

Random Thoughts from This Year's Trip to Ukraine

By the time you read today's article, our work in Ukraine will have concluded. God willing, Mitch, Kipp, and I will begin the long journey home from here tomorrow morning and be home by Tuesday night. Our flight from Mariupol does not leave in time to allow us to board an outbound flight from Kiev to Amsterdam, so we will have to stay overnight in a hotel in Ukraine's capital city. A special thank you goes out to everyone at Brownsburg who made this trip possible. Thanks to the elders who, when I approached them last fall, did not hesitate to give me the time off to come. Thanks to those of you who have donated generously out of your pocket for benevolent needs and the overall expenses of this trip. And, thanks to everyone of you for your prayers for our safety and success. And, might I add, thanks for your kind words, prayers, and assistance to my wife and family while I have been away. You are a special group and I will always love you for making the Allen's feel like we've always been part of the family here in Brownsburg.

HUNGERING & THIRSTING AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS

We have received the warmest of welcomes from these Christians and even though we must communicate through a translator, our love for each other is great. Kipp and I talked earlier in the week about our special affection for these Christians. They have persevered spiritually for almost two years - and most of that with no outside help. They truly are hungering & thirsting after righteousness and have made great sacrifices to remain faithful. When we were in the planning stages of our trip last November, we did not know of anyone that would be able to help out these brethren during 2004. They had just weathered a great conflict in the group and we did not know how things would turn out. To be honest, from our perspective, things looked pretty bleak for this group late last year. God has answered our prayers because in late February Charlie and Kay Gant arrived from Kazakhstan and remained here until May 9. His work with them is very evident as their spiritual growth is so clearly seen. Not only did they benefit from Charlie's teaching, but in Kay the women got to see a good example of the life of a Christian woman. You may remember that this congregation is comprised of mostly women. Matt Duggin arrived on May 4 from Tennessee, and plans to work with the church here for at least six years. They have already gotten close to him - and he definitely is doing much good here. At 24, Matt has already done quite a bit of work in the former Soviet Union, having worked with Charlie Gant and Michael Connolly in Kazakhstan during the summer of 2002. Last year he spent time encouraging Christians at two congregations in Russia. He has a working knowledge of the language and can get around pretty well on his own. He has been sure to let us know that the need for American preachers to assist in the work at Mariupol has not diminished because he is working here fulltime. He has asked for us to spread the word to let other preachers/teachers know of how useful their assistance can be in this work.

LIFE IN MARIUPOL

We've noticed that Mariupol is seeing many improvements over what it experienced during the Soviet era. Within eleven months time, we've noticed many changes in the city - such as a new airport terminal, and street improvements. Areas downtown are being remodeled as is the central market. One thing that is very easy to spot this year over last has been the arrival of cellphones. While they had them last year, they didn't seem to be nearly as prevalent. **Everyone** is carrying a cell phone and if they weren't speaking Russian you'd think you were in America. Everyone buys prepaid cellular over here, so every store you go in sells cell phones and the minutes to go with them. From a market standpoint things are improving in this country. Each year it becomes just a little more westernized. But, inflation is a problem as prices have gone up across the board. Some of the brethren have remarked that they are glad to see some of the new things come in, but they can't afford to buy them. Under the old system everyone was guaranteed a job - this is no longer the case. Now many of those who are out of work and can't find a job have nothing to turn to but the bottle. To say alcohol is prevalent in this country would be an understatement. We've seen drunks out at all hours of the day and when you ride on public transit the smell of alcohol is in the air. Since there are no laws against underage drinking, you see plenty of young people with a bottle in their hand. It is easy to see why some of the Christians have struggled with the bottle - because alcohol is so embedded in the culture here.

They still have a ways to go with improving the reliability of the infrastructure. Matt Duggin has gone six weeks

without a hot shower as the government can't seem to get around to repairing the hot water pipes near his flat. He's been able to use the hot showers here at the hotel since we've been here. Today (Friday) is the second day in a row his flat has been without electricity. And yes,...he'll probably receive a bill for a service he did not receive. Mariupol is the home of 4 major factories - two steel plants, a rubber plant, and a heavy machinery plant. The majority of the people either work for one of these factories or know someone who works for them. Steel from Mariupol goes around the world. Last weekend, the smog was so thick that one could hardly breathe when outside. It was so bad last Sunday that it hurt to breathe and your eyes would sting. At bible study on Monday a few of the brethren were complaining about the headaches and other problems due to the smog. It's really hard to imagine what it's like unless you've been here.

OUTLOOK FOR THIS WORK

While these Christians have a lot of room for growth, their attitude is right. Their dedication and love for God are evident. One year ago, Valentine Kostin was a newborn Christian who could barely find the passages we were reading in the Bible. This year he is confident enough to lead prayer and ask us to lead prayer at the specified time in worship. Galena, Valentine's wife, and Evgenia have also shown a significant amount of growth. From her warm smile and joyous laugh, Galena has gone out of her way to show hospitality. From pickled apricots, pickled tomatoes, fruit juice, and Borsch with cow's tail - she's made sure we've left her home with a full stomach. She and Valentine have opened up their home night after night for us so three Americans could share their knowledge of the Scriptures.. Evgenia is a meek & quiet woman, who is very dedicated to God. A former atheist in the communist days, she counts it a special thing to be a believer. These three, along with Matt Duggin, make up what I would call the "core" of the group. Elonore, Teresa, Tonia, and Mansoor are all struggling spiritually, but are making efforts to change. They were present for our studies for most evenings. Sergei, Valentina, Olga, and Tanya did not make it for any of our studies. Olga (22 yrs old) got married yesterday and the family has been too busy preparing for the wedding to make it to our studies. That is somewhat understandable, but Charlie Gant & Matt Duggin have said this family has only been to worship twice in the last three months. Sergei is just "too busy" for the Lord right now. Unfortunately, he keeps the rest of his family from worshipping - when they desire to do so. It's a tough situation. I think the group will grow over time, and now with someone here all the time - the chances for success are even greater. Let's give the glory to God!

THE NEED FOR WORKERS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

There is a tremendous need to spread the gospel in this part of the world. Only 12 souls comprise the church in this city of over a half million people. In fact, there are probably less than 100 Christians in non-institutional churches of Christ in all of Russia & it's former republics. (-160 million people) This is with ten-twelve years of labor. But, before one writes off this part of the world as saying the people aren't responsive to the gospel - remember that only a handful of men have participated in the spreading of the gospel here since the fall of communism. Literally, millions are going w/o hearing the gospel message. What we have found in our experience in our visits to Mariupol thus far is a group of people who, when they obey the gospel, are very committed and persevere through conditions that are hard for Americans to imagine. They like Americans and are so wonderful to spend time with. They genuinely appreciate our being here and we know from experience that brotherly love reaches across language barriers with their warm hugs and gentle kisses on our cheeks. At times it can be hard to put this experience into words - it's just something so wonderful that you have to experience it for yourself.

Thanks again for making this trip possible. I look forward to getting back home and getting busy in my work at Brownsburg. Please remember us as we travel over the next few days.

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