

## God's Spirit of Reformation is infectious

by **Dan Freemyer**

I caught something during my recent trip overseas. My traveling companions and I were all exposed, and doctors are powerless against our infections. Since our return home, our families, friends and churches are also in danger. Our travel guides knew about the risks, but failed to warn us. Now, because of their careless negligence, we are forever burdened with the consequences.

It seemed harmless at the start. Paula Clayton Dempsey sent an email to individuals and churches that she thought might be interested in visiting one of the Alliance of Baptists' mutual partners. A few of us responded, and some weeks later I was on a plane bound for Georgia—not the home of Coca-Cola and peaches, but rather the Georgia at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe in the former Soviet Union.

Paula knew of our danger then, but didn't say anything. My flight from Dallas-Fort Worth was delayed long enough that I missed my connecting flight and found myself with an unexpected day and night in Chicago. Trying to make the most of the unwelcome delay, I hopped on the metro to catch a city walking tour. My train to downtown broke down, so I arrived late and ran to catch up with my tour already in progress. It seemed fitting since I would be joining the rest of my travel party late, with the trip already in progress. Frequently on "mission trips," we think of ourselves as taking God with us to share with others. It occurred to me later that I was about to witness and join God's work that has been in progress for hundreds and thousands of years.

With a flowing white beard contrasting against his all-black casual clothing, Malkhaz was easy to spot as he waited in the Tbilisi airport to greet me. His warmth concealed any weariness from collecting visitors at 2:30 a.m. for the second day in a row. During the drive to my hotel we talked about our families, churches, ministries and mutual fondness for hiking/running. His love for his country and its people was palpable, as was his burden and heartache over the hostility that many in his country harbor toward marginalized groups, especially Muslims, Yezidis, refugees, internally displaced people and persons who are LGBTQ.

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili is the Bishop of Metro Tbilisi for the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. Our other primary guide for the week was Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze, the first female bishop in Georgia and 2014 recipient of the U.S. Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award who has addressed the United Nations on human rights. My fellow pilgrims were Paula, two lay leaders (Susan Lepore and Craig Wiester), and two seminary students (Austin Maynor and Benjamin Smith).

With Malkhaz and Rusudan as our guides, we: celebrated Pentecost Sunday at Peace Cathedral; toured churches and holy sites ranging from the 10th century to the present; ate incredible meals in homes and family restaurants; observed communion with and heard stories of abuse and discrimination from LGBTQ siblings; viewed beautiful Georgian art and architecture; attended

marionette theater; danced and dined with Muslim, Christian and Jewish students at Peace Academy; grieved with our hosts over the death and displacement caused by ongoing Russian invasions and occupation; and spent time in meaningful conversation.

We learned that when a young 26-year-old Malkhaz found himself the president of Baptist churches in Georgia at the fall of the Soviet Union, he was faced with a choice of creating “a Baptist church for Baptists” or “a Baptist church for Georgians.” They abandoned the beardless, robeless, bishopless, anti-liturgical customs as defined by the German Baptist missionaries in their past and they created new customs and a new liturgy—ones that seemed familiar, meaningful, and sacred to most Georgians. Ironically, this meant adopting ancient Orthodox traditions, but in a new way that respects Baptist freedoms of priesthood of the believer, autonomy of the local church, religious freedom and interpreting the Bible. A bishop in a robe with incense, liturgies, processions, while the choir and people chant—an unusual Baptist indeed.

Their reforms continued: electing a female bishop; building close relationships with Muslims, Jews, and other faiths; embracing their Jewish heritage that all Christians enjoy; and affirming LGBTQ persons within a culture that is hostile and violent to them. These Georgian Baptists who call Peace Cathedral home have embraced a Spirit of Reformation like no people I’ve ever met, and it invades everything they do, everything they think, and the courage they show in the face of conservative powers that use the tools of religious nationalism, xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia.

Conserving forces are strong, but God’s Spirit of Reformation is stronger. And the Spirit is infectious. I caught it in Georgia.

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