

Religious Youth Service in Siberia, Russia Youth Build a Peace Park in Siberia

John Gehring

August 15-21, 2011

Novosibirsk, Siberia, Russia

Novosibirsk, Russia — On the way towards fulfillment of our dreams, we are often confronted by difficulties and obstacles. I always felt inspired by the slogan: “It’s I who am responsible for the future!” And the future of Russia depends on friendship and understanding among people of different nations and religions. Our youth project— “Cherish Friendship, Create a Park of Peace” —is the living proof of it.



The first time I heard about the Religious Youth Service (RYS) program was 15 years ago, and I became a participant in the first project in Russia.

The RYS project took place from August 15-21 in Novosibirsk, the largest city in Siberia. “Let us make friends” —these words opened the VESTI television broadcast about our project. The various nationalities of Russia have been fostering friendly relations for many decades and certainly long before our forefathers worked together to vanquish Nazism.

But will this continue to be true with future generations? According to statistics, the number of armed clashes in recent years has increased dramatically, and some of the conflicts are of a pronounced religious character. RYS calls upon people to strengthen friendships between nations, which is facilitated through socially useful activity or, as we usually describe it, social service. That is why our program is called the “Religious Youth Service.”

The project is aimed at both educating spiritual leaders about service and educating responsible citizens of peace about caring for the public benefit and being willing to serve. We hope that the participants will become good Young Ambassadors for Peace, who can promote positive social change toward overcoming barriers and developing friendships, and as well as fomenting reconciliation of conflicting sides.

Altogether there were about 70 participants who came to the Veterans' Home of the Novosibirsk region. They were mostly students from Iran, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, USA, and different places in Russia.



The program consisted of three segments—planning, practice, and analysis. Each day was distinguished by practicing one of several values universally recognized by people throughout the world—purity, beauty, love, life, unity, peacemaking, and family. From the first day on, an interreligious worldview was our leading practice and it serve to bring us together into one united team, each member of which desired to help others. These practices inspired hope that creating a world where people of different nationalities and traditions can coexist in peace and friendship is possible.

Each morning all participants attended seminars where they learned how to function as Ambassadors for Peace. On the first day, the participants appeared in snow-white T-shirts to demonstrate their intention to serve in purity and, in harmonious cooperation, they began the project activities centered on the Veterans' Home.

Teaching through service

“Everyone can be great because everyone can serve,” declared human rights champion, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Following this idea, after the lectures the students carried out social projects each day for the benefit of the local community of veterans. Our work in this regard was not considered the final goal but, instead, the means for uniting us and furnishing valuable experiences in creating a culture of peace.

The participants were divided into several teams. One team did repair work while the other teams created a lawn with a flower bed, and painted benches and pavilions. Team work is a good practice for stimulating personal growth and development. It teaches people to analyze problems from a wider point of view, acquire communication skills, and develop friendly relations.

In different situations, the young people participating in the project were also led to discover each other's personal weak points and, in the process, to determine to overcome these character weaknesses. In particular, through physically working together, the volunteers learned how to resolve difficulties while creating a special spirit of comradeship.



Integration of interreligious experience

The idea of the project was for all participants to feel as though they were real peacemakers. Working in teams, using visualization exercises, training in developing habits of communication, and carrying out actions of unselfish service—all these activities promote the creation of a culture of peace. In line with this purpose, as a part of the program we visited religious holy places and numerous cultural sites so the participants could get a feeling for the spiritual roots of the nation.

While preparing to meet representatives of other religions, project participants read paragraphs from the holy scriptures of the world religions. We were privileged to visit the main mosque and the Transfiguration Cathedral.

In the mosque, we were welcomed by Imam Halil, who spoke about symbols of the Islamic faith and showed us around. In the cathedral we were welcomed by Father Alexander, who explained to us the role of the Catholic Church in the world and its many social projects.

The participants asked Father Alexander many questions. Sightseeing helped us to widen our knowledge of the different religious traditions, thereby enabling us to better understand our own spiritual roots.

The Jewish synagogue also wanted us to visit but, unfortunately, the premises were still under construction, so we decided to visit during a future project. All in all, these visitations were greatly educational and deeply thought-provoking for the RYS participants.

Some participants came to understand their own religion more deeply. Others knew next to nothing about their traditional faith and even less about other religions. Our project helped them enrich their experience in this direction. The participants learned to respect their religion following the example of those who showed their sincere devotion and respect for their religion.

Ideas of peace at work

The third day of the project was its culmination point. We began the day by discussing in a friendly atmosphere the theme “Conflicts, Reconciliation and Peace.” Project participants created a flower bed in the form of a map of the world—a symbolic representation with the world’s continents made of stones rolled in the oceans of flowers. In the center stood the Pacific Ocean as a symbol of tranquility. Also on this day, it happened that missionaries of the Mormon Church joined our project.

The flower bed portrayed the Bridge of Peace in the Bering Strait that will connect Russia and America in the future. Americans and Russians together built a symbolic bridge of flowers over the “Bering Strait,” connecting the two continents. They were happy to work for the benefit of lonely, elderly people who needed support and attention.

The participants expressed their desire to give a musical performance for the veterans. Our performance was linked to the UN Day of Humanitarian Aid on August 19. There were songs in Russian, English, and Korean languages.

We tried to demonstrate both the rich diversity of different cultures, as well as the unity in the diversity of different cultures based on universal principles inherent in every culture—e.g., work in the name of goodness, love, mutual assistance, family, and God. The elderly people shared their warm gratitude. The administrators of the Veterans’ Home expressed their desire to continue our cooperation in the future.

The third segment of the project included analyzing and evaluating the results. During the project, the RYS participants discovered new opportunities for developing their peacemaking abilities. Below are some of their comments.

“Participation in the project helped me to reconsider such notions as “peace”, “peacemaker”, and “living for others”, and to reflect on the role of religions in character education as well as relations between religious traditions.”

“I got the main point of the project as the desire to abolish the borders dividing people of different races, religions and nationalities. I’m happy to confess that my attitude toward Americans has changed—no more feelings of animosity.”

“I myself wish now to become an initiator of such projects. I experienced the real evidence of the efficiency of the principle of living for others. By giving out, you receive back so much pleasure, positive feelings, and love that you naturally feel like sharing all this with others.”

“I think that the project could influence the spiritual atmosphere of our city and, maybe, of the whole nation!”

“It was a wonderful experience for me—extremely captivating and greatly inspiring. I liked everything! I’ve never been in such a project in Russia. I was happy there.”

