

An Interview with AGST Alumnus, Joel Petty.

With deep roots in the Texas Hill country, Joel Petty (AGST '97) is today living in St. Petersburg, Russia, serving as president of the Institute for Theology & Christian Ministry (ITCM), a Church of Christ seminary. In August, Hugh Gainey sat down with Joel Petty to discuss his work in Russia.

HG: Tell me something about yourself.

JP: My great grandparents were some of the original founders of Fredericksburg, TX. Three generations of my family had attended Texas State University (formerly Southwest Texas State University) where I also studied Geography and Political Science, with a concentration in Soviet studies. I thought I might work for a federal agency as an analyst. After many personal and financial struggles, the Lord introduced me to an amazing family of God – Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin. They were faithful in fellowship, persistent in prayer and sincerely studied the scriptures. I grew in faith as I got to know the Lord in them. Although I had become a believer through a Lutheran church, I was baptized into Christ at Brentwood.

HG: Tell me how you got to Russia?

JP: I had visited there in 1987 as part of the TSU Geography Department. I had a very inspiring teacher who was excited about his time in Russia and all things Russian. He took us there on a two-week exchange tour during *Perestroika*. That trip changed my life.

Although I was not a Christian then, I understand now that “we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God planned in advance for us to do.” I think the Lord worked in my life before I knew him, preparing me for my life’s ministry. I now see that the Lord takes care of kings and governments (witness the fall of the Soviet Union) and gave me other tasks.

Later, David Worley, Chuck Whittle, and others were used by God to help me confirm my calling. I went on a two-week campaign trip, and then a three-month teaching trip to St. Petersburg in '93 where among other things I met my future wife and broke my ankle! In '97, I graduated from Austin Grad, got married and moved to Russia as a church-planting evangelist supported by Brentwood, all in a span of about three months!

HG. Do you see yourself ever coming back home?

JP: I have been there nine years. I plan to be in Russia as long as the Lord allows and as long as I can be useful and an encouragement to the church.

HG: In what ways do you see the hand of God in developing the school?

JP: I think God gave Russians and Americans a vision of what needs to be done, and brought everything together so very quickly to make it happen. Everyone at ITCM is doing exactly what he or she are gifted to do. We have more students than we expected. We have many wonderful teachers from almost all the church of Christ schools [in the States]. We have funding for the experimental stage of this work. We have two of the

best simultaneous translators anywhere. Too many things are going well for this not to be God's will. The fact that some other schools in Russia are now imitating what we are doing in Russia is perhaps another validation.

HG: What do you see as the greatest strength of ITCM?

JP: Our concept of bringing together scholar-ministers from different Christian universities in the States and Russian ministers who model ministry for the students. And, of course, the job skill training dimension of our program.

HG: The concept of doing secular work as a minister is a Biblical concept, but seems unique today.

JP: Actually, others have done it before us. For example, it is done in India and we learned the idea through an alumnus of AGST. We know the job skill training is also done in Africa and South America. However, we were the first ones to do it in Russia, but others are doing it now.

HG: What is your greatest challenge?

JP: Administering any kind of organization in what I refer to as spontaneous, unpredictable, often illogical Russia is difficult. David Worley calls Russia "bizarro world" where everything is backwards, for good reason. You must be a logistics expert just to survive there. A future challenge will be recruiting. We now have many applicants, but finding students who meet our very high admission standards in the future could be difficult unless the churches begin to grow and change.

HG: Tell me about the church in Russia.

JP: We've had many baptisms, but few conversions. Perhaps 100 churches were planted in early 90s and some leaders emerged. Now there are about 50 churches, and only four have over 100 members. I doubt there are more than 3,000 Christians in the entire country. Sadly, most churches are still dependent on outside funds, and many have no significant ministry. However, there are several bright spots. The Neva church in St. Petersburg is a merger of several congregations that put aside differences in personality, theology and practice for the sake of unity. In Tomsk, Siberia, the church supports its own minister and is a thriving center of evangelism and ministry. The church in Rostov on the Don ministered to the children of the Beslan terror attack last year. There are other examples I could include. The churches can also benefit from the Russians natural tendency to be tenacious, committed, and faithful to the death when inspired. Those characteristics were seen when the Russians defeated Napoleon and Hitler, and in the endless sufferings, they patiently endured throughout their 1000-year history.

HG: What did the Communists do to the church in Russia? Didn't they wipe out the church?

JP: Not as entirely as we had thought. Some Orthodox churches stood up to the KGB and suffered, but most did not. Some evangelical groups went underground and continued to worship.

HG: As you look to the future what do you think God has in mind for the school?

JP: I don't know the mind of God but I hope He has in mind for us to stay true to the vision and mission I think He gave us: To train servants of the Word—leaders for the Russian churches from among the brothers and sisters—some of these will be full-time but most part-time so that more churches will be planted and existing ones strengthened to the glory of God. I also think God wants us to develop the tradition of Christian scholarship in Russia, so that the Russian church has her own scholars in the future. It is hard to imagine what else God wants us to do but He will make it clear to us as we go. We are open to His leading.

We are so thankful for the many blessings at ITCM and how God has brought the school together so quickly. I'd like to add one anecdote relating to AGST. It was through Allan McNicol that the relationship between ITCM and the State University in St. Petersburg (SPSU) developed. Through our agreement, we share joint facilities and offer a joint masters degree program. This joint venture gives us the ability to influence State University students for Christ through lecturers and classes. As you know, Allan taught the last class at the Church of Christ Bible Chair when the University of Texas (UT) accepted their classes for credit. It was through Allan and his contacts that we learned about SPSU. Then, quite providentially, Allan taught the first class at ITCM in the SPSU building last year that marked the beginning of the partnership between SPSU and ITCM. At first I ignored the opportunity with the state university, thinking "What does the Christ have in common with Baal, i.e. what will a state university in a secular, formerly atheist state have to do with us?" However, in spite of my initial lack of faith, God worked and blessed us with a tremendous partnership with SPSU. Allan was in the middle of all it because of his willingness to be used by God.

Along with Allan, we thank God for others from AGST who have taught for ITCM in St. Petersburg. These include Jeff Peterson, Mark Shipp, Stan Reid, David Worley, and Todd Hall. In addition, Mark Shipp has done much to advance the work of one of our students who writes high quality and biblically sound a cappella hymns in Russian and English. God does more than we can ask or imagine, to his glory, in his church. Amen.