



TERNOPIL, UKRAINE

2nd Quarter 2014 Report

April

Greetings to you, dear friends, coworkers in evangelism!

In my last letter I described a little more concerning our feelings on the situation in Ukraine. Sure, it affects all of us, Christians in general, and each of us individually, and the church in particular. What are we to do in this situation, which is not simple? How should we behave, how should we respond?

The situation remains tense. There hasn't been enough time to change the government since Russia committed aggression on the territory of Ukraine and made the annexation of the Crimean peninsula. People are angry. There is so much negativity; it's been a long time since I heard so much of it. We in the western part of Ukraine had not strongly sympathized with Russia, and now it's even more so. Some like how the new government is acting, and some do not like it. And there's the feeling of helplessness. Understand this: there are things that you cannot change.

In a fresh way, I've begun to understand the wish expressed by Paul : «I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and *for* all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth» (1 Tim. 2:1-4). That's what I realized: Clearly, that is what God wants, that people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. But the way people will perceive the Truth and the message of salvation depends. When there is so much evil, a lot of aggression, everyone has their own idea of truth. Some are offended by God. Example: When a lot of people here perished [during the protests] people began calling them the "Heavenly Hundred." The name itself suggests that all these people went straight to Heaven because they died for freedom. Very often these perished people are regarded practically as angels and equated to dead saints. Today people like this idea. I am sure that if some preacher stood in the center of Kiev or Ternopil and spoke the truth, then at the least they would kick him out, and possibly beat him up. At such times, no one wants the God of the Bible, the God who saves the sinner who repents and believes in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as personal Savior. The situation changes people's ideas of what is truth.

Unfortunately, the official church (in Ternopil this is the Greek Catholics and Orthodox) is today catering to these patriotic tones. They tell half the truth, say what the crowd wants to hear. Formally, it seems that people stand a little longer to pray; maybe someone even goes to church more often now. But for us (our church, the Baptists in the region) it has not become easier. We've become even more in opposition to the majority.

Yesterday I witnessed how an icon of Mary was carried through the streets. This is not just an icon - it is a super icon. It is a local relic. Usually it is kept in one of the temples of our area and every respectable Greek Catholic in the region should pray toward it. They pray to the original, not to a copy of it; i.e., at least once a year they should make a pilgrimage to this temple. And then I read today in the news that the people of our area are instructed to come under the protection of Mary. Hundreds of thousands of people came to worship. So, half-truth triumphs. People are pacified.

Friends, please pray for us! Pray for opportunities to preach the gospel; for the possibility of holding a camp this summer. Our politicians worry that our chance to hold presidential elections could be ripped away from us, but our wish is that "camp season 2014" not be ripped away from us.

- Pray for the leaders of the camp ministry. Several leaders who helped us in past camps dropped from the team this year. (Two now attend another church; another person has a work conflict.) We need a leadership team.
- Pray for the development of home groups. For new people to come to small groups and to multiply and grow the church.
- Pray for the rehabilitation center. Primarily pray for ministers for the center. We need a responsible minister. Pray that new rehabilitants, people with whom God works, will come and fill it. Pray concerning formalizing documentation about our reconstruction work there. A week ago, I was summoned to the police station, where they demanded explanations regarding this matter. Then, through a friend, they hinted that I should offer a bribe to get that matter closed. I refused and said that we have begun doing the paperwork. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity before to get these documents. Recently we have begun to address this issue.

Pray for the family. For health, for strength for the ministry. For a chance to get some rest.

May

Peace to you, dear friends, fellow workers in the work of the Lord our Savior Christ. I am happy to share with you some of our blessings and experiences.

A pastor once said, "I would be a good shepherd, if it were not for people." There are many good books on how to be a successful minister, but I see that in practice it's not so simple. In the effort to convert, you talk, you prepare people for baptism, you baptize, and then half a year after the baptism a person says, "I'm switching to a charismatic church. It's a more dynamic ministry." You teach leaders and hope that there will come a time that this ministry will become more mature, independent, but it turns out that when you turn control of something over to another person, then half a year later, you need to build it all over again from scratch. When we all meet together, everyone is able to say the right thing; everyone knows the best way that everything should be done, but as soon as you raise question of responsibility, dedication to a particular role-- not so much. No wonder some author wrote in one of the books that many people expect the pastor to be "a sheep that gives milk, wool, and eggs." So we have to do a lot. I understand that this paragraph is more suitable for Facebook than for a letter from a missionary, but this is what I feel today. Pray for spiritual strength to serve.

