house – the church, Christian Outreach Centre, decided to support the vision strongly, and I started raising funds through the church (a very large one), and I formed a ministry called “Breakthrough USSR” under the auspices of the church.

Through Breakthrough USSR ministry, we started teaching people the Russian language, and raising the necessary money for the crusade. I was on a roll – pure “R1” – everything was going 100 miles an hour, and I couldn't put a step wrong. I was often up in front of several thousand people in the church, sharing the vision, and exhorting them to participate.

Finally, we set up our first trip in to the Soviet Union, flying on YAT (Yugoslav Airlines) via Belgrade to Moscow (as for the flight, all I can say is that, mercifully, YAT no longer exists). In Moscow and Leningrad (now St Petersburg), we had arranged meetings with a number of underground church groups, and secret Christian agencies.

I should mention one strange thing happened – the Sunday before we left on the trip, a lady came up to us and said she had a “word” for us for the trip – and the word was “St Andrews”. It didn’t make any sense to me – we were going to Russia, after all, not Scotland!

But guess what – I was powering ahead very much in my own strength, and going so fast I was starting to leave God behind. Bad move!

So started my R2 – my Reversal

As Kay and I crisscrossed Moscow, meeting with churches and individuals, we met total failure at every turn. We were rebuffed and rejected everywhere we went – in a series of furtive little meetings in basements and dingy locked rooms all over Moscow, we were treated with nothing but hostility and suspicion. The underground churches at that time were very bound up and conservative – I remember once telephoning a pastor, and his immediate question was “You speak in tongues”? When I said yes, he hung up in my ear!

And we certainly didn’t get any opening to hire any stadiums. Anybody we mentioned that to, just laughed in our face, and reminded us where we were! We were called fools more than once, and warned that we could come to real harm if we persisted in this “foolishness”.

So we left Moscow, and flew to Leningrad. Same result. Rebuffs, rejections and a general reaction that we were barking mad.

By this time, I was quite distraught and even getting depressed! This “mighty man of power and faith” could only envision returning to my church in Brisbane, and standing up in front of several thousand people to tell them I had “missed it”. Sorry – mustn’t have been God after all. Take your money back – the crusade’s off.

In spite of Kay’s encouragement (she’s a great encourager) I was wallowing in the deep and dark doldrums. Nothing would get me out of it – I felt almost abandoned by God, and my moods swung between disappointment and frustration.

So we left Leningrad, and traveled to Kiev in the Ukraine, where we had arranged to spend a couple of days for “rest and recuperation”. I sure needed it!

We flew to Kiev on a rattly old Aeroflot plane (no seat belts, the outer door didn’t shut properly and whistled the whole way, and on boarding, we had seen canvas showing through the treads on the tyres), and checked into our hotel. We had nothing much to do, so Kay suggested we take an Intourist half-day tour of Kiev.

So – we got on the tour bus, and the first place we got off was - guess what - a church called “St Andrews”. Hmm. Wasn’t that the strange “word” the lady had given us back in Brisbane?

When the tour ended, Kay and I decided to walk by ourselves to this St Andrews Church. On the way, in a rather scruffy street, we walked past a building with a little sign on the door that said, in Ukrainian, “Good News”.

Without really thinking about it, we went inside and walked into a totally abandoned and dilapidated room, looking like no body had been inside for years. Then we saw a door at the far end of the room, and went through that into a second room, which was even more forlorn, dirty and dusty than the first one.

In the second room we saw yet another door, and went through that into a third room – by now, we were deep inside the dark and rather scary building, and wondered what we were doing trespassing in a strange building in a strange country.

But then, even as we stood uncertainly in that third room, we heard a sound I couldn't believe – the sweet sound of voices raised in Christian praise and worship. Were we hearing things? Had our minds really, finally snapped?

So we prayed, held our breaths – and knocked on an almost invisible door recessed back into one of the walls. And then the door opened.

And ... hallelujah, God is faithful, even when we are not! In His own time, and in His own way, when we had exhausted our own resources and tried everything in our own strength, he brought in our long-awaited and blessed "R3" – our *Restoration!*

Because in that room were a group of young Ukrainian Christians, born again and Spirit-filled, who were singing and praying for a miracle. They had been under intense persecution from the KGB, and had no money or resources. Just their faith in God.

But their faith brought us – all the way from Australia! I have been called many strange things in my life, but that was the first time I had ever been called a "miracle"!

As we embraced those young and brave Christians, tears flowed, and the presence of God was so strong in that room it reminded me of the Scripture in the Old Testament where the Glory of God came into the temple and the priests could not stand to minister.

