



**ATFE**

Association for  
Theological Field Education

2011 ATFE Biennium

**TRI-CULTURAL CONTEXTUAL  
EDUCATION**

Samuel M. Johnson

**Tri-Culture Contextual Education**  
led by **Samuel M. Johnson**  
Boston University School of Theology

In May of 2010 five scholars from Boston University School of Theology met five scholars from Russia United Methodist Theological School from Moscow in Kiev, Ukraine, to do Contextual Education. They spent about one week there doing ministry with St. Luke United Methodist Church, one week in Chernovsti, Ukraine, at the United Methodist Church, and then a final week back at the Russia United Methodist Theological School in Moscow visiting a church, talking to the Bishop of that Eurasia Episcopal Area, seeing many of the main Russian Orthodox cathedrals and churches in the area, and doing a lot of reflecting among themselves. The purpose of the class was to transcend the limitations of a cross-cultural immersion when only two cultures are involved. In this case not only were Russia, Ukraine, and the United States represented among the schools and the sites but beyond that the students had connections to Uzbekistan, Korea, Philippines, and Singapore. Moreover, we discovered that such countries as Kazakhstan, Iran, Romania, Moldova, Turkey, and others were present through the churches we were part of. Following are some of the key learnings that came out of the experience:

- Planning with an institution from another part of the world is both much more complicated than with one from the United States but also will have a larger degree of uncertainty than most of us are comfortable with. This experience is part of the learning about other cultures. One of the key areas of uncertainty is financial. It is very hard to predict cost or, once over there, to control costs. Another complication in the planning is not only were we planning with another seminary abroad but they were planning with churches in a still different country than their own. Communication and differences in planning styles are hard to deal with. The President **Error! Reference source not found.** of the Russian United Methodist Theological School and I had formed a good relationship in the past that was extremely helpful in the planning. We are still good friends; indeed, better friends but amazing.
- The relationships among the students and teachers in the class are key for all the learning that takes place. The fact that Sergei, my wife Donna, and I modeled trust and friendship I am sure was helpful. We did not have time to do relationship building, it happened through the travels and the ministry. All the students worked hard in building relationships in spite of the language and cultural differences.
- Physical hardship is not to be underestimated. We did much walking in hard urban terrain. In recruiting I had considered the physical fitness of our students. I was the only American who did not get sick on the trip.
- I put a high value on intentional theological reflection but it is very hard to find the time during the experience. During the day we were either traveling from places of stay to places of ministry or places to see. In the evening when one

might think would be a natural time to reflect, most were tired and the Russians wanted time for prayer.

- Experiencing three separate places—two in Ukraine—greatly enriched the experience. Assumptions get challenged and relationships get strengthened when multiple cultures are experienced.
- One of the key differences between the two groups was that the Russians were first generation Christian while those from Boston University School of Theology had all been raised Christian. One example of the difference this made was the Russian desire to testify and wanting the Bostonians to testify to their conversion experience. The Bostonians were at a loss of what this meant let alone how to do it. Also, the Bostonians loved the Orthodox churches and icons while the Russians saw these as idolatrous due to their personal experience of the Russian Orthodox Church. Our bonding enabled us to have deep conversation about this volatile difference.
- Worshipping together on our own as well as with the other groups we were with was essential. It helped the bonding, deepened our experience of God, and kept reminding us what we were about and who we were. Being of a single denomination was helpful because our common worship forced us to look deeper concerning our differences.
- This experience was difficult but greatly rewarding. All learned much more than they anticipated and our expectations were high. We are hopeful that the Russians will come the United States this May to complete the experience. I hope we will continue to learn how to plan and execute better to lessen the stress and enhance the learning.