

# Mission among the Roma

*PCUSA joins others in sharing Christ's love  
among a marginalized minority*

By Burkhard Paetzold  
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**E**szter Dani's passion is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the Roma (Gypsy) people of East/Central Europe. Her mission is complicated by long-standing prejudices and harmful legends that have gained acceptance among some in the region.

Some parents tell their children not to even sit beside a Roma child.

For Dani, an ordained minister of the Reformed Church in Hungary, such prejudice and marginalization is a call to action. "Jesus broke boundaries of his time and touched those who are marginalized," she says. Her heart is among this group besieged by poverty, poor housing and little access to health care. Dani has initiated and implemented a leadership training program within the emerging churches that have sprung up among the Roma in western Ukraine.

The hope is that trained leadership will help Roma congregations become self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating at a level similar to other Reformed congregations. There is a more or less romantic image of the "roaming Gypsies." If this image were ever accurate, it is not true anymore. When Communism ruled in East/Central Europe the Roma were forced to give up their itinerant lifestyle and begin to assimilate into the majority societies. Today only 5 percent still cling to the nomadic lifestyle.

The term "Gypsy" was invented by Europeans, who incorrectly believed that the Roma had their origin in Egypt. Centuries of hatred and persecution have caused "Gypsy" to become a derogatory word in some countries. Most prefer to be called Roma, which is the plural of their own words for human beings, Rom (male) and Romani (female). The Roma migrated from north India more than 1,000 years ago and now the worldwide population is estimated at 12 million. They arrived in Europe in the 14th century, bringing a host of highly skilled smiths, cobblers and weavers as well as exceptional musicians, dancers, fortune-tellers, and traditional healers.

The Roma belong to many tribes, with different traditions, customs and beliefs. Roma groups did not totally assimilate, but they have absorbed some of the non-Roma local culture. Most Roma have converted to the religions and denominations of their host countries, although their formal religious affiliation is often supplemented by traditional Roma beliefs and practices.

**Vexing social ills** While the fall of Communism opened up numerous opportunities in East/Central Europe, it created tremendous challenges for Roma communities.

Economic depression, a renaissance of traditional majority values, and radical social change faced the new governments in East/Central Europe after the collapse of the Communist systems. The new governments were seemingly unable to protect the weakest segment of society, the Roma minority: unemployment soared, and a host of economic and social problems ensued among the Roma. They often became the scapegoats for the social ills facing East/Central Europe.

Under Communism Roma were forced to conform to the ways of the majority societies. The upside of the system was the provision of jobs and a social safety net, but more than 15 years after Communism's fall many Roma are still struggling to find a steady job. They have to make a living from small trade, day labor, and other meager jobs. Meanwhile costs for rent, gas and electricity have increased enormously. Usurious lending practices are a cancer that undermines some Roma communities.

These seismic cultural and economic changes caused the Roma to lose their self-esteem and cultural roots. Immense numbers of them live in horrible circumstances in formerly abandoned houses, slums, urban ghettos and rural camps. Some Roma communities are settled on garbage dumps and riverbanks, where the unhygienic conditions cause serious public health problems.

The United Nations Development Program has issued a detailed report on the socioeconomic situation of Roma in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. The report says that "the living conditions of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are more characteristic of sub-Saharan countries such as Zimbabwe or Botswana than of Europe."

One out of three Roma children fails to complete elementary school, and the illiteracy rate among Roma is high.

Governments in East/Central Europe have tended to make health services more and more inaccessible for Roma. Basic health facilities and public health information adapted to the specific needs of the Roma community are about to disappear.

PCUSA mission to the Roma As churches in former Communist countries gain new acceptance and redefine their own identity, they can play an important role in finding out how to improve the relationship between Roma and non-Roma. Several churches, ecumenical bodies, and faith-based organizations in East/Central Europe support the process of bridge-building between Roma and non-Roma.

The PCUSA has been able to utilize its good relationships with those churches and organizations and join our national partners in common mission efforts.

The PCUSA also collaborates in Roma ministries with the Reformed Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the Dutch United Churches, as well as with the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches.

Here are a few of the ministries where the PCUSA is involved:

v The mission department of the Hungarian Reformed Church has hired Iren Buzas to work with the educational programs of the Hungarian government related to Roma. She also advocates for Roma and strengthens participation of Roma in congregational and church life. She organizes summer camps and seminars and created a Roma mission center in Debrecen. Some PCUSA congregations have sent teams to help with this center.

v The Reformed Church of Transcarpathia, Ukraine, has built several new church buildings for Roma communities. However, trained Roma leadership was needed before the Roma could take ownership. Two years ago training opportunities were begun. In addition the church is supporting a Center for Roma Mission by allocating and remodeling a building. The complex can be used for

many purposes, such as summer camp programs for Roma kids and public health and vocational training programs. The PCUSA has supported this work through mission teams and financial support.

v The PCUSA supports the Czech Ecumenical Council's Roma Committee, which has organized joint meetings for Roma from different denominations in the Czech Republic. This allows otherwise isolated Roma leaders to share their experiences and be encouraged by serving Christ with a common voice and unique music.

v The PCUSA has helped the European Diaconal Year Network (EDYN) create the "Roma-Gadje Dialogue Through Service Initiative." The goals of this long-term commitment to improving the situation of Roma in European society include placing non-Roma volunteers in Roma communities to work alongside Roma and enabling Roma to volunteer in Roma communities outside their home countries.

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*See also the 2006 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study, page 181. For information about supporting Roma ministries financially visit [www.pcusa.org/give](http://www.pcusa.org/give) and type "Roma" into the search engine.*

## **PCUSA mission workers among the Roma**

**Stephen and Ruth Cho** help develop Bible studies and congregations among the Roma. They are jointly appointed with the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea and have served in Hungary in Roma ministry since 1997.

**Grant Lovellette** facilitates the Roma-Gadje Dialogue through Service Initiative, which places European and Americans in service projects in Roma communities and sends Roma men and women for service in Roma communities outside their home country. He serves in Hungary and was appointed to his current role this year. Previously he served for one year in Roma ministry in Ukraine as a Young Adult Volunteer.

**Burkard Paetzold** is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) regional liaison for Central and Eastern Europe. He devotes a major portion of his efforts to Roma ministry. He supports the work of PCUSA mission personnel and facilitates PCUSA work with partners and mission teams that visit the region. He is based in Germany and has been a PCUSA mission worker since 1998.

Two Young Adult Volunteers, **Stacey Horn** and **Kristin Nickel**, are working with the Roma-Gadje Dialogue through Service Initiative. Horn is helping to break down the wall of segregation between Roma and non-Roma in Hungary by facilitating activities that bring together Roma and non-Roma children. Nickel is teaching mathematics and English at a Roma camp in Ukraine.

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This article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of *Highlights*. A downloadable PDF of the issue is available on the Web at <http://www.pcusa.org/wmd/newsarchive.htm#articles>.

Caption of photo in the PDF:

**GATHERING COMMUNITY** The Roma community in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, enjoys several new church buildings and a community center supported by the Reformed Church.