Please pray for the leaders of the church. From my perspective, I try to educate leaders, teach them, but it doesn't always turn out successfully. I would love for us to have a team of responsible, dedicated spiritual leaders, but where to get them? We have to work with those people we have. Pray that the leaders would have a desire to learn.



In early May, we decided to create a better opportunity to talk in depth with the leaders and their families. We needed to break away from the familiar surroundings and go off to be alone with God and with each other. So we did. We spent 2 days in the Carpathian Mountains and had a wonderful time. It was a good time to contemplate the beauty that God's creation. A great time of fellowship and prayer. There was time to talk to each other, to support someone, to offer another understanding and forgiveness. We held general meetings in the morning, and in the evening where we could worship the Lord and hear the Word. God put on my heart several important

topics for leaders. In addition, we invited both leaders of the church and also those who are not involved in the ministry. We were hoping that they would decide to work harder for the Lord, and indeed some have become more responsive; they have begun to take more responsibility and initiative.

Also, along with us went a few people who have not yet become members of the church, but are participating in the life of the church. For them, being invited was an indication that we appreciate what they do.

Everyone returned from this little trip feeling more encouragement and inspired. Unfortunately the good feeling after a holiday passes quickly and you go back to real life. Pray that the leaders would be able to understand God and all of us will be able, as a church and each individual, to see how to keep ourselves faithful to serve God while surrounded by so much evil.

Pray for peace in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, we have already begun to view human deaths as normal. In one of my last letters, I wrote that we were shocked at the deaths that happened in Maidan, but now we've crossed over the border, where death is shocking. It's scary to admit, but death becomes the norm. They say that there's a war. In our Western Ukraine all is more or less peaceful. But everybody is very worried. People share each other's bad news. Everyone talks about what they saw on the news, or heard on the radio, or read on the Internet. It would seem that here there is no room for the Good News, for the Gospel; people unfortunately are now more interested in the situation in the east of our country, and for them the good news would be a message about peace in Ukraine.

Pray for camps.

This summer we'll have four camps; two youth and two children. Two camps will be day camps, and two will be stationary. Pray that the military situation will not ruin our plans for camps. This year, as never before, have so many people been willing to go into our camp. Nobody will go on vacation to Crimea because of the Russian invasion, and nobody is going on vacation to the east because of the hostilities. Most social services have offered children to us. These are mostly children from poor families, from large families, or orphans living with guardians (relatives). Pray for safety from injury for children, for youth and for leaders.

June/July

Peace be with you, my dear friends and co-workers!

«This was really something!!!» «This was a children's camp I will never forget!» Basically these are the words children spoke about the camp. Zlata (age 13) wrote, "This was the best camp. Look for me next year!" Igor (13) wrote: " It's the best camp I've ever been in. I will never forget the leaders who constantly looked after us...."

This emotions expressed by children after the camp reflect what they felt. My emotions are much more complex and mixed. It was a wonderful time in camp, but it was also difficult. There were too many children (along with our smaller children, 69). We experienced a lot of difficult moments.

But let me discuss it in order. This camp was possible because of the help of our old friend and sister from Holland, who has lived in Ukraine for more than 14 years. She arranged and paid for the recreation center where we held the camp, and she invited 5 people young people from the Netherlands, who were responsible for sports and craft time, and for us, the Ukrainian team (14 people), she provided the main program and transportation for children to the camp and back.

As you may remember, in our country there is a war, a cranky economy, frightened people, refugees who have escaped from the war to the western part of the country where we live. In one of my last letters, I asked you to pray about the possibility of holding a camp. Many times we had a feeling that all of our plans could fall through because of the war. But as we were preparing, God saw to everything.

This year we decided to flip-flop the day camp and stationary camp. Last year we held a day camp first, but this year started with a stationary camp, which we concluded just a week ago. The purpose of this rotation was the desire of many children from the camp to be in children's ministry at the church. Last year there was a big emotional and temporal break (almost a month) between the end of the camp and the start of classes in the children's and teens' Christian clubs.