We had brought money and other Christian resources, which we gave to the group, but most of all, we brought hope and a powerful confirmation of God's faithfulness.

As we shared the vision that God has given us back in Brisbane, that we were supposed to hire the largest stadium in the Soviet Union for a crusade, the Pastor Valery told us that the biggest stadium in the Soviet Union, the Republican Stadium, was right there in Kiev – seating well over 100,000, and it was in fact right next to our hotel (for some reason we hadn't seen it).

Valery didn't think we had any chance of hiring the Republican Stadium – but he said he would be happy to go with us to see if we could meet anybody there. I think privately he thought we were mad too, but was just too polite to say it.

So – in faith and very little else – we went to this massive stadium, and walked in to the office.

I asked – in Russian, which most Ukrainians speak – if we could meet with the senior person.

Suddenly, we were ushered into a huge office, and introduced to the Director of the Stadium, who listened to our request without comment or reaction.

I said we were Christians, and we wanted to book his stadium for a Christian meeting, and then I brought out some Christian music tapes to show him.

At that, he suddenly sparked up, and said that his son was a "believer", and that the tapes would be the greatest thing anyone could give him. We happily handed over the tapes, and the Director said in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way, that yes, it was no problem hiring the stadium, as long as it didn't

clash with football matches, and what's more, he was a director of the local television station, and he would be happy to advertise our crusade on Kiev TV.

I recall standing there with goosebumps on my goosebumps – could it be true? Were we just being told that we could have the biggest stadium in the Soviet Union for a Christian revival crusade? Could God really do such a thing?

Well, He could and He did. But listen to a little more of the amazing things our miracle-working God can do.

After the meeting, Pastor Valery seemed very excited. He had been talking to the Director in Ukrainian, which I did not understand. So I asked him why he was jumping around from one foot to the other.

He said he had once had a vision of himself preaching in the Republican Stadium – the “Impossible Dream” - but had dismissed it because it was so unlikely as to be insane.

“But do you know what,” he said to us, almost bursting with excitement, “the Director has invited me to speak next Saturday in the Stadium, before an international football match between Russia and the Ukraine.”

So this young pastor, unknown and persecuted, got to do something that had never been done before. The very next weekend, he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ for nearly 20 minutes to more than 100,000 people in that massive Republican Stadium, the largest stadium in entire Soviet Union!

So next time you're faced with an impossibility, remember Pastor Valery – picture him standing up in front of over 100,000 people, fulfilling a vision God had given him many years before that he thought could and would never be fulfilled.

We can, indeed, do all things through Christ, who strengthens us!

To round off the story, which in fact has not ended yet, we got to have our crusades over three nights, resulting in tens of thousands of Ukrainians being saved. And in addition, we held outreach meetings in schools, army barracks, hospitals and even prisons, where thousands more were brought to the Lord over a period of several months.

Many local evangelical churches were involved in the crusades, and later, as the people saved were baptised, they were also given Russian Bibles which we had financed from Australia – at that time, a very scarce commodity indeed in that part of the world.

Ultimately, further crusades and other meetings were held, leading to a string of churches and schools being set up throughout the Ukraine, today a powerful force in spreading the Gospel widely throughout the entire former Soviet Union.

In Kiev today is the largest evangelical church in Europe, Pastor Sunday Adelaja's “Word of Faith” church, which has grown in about seven years to a membership of more than 17,000.

To bring this testimony right up to date, Pastor Sunday recently invited us to visit his Church in Kiev, saying in an email: “I do not doubt that God still has a purpose for bringing you to the Ukraine, and for using you to be one of the pioneers of the Gospel in this new environment of freedom and

independence in the Ukraine...please pray to consider how God would like to use you to raise up the economical level of the believers in this country.

“You have sown in the land, and you have the right to reap ... you must come and see the fruit of the seed the Lord used you to sow.”

So, God willing, next year Kay and I will travel to the Ukraine to visit Pastor Sunday and his historic church, and we will be open to nay doors God is opening for us there. So in a sense, our “R3” Restoration is still going on!

I have recounted this little tale in some depth, because it is a true testimony, it is an unfinished testimony, but above all – it is a testimony to the faithfulness of God that when He calls us, He will give us the victory, no matter what opposition we face on the way through.

The key is to stay in faith and keep trusting and obeying God. Don’t ever give up!

He will not give you a vision, without giving you the grace and ability to fulfill it – even if it seems too big and too impossible and even, in human terms, quite ridiculous.

After all – God is God! He will give us exciting plans and visions, He will see us faithfully through the trying and the testing phase that will inevitably come, and He will bring us through to ultimate victory because He is a good God, and He is faithful to perform His Word to His people.