

# BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith:  
A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations



WISCONSIN COUNCIL  
OF CHURCHES  
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

Becoming Welcoming Communities - Wisconsin Council of Churches- Session 4, Handout 4H

## Interview with Yuri (part two)

*Edited for length and clarity*

*What did you expect America to be like and did it meet your expectations?  
What surprised you? What was life like when you first arrived?*

I didn't know what to expect. I guess I expected it to be different, and it was different. I didn't know exactly how it was going to be, other than everything being in a different language. It was difficult because it felt like I was trying to become part of something and studying it at the same time and being more conscious about it. I am assimilating into this culture. So, what do I like? What do I not accept? What am I willing to accept? Those are all choices that need to be made.

*Was there anything in particular that you liked or did not like about America?*

There are certain flavors that were very different, and I still cannot drink root beer. It's just the most disgusting processed thing. I can't smell the thing. But peanut butter, I like. There was no peanut butter in Russia. Mint flavor, like peppermint patties. That kind of stuff I like now. Celery wasn't part of the Russian diet. I didn't like it at first. Now I like it. So, yeah, there's a lot of adjustments.

*Do you still feel connected to your original culture or the family you left behind?*

You know, there's two questions, because there's my connection to my family and my relatives, and there's my connection to my culture, which is much bigger than my relatives. I have been in pretty good contact with my family. They came out to visit me and we're on good terms. I decided to go back to Russia for a visit in 2019. They were just wonderful. It's great.

But my culture has been fascinating to me because at first, my desire was to become an American from Russia. I didn't want to be a Russian American. I wanted to be an American from Russia. And so, I've been very active

in building my own life here. I have a master's degree. I teach at a university. I'm a local elected official. I participate in the life of my community. I can get a new headline generated in a local newspaper.

I have some influence, but at the same time, I realized that the Russian inside me refuses to die. There's a person inside me who still appreciates the culture and enjoys speaking Russian, and who has all of those points of view. In 2010, I got licensed to certify as a court interpreter. So now I am one of two certified Russian court interpreters in the state of Wisconsin. I'm licensed through the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

Because of this interest in Russian language and culture, and my general interest in politics and democracy, I went ahead and started a podcast and then it became a blog. I have a YouTube channel. It's kind of ironic, because it was started in English. I wanted to tell Americans about Russia and share with them interviews with some of the people in Russia now. But there was just no interest in that. Then I started doing the podcast and blog in Russian – for Russians about Russia. You see, because I'm in America, I'm unafraid. I have my YouTube channel and I'm very active on it, and I have a following in Russia. And actually, what I want to do is be of service to my new country, the United States of America.

I believe that the United States of America is an amazing country and that it deserves to be protected. One of the ways that we can protect it is to communicate things like I am, educating different people on different things. I do have this relationship with Russian culture, and I can't deny it. I can't deny myself and others that I have that, even though I'm working very hard to become an American.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Yuri was asked about expectations and assimilating into a new culture. Pick another country to which you might imagine fleeing as a refugee. What do you suppose one could expect? How do you suppose you might adjust or assimilate?
2. How does Yuri relate to his Russian connections and culture?
3. How does his civic engagement through the courts and his work through his podcast, blog, and YouTube channel serve Russians? How does it serve America?