The majority of the children (more than 40) were recommended to us by the Center of Social Services in the city of Ternopil, with whom we have already worked for several years in various charitable projects. As a result, most of the children were unfamiliar to us. We met on the road to the camp and got acquainted in the first days of the camp. Most of these children were from "social problem" families. Some of the children are being raised by single moms. Some children were from foster families (orphans living in the care of other families). There were children who live in dormitories where one kitchen services 5-8 families). There were "unloved kids" with beautiful iphones, ipads, and laptops. When you get to know them, you realize that their dads just buy them expensive gadgets rather than spend time with them. There were several children refugees from eastern Ukraine, where there is a war ...

And so nearly seventy children of different ages (from 9 to 14 years), with different families, with different upbringings or lack thereof, with different life stories and experiences were sent by their parents to a Christian camp 315 miles from home. We knew that this would be a time, when we could share with them the love of God that they may have never felt.

If there was a need, you could write a small book of all the stories of things that happened in that camp. I want to tell you a few bright stories about what took place in the camp.

The tire

The first incident happened on the way to the camp. As I wrote above, the camp took place over 315 km from Ternopil, near the town of Mukachevo (Transcarpathian region. Extreme west of Ukraine. One hour from the Hungarian and Romanian borders.) We drove to camp in three cars, two buses, and my family minivan. I was driving in the rear with my family behind the buses. At one of the stops the bus drivers and I agreed that somewhere within 10-15 km from the finish, I would pass the buses and lead the way. The last third of the road was a dangerous road in the Carpathian Mountains: serpentine roads, hills, cliffs on the right with precipices on the left, not to mention the potholes in the roads. We already had the worst part behind us and were about 10 km from the camp. We'd been on the road for more than five hours of arduous travel. I had pulled ahead and constantly checked the mirror so as not to leave the others behind. Then I heard a powerful explosion. At the same time I saw a cloud of dust near the rear wheels of our big bus for 55 people. We did a quick stop; an inner tire (rear two wheels) for some reason had exploded. There was a lot of dust, frightened children. From the explosion a metal trunk was bent. We wondered what to do, since we still had to drive over some serious ups and downs? We looked around, and I could not believe my eye: just 100 meters away from us was a tire-repair business for heavy trucks and buses). Within 15-20 minutes, we continued on our way. I thanked God for His grace to me. The wheel exploded, not on a sharp turn in the mountains near the gorges, not at high speed on a straightaway, but right near a place where they carry such tires. And it was not a front wheel, which would make the bus unmanageable, but one of the rear ones. At such moments, you realize the power of prayer, and the greatness of God's mercy.

The boy who was tired of camps

The first day of camp: someone has already quarreled on the road, some boys already had a fight, a couple boys have stomachaches, because during a stop they plucked unwashed cherries and plums from trees and ate them. Someone can't find his bag, another is unhappy with his bed. One wanted to sleep on the top bunk, but ended up on the bottom. Someone on the bottom was perturbed that his neighbor was stepping on his bottom bunk to climb up. We had a first aid kit for emergency cases, but who knew that some parents sent their child with a sore throat (throat infection), giving us an urgent need to go to the city to purchase medicine. I needed to settle

up with the drivers for the road. "But when will there be hot water?" It seems to me that none of the questions put to me that day were more important.

I went to buy the necessary medicines, then returned to the camp. I rested on the way. Suddenly--another surprise: while examining the girls, our paramedic found that two of them had lice. This is very dangerous. If anyone lies on someone else's pillow or borrows a comb, a hat, or hair band will be infected. We needed immediate action: more medication, to brush out their hair, throw away all scrunchies, boil their combs and barrettes... Ah yes, one of them has no comb at all. I needed to go back to the city.

And so, there I was, rushing to get in the car, and at that moment I saw a boy, aged 10, crying. I went to him and said, "Why are you crying?" I thought an older boy hurt him, or maybe he lost something valuable, but he said, "I've already been to camps. I'm tired of going to them. All summer I was home only one week. All the time my parents send me away. I miss my family at home.» I understood: an under loved child. He wanted to be with Mom and Dad, but the parents were not up to it. He was a burden for the summer, a problem that had to be gotten rid of. At this point, I understood that he was exactly where he needed to be. In this camp, he would learn about the One who loves him. I comforted him, encouraged; I promised that he would not notice how fast 12 days would pass. Then, I was off to the pharmacy.

