

Ministry among the Roma

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In a culture where discrimination is rampant, Presbyterian mission co-workers Al and Ellen Smith are working alongside Russian partners to proclaim a gospel of inclusion.

The Smiths' ministry is one of reconciliation, fulfilling the biblical call to help people be reconciled to each other and to God through Jesus Christ. That call extends to the Roma people, one of the most marginalized groups in Europe. Once known as Gypsies, the Roma face limited educational opportunities, bleak employment prospects, and widespread prejudice. "It's pretty unusual for Roma to go to school through grade 10 like most Russians do," Al says. "You wind up with people who have very limited job skills."

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They came to Europe from India centuries ago, but they continue to be treated as outcasts. “The Roma are aliens in the land where they live,” Ellen says.

In Russia many hold contempt for people who are not ethnic Russians. Violence against non-Russians, particularly those with darker skin tones, has been increasing. Yet Al and Ellen see signs of hope.

Sign of hope

For example, a summer camp for children and youth held by a Russian church proved to be an especially powerful demonstration of Christianity in action. Roma and Russian campers began to grow in their faith and relate to each other in the spirit of Christ. Stereotypes were overcome and friendships were developed. The experience so moved one Russian teen that he made a profession of faith in Christ.

During a visit to a Roma camp in Carpath-Ukraine, Al was accompanied by Andrey Beskorovainiy, a Roma pastor from Russia. They saw people living in ramshackle housing made of homemade bricks and plywood. “How anyone survives a winter is a mystery,” Al says. “The camp is very crowded; men, women, children, and stray dogs wander everywhere, and few people are able to find gainful employment.”

However, a bright spot of the trip was a nearby Reformed congregation that was tending to the physical and spiritual needs of the people in the camp.

Joint mission

The Smiths are also involved in a congregational twinning project, pairing Presbyterian congregations in the United States with Russian congregations for friendship and mission.

This ministry helps repair the breach between Russians and Americans caused by decades of Cold War tensions. The Smiths have seen relationships grow between U.S. and Russian congregations and joint ministries flourish. Russians and Americans work together in youth and children’s camps, orphanages, prison ministries, and ministries with elderly people. “Out of the relationships, projects often develop that enrich congregations on both continents,” Ellen says.

Presbyterian World Mission relies on congregations and individuals like you to support God’s work in the world. Please prayerfully consider joining us in mission through your financial support for the Smiths’ ministry in Russia. To donate online, visit www.pcusa.org/give. To learn more about the Smiths’ ministry and read their letters, visit www.presbyterianmission.org/alan-and-ellen-smith.

To learn more about other mission personnel and read their letters, visit www.presbyterianmission.org/missionconnections.



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