

How Christ's love is touching children in Moscow. Janet Goodall reports

# To Russia *with* love

A short visit to Russia last autumn took me to join Moscow's Christian Medical Mission (CMM) under the directorship of Dr Olga Polezhaeva. We visited two city orphanages and another in Tula district, near Tolstoy's old home. Each held about 50 orphaned or abused children, aged 5-16 years. Throughout Russia and the old USSR there are thousands of orphans, many even younger. Their care varies and I probably saw the best, with children as physically well cared for as \$5 per head per month allows, plus \$5 more a *year* allocated for health needs. Despite a few staff psychologists, many orphans must have deep emotional wounds. One young teenager had lost his natural parents and was then adopted by a couple who later died of alcoholism. In a few years time, he will either be alone in a State flat or a young soldier.

The team aims to examine and, if possible, treat the children and to share with them the practical love of Christ. Open evangelism could risk closed doors. The Russian Christian doctors currently have official permission to visit, with overseas doctors as their guests. 'Protestantism' is seen to be distinct from (and less desirable than) Russian orthodoxy, so it is love in action which gives entry and sometimes prompts further questions. Our trendy young psychologist went down well, with talks about saying 'No to drugs, tobacco and casual sex', but some children told him, 'We hate being in an orphanage - we want families, but nobody wants bigger children.' We left them a few educational videos with a Christian flavour, along with Bibles, small gifts, sweets and toothbrushes. At Yasnaya Polyana, young church members from Tula performed Christian songs and sketches.

In the medical room, various pieces of equipment, sent to CMM as aid, allowed routine electrocardiography and abdominal and thyroid ultrasound for all. Gall-bladder disease was reported in 15% of orphans, so far with no control series. A new Russian laser beam therapy was in use for chest infections. This all indicated the shortage of more customary therapies which, apart from their expense, can be limited by import regulations banning any medication from certain drug companies and all narcotic drugs. Antibiotics and dental amalgam are

## Orphans in Russia

The term 'orphan' includes approx. 90% social orphans, held in orphanages because of abuse or social deprivation, as well as children whose parents have died. Accurate figures are hard to come by. One estimate (circa 1990) suggested that 19,000 children were held in orphanages in St Petersburg alone, with 10,000 more abandoned or living rough in that city.<sup>1</sup> Rising levels of unemployment and alcoholism since then must have sent even more children into institutional care.

Many such children are too readily labelled 'oligophrenic' (mentally retarded) but without adequate evaluation, little or no special education and rare review. One independent study found that 66% of 82 children from 10 institutions were within the normal range on non-verbal developmental and IQ testing.<sup>2</sup> It is hoped that interventions by Baroness Cox and others will gradually improve matters, but as ever, there is inadequate funding even for existing levels of care.

costly or scarce so there is great reliance on overseas aid. More clinical teaching would be welcomed, too.

Church life of various kinds is active, but poverty can limit vision. My Christian interpreter, who had not visited an orphanage before, promptly took along a hairdresser friend to cut the children's neglected hair. Better still, as he told his church of the experience, a few Christian women asked if they could visit the children. This was a real thrill, as most orphans have little experience of home life. One of the directors, herself a resident, told me, 'I now believe that orphanages are prisons. Children need families.' There is a Christian project in Moscow which aims to link orphans with foster parents and soundings are now going on about reduplicating this facility, but it will need more cash. How lovely it would be if orphaned children could meet with Jesus as they are welcomed into loving Christian homes.

Members of the Christian Medical Association in Moscow share in CMM's ministry and try to meet weekly for prayer and Bible study. They are hard-pressed and wearied by trying so lovingly to care for so many, yet with minimal supplies. Even so, I was touched by their warm and generous welcome (and lovely singing!). They badly need practical help and supplies, but they also covet our support in prayer.

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## References

1. *Trajectories of despair: misdiagnosis and maltreatment of Soviet orphans*. Ed Caroline Cox, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) ISBN 3 9520345 3 3
2. *Scientific results of tests carried out by the CSI group in September 1991*. (ibid p35).