Winemakers in the camp

Last year, we had a problem group of teenagers – the girls. To this day, the leaders recall what they were doing. That year we did not take along any boys, and not all the girls were teens; they were ages 12-14 years. We understood that they were vulgar, used obscene words, and for that we were ready. But we never imagined that in camp they would try to make wine to drink. It fell to me and our program coordinator Volodya to sort out the situation. I was brought up in a Christian family, but Volodya's father was an alcoholic and he, too, drank alcohol before getting saved. Both of us have three children. For many years we have held children's and youth camps and, you would think it would be difficult to surprise us, but it was possible. What we have heard and seen has shown us the condition of the seemingly "prosperous and religious future" (future generations) and of Ternopil, Ukraine, in particular. This history has shown that we are doing the right thing -- trying to change the fate of these kids by trying to introduce them to God.

Approximately in the middle of the camp (on the 5th day) the kids had the opportunity to go into the forest and gather blackberries. As it turned out, even in the camp there were blackberries. Most of the children were happy to walk with leaders and eat fresh and tasty berries. But one of the older boys was not satisfied with walking and tasting food. Someone had an idea: Why not make wine? But how? Wine needs time, and there was no time. But they already wanted to do something. It turned out two of the guys had rubbing alcohol; or rather one had rubbing alcohol, and the other had moonshine (homemade vodka). Their moms gave it to them for the treatment of wounds. The one with the rubbing alcohol really had an injury, but the one with the moonshine—his mom gave it just in case he needed it for the treatment of wounds ☺. They were in medical bottles, 50 ml. And our guys decided to accelerate the process of turning blackberry into wine. They decided to put the berries into a soda bottle, shake it up, and add water and alcohol to the juice. And here's a quick method of fermenting wine. And that is what they did ...

Everything would have been funny if it were not so sad. Their parents had no idea that they were rearing future alcoholics. We began to talk about the outcome of their lives, if such habits were already normal to them. Where did they get that understanding of "creating alcoholic beverages" at that age? In many families, alcohol is an integral part of life. Moreover we just would not have guessed that they had homemade brew in a bottle. We decided to set fire to the liquid. Nazar, who is not yet 13, sniffed and said, "Whew! That is brew, all right. Set fire to it: it will burn poorly, with pale blue flames." We did and were shocked, because that's the way it burned. "How did you know?" we asked. He calmly replied, "My grandfather in the village produces moonshine. I've tried it."

Train up a child in the way in the way he should go. He will not depart from it when he grows old (Proverbs 22:6). At the end of camp, several people prayed the prayer of repentance, but they need to have not just repentance. They need a process of education and purification.

What's next?

All these stories are only part of what the Lord has taught us.

We always feel a great blessing and relief after we get home. All children hug their parents. Some of the parents thank us; others just grab the bag and head for home without even saying "Goodbye." Someone might ask, "How did my child behave in camp?" This year, two parents out of 69 children came up and asked. The rest simply know that they are great kids and that everything was fine... When you return children to their parents, it's a special feeling of lightness. You have a sense of work performed, a feeling of gratitude to God that everyone came home alive and well. But at the same time there is a sense of sadness and regret.

Some children's parents would never allow their kids to attend the children's club, because "cultists" might pull them into their faith. But sending them to camp? That's another thing. It's almost free, and that's enough... Let them go to a dance. I remember after a while meeting a boy in the city. We invited the boy, "Come to our Christian club for children!" The parent said, "Oh, you know, he can't go. We enrolled him in a chess club. But thanks for the camp. We are very satisfied!" And it is so sad, because you know that people are deceived. Our one hope is in the Lord! Because we're doing these camps despite the ingratitude, despite hostility. We do it because we believe that, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). We do it, because maybe it's the only chance these children will have to hear that they are sinners and they need a loving Savior. We do it because we believe in a mighty God, who said, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Is. 55: 11)."

Friends, it's great that we can work together for God in His kingdom!

Thank you for your support! Pray for the children whom the Lord has sent to these camps.

Best regards,
Vitaly Bilyak

P.S. I forgot to write. A couple of days after stationary camp we spent a week in day camp. Only half of children (30-35) from the stationary camp came to this camp. After another good week with the kids, we invited them all to a meeting in children's and teens Christian clubs. We really hope to see them again.