

## Computer Training Helps Georgian Nuns Publish Religious Pamphlets

**P**erched on a cliff high above the Mtkvari River in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, the Peristsvaleba Convent provides a peaceful and traditional home to seven Georgian Orthodox nuns. A church, several smaller buildings—including one that houses a newly-built community center—and well-tended gardens connected by brick paths that wind along the hillside complete the monastery complex, which dates back to the



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINNAN  
Sister Theona and Mother Tekle at Peristsvaleba Convent in Tbilisi.

early 1800s. There is an atmosphere of history and serenity pervading the place that gives the illusion that life for the women residing here today is very similar to that of their predecessors from decades long past. But then a laptop, scanner, and printer sitting on a desk in one of the convent's rooms clearly illustrate that these religious women have their feet planted in the 21st century.

"Our monastery has been assigned the task of educating and enlightening people by the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church," says Mother Tekle, the Mother Superior of Peristsvaleba Convent. With more than 60 percent of the country's citizens practicing the Georgian Orthodox religion, the responsibility of publishing relevant literature in the Georgian language, rather than in Russian as required during Soviet times, is not a task the sisters take lightly. To date, they have produced prayer books, psalms, and other outreach materials, as well as informational leaflets that describe various holidays, feasts, and celebrations of the church.

While the nuns are committed to the project, the undertaking is not a simple one. Describing the conditions that most Georgians cope with every day, Mother Tekle explains that their electric supply is limited to only four hours each day—two in

the morning and two in the evening. "So, we work during the times the electricity is on while, at the same time, recharging the laptop battery. Then we work by candlelight, relying on the battery to power the computer for as long as it can, repeating the cycle when the electricity returns in the evening. Paper and ink are also quite expensive, so it is a challenge to keep the project afloat." Despite these hardships, their mission to create religious publications in their native language became easier, she contends, after one of their congregants, Nino Didmanidze, recommended that some of the nuns enroll in a computer class at the National Information Learning Center (NILC).

The NILC, which evolved from the LRC established through the efforts of AIHA's now-graduated Tbilisi/Atlanta partnership, has offered training courses to local health-care professionals, university students and professors, and other members of the Tbilisi community since 1996. With encouragement from Didmanidze, who is an instructor at the Center and a devout Georgian Orthodox, two of the nuns—Sister Theona and Sister Marika—signed up for a basic computer skills course to learn how to operate word-processing and illustration programs, as well as some basic desktop publishing applications.

"The computer training these two nuns received was very important for our work, especially as we were just getting started with our publishing project. Theona and Marika brought what they learned in the classes back to the Convent and taught other nuns how to use the laptop and scanner—as well as the different software programs we have—which were all gifts to our Order from an American benefactor," Mother Tekle continues, explaining that the Sisters spoke so highly of both the training they received at the NILC and their instructor, that she sent her own niece to the Center for computer classes.

As their skills grew, they began to create brochures, flyers, and pamphlets using Microsoft Word and Adobe PageMaker, distributing them not only in the Tbilisi area, but throughout the country and even to the Georgian community living in Moscow. When other convents and monasteries decided to begin publishing religious materials of

Since 1995, AIHA has established a network of 140 partnership Learning Resource Centers (LRCs) that, as of June 2002, have collectively provided information and communication services to more than 95,000 medical professionals, students, patients, and other members of their communities. In addition to meeting the research needs of partner institutions, LRC staff work to ensure the sustainability of the Centers by offering various fee-based services—including Internet access, desk-top publishing services, and software training courses—to the general public. This is the story of how a group of Georgian nuns applied the computer skills they learned at the Tbilisi LRC to their own community education and outreach work. The story of the woman who provided the training is on the other side.



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINNAN  
In the Convent, modern-day accoutrements—the laptop and scanner—coexist with old-world necessities—the candle.

their own, the nuns at Peristsvaleba provided guidance and advice.

These days, Mother Tekle is working on a new assignment given by the Patriarch—teaching children and young adults about botany and ecology. And, while Sister Theona and Sister Marika now reside at other convents, they taught the Peristsvaleba nuns how to use the laptop and scanner, so the publishing project is alive and well.

Bringing to her new endeavor fond memories of the last, Mother Tekle notes that the computer skills Theona and Marika learned at the NILC played an important role in the continuing success of the Convent's task of enlightenment, concluding, "It is a very pleasant thing to see one's work bear fruit."

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