

NEW MISSION WORK IN GEORGIA

\$15,750

The country of Georgia is found along the Black Sea, situated between the Caucasus Mountains of Russia and Turkey in southwestern Asia. It is slightly smaller than the state of South Carolina and is home to nearly five million people. Seventy percent are of Georgian descent, another 8.1 percent are Armenian, 6.3 are Russian, and 5.7 percent are Azerbaijani. Georgian is the official language, and for nearly three-fourths of people, it is their first language.

For centuries, the land of Georgia was dominated by surrounding empires and annexed as a part of Russia in 1801. It enjoyed brief independence from 1920 to 1921 following the Russian revolution, but soon came under Soviet rule. Following the collapse of the U.S.S.R., it claimed its independence in 1991. Since that time, this republic government's first president became dictatorial in rule, and the country has been wrapped in conflict between ethnic minorities and secessionist wars. Russia still maintains military bases in Georgia and has, at times, backed various sides in the nation's conflicts. Another destabilizing challenge is that it shares a border with the war-torn Chechen Republic of Russia.

Since the 1990s, Georgia has struggled with a very slow economic recovery following the Soviet Union's collapse and its own civil strife. Fifty-four percent of the population is living below the poverty line.

The Georgian Orthodox Church dates back to A.D. 150 and for centuries was the only preserving factor in Georgian culture and nationalism. Most of the neighboring areas have been and are home to Muslim ethnic groups. Following Georgia's independence, there has been an increased interest in spirituality and the Christian faith. The former Department of Atheism at the national university is now a theological faculty. Nearly 63 percent of Georgians are Christian, 20 percent are Muslim, and 17 percent are non-religious. Yet today, the Georgian Orthodox church has factions that are hostile and repressive to evangelical ministries at work in Georgia—complete religious freedom is not yet a reality.

In May 2002, LCMS World Mission missionaries in Russia, Rev. Matt Heise and Rev. Brent Smith, visited a small group of people in the Republic of Georgia who had learned of the Lutheran church through Lutheran Hour Ministries. By June 2002, the first leadership training seminar was held. Currently, there are three Georgians completing theological degrees, two from our Russian partner church's seminary in Koltushi, Russia. These Georgians have already been active in gathering people, sharing the Gospel, and forming worshipping communities. Services are held at 11:00 every Sunday at the apartment being rented by LCMS World Mission. The Lutheran community is quite small now, fluctuating from 10 to 20 regular attendees on Sundays. Nonetheless, the evangelists have used the opportunities presented by the difficult financial situation in Kutaisi (about 70 percent unemployment) and the recent war to speak of the eternal truths of our Lord Jesus Christ through their Gospel witness.

Through this project, the Lutheran outreach to the people of Georgia will help restore a Lutheran witness in a country where there has been a Lutheran presence since 1818, when German immigrants founded churches. The evangelists who serve in this project primarily witness to their fellow Georgians in the city of Kutaisi in central Georgia. They are also planting a few congregations on the Black Sea coast, in the village of Tsvermagala, and in the city of Batumi. They also have opportunities to begin relationships with Iranian citizens in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. They have been witnessing to refugees from the war with Russia this past year, including refugees in Joseph Stalin's hometown of Gori.

Evangelists Zviadi and Tea Charkviani have now officially graduated from the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia. Zaza Kiknavelidze hopes to complete his diploma work for a degree within the next few months.

This project focuses on supporting evangelistic activities and outreach programs which will include providing Bibles or other Christian resources, renting facilities and equipment for outreach events, covering the cost of transportation for participants, and even facilitating the involvement of volunteers from around the world. Missionary Rev. Matthew Heise is currently living in Georgia.

Funding will be used for:

The Charkviani family and Zaza Kiknavelidze will each receive \$400 per month for living expenses (total of \$9,600 per year). The remaining funds will be used for heating and electricity at the mission facility in Kutaisi (\$1,600), gas needed for travel in the mission car (\$3,000), and editing the Christian literature that has been translated into Georgian (\$800).

Prayer needs:

- Please pray for Zviadi and Tea Charkviani and Zaza Kiknavelidze as they continue their missionary work in Georgia and work to form a Lutheran congregation in Kutaisi and preaching stations throughout the country.
- Pray for the first seminars held in Georgia—on community health care training and the house church model—that they would help develop a vision for service to the community and a vision for sustained growth of the church.
- Pray for evangelism outreach among Iranians living in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.