

Rock of Ages Ukraine Mission 2010 Report

This was the sixth year that a team of members from Rock of Ages has ventured to Ukraine for mission opportunities. Our team of 5 included Dawn Atkinson, Pete Coggeshall, Karen Twenhafel, Megan Martin, and Aaron Clymer and was diverse in age, personality, and talents. Prior to our trip to Ukraine, we worked together as a team beginning in December 2009. We met with previous members including John Yenter, John Bentrup, and Sarah Sacco, who each played an integral role in our planning and team building. This year, much direction was given toward building the team's working relationships before our departure.

The team left the United States on Thursday, June 10th, 2010 and arrived in Odessa, Ukraine on the 11th where we realized 2 members were missing their luggage, and all 5 tubs of mission supplies had not made it. We met our 2 translators, Dima and Zhenya, who are members of Alpha & Omega, plus our van driver Vlad. At the Odessa Seminary it looked doubtful that the plan of sleeping there would be possible because it had no running water. However, in the end, and with the gracious contribution of showers from Pastor Sasha at his home nearby, the 7 of us (team plus translators) were able to stay there.

Kagarlyk

On Saturday the 12th we bought books in Russian and visited the Black Sea. Then Vlad drove our team to Kagarlyk where we were warmly welcomed by Elder Misha and Uri, the youth director. This first evening, we all organized our rooms above the church before a full presentation with a group of about 13 village children. In response to our songs, the children, directed by the secretary of the Lutheran Church in Odessa, Alina (who is from Kagarlyk), sang a few of their church songs in Russian.

The next day was Sunday, time for church. The majority of this congregation consisted of older women with a few younger people and only a couple of men, other than church leaders. Pete remained in the service with translator Zhenya, and gave his Christian message. The rest of the team went outside with translator Dima to lead from 25 to 30 children in Sunday school. Although it was extremely hot, everyone joined in playing "Red Rover." Later, Elder Misha came to announce it was time to return for communion. Pete assisted Pastor Sasha (who rotates churches) and Elder Misha with the distribution of communion, with Zhenya translating Pete's words. The team distributed prayer cards to the congregation after church.

After lunch, Aaron connected with Uri by helping to re-string his guitar. Finally, much to the delight of the whole team, but especially Dawn and Aaron, the missing luggage and tubs were delivered. The whole team enjoyed the remainder of Sunday by walking through the town. That evening, we gathered to play Uno. Uri and his wife, Luda, joined in.

Monday we enjoyed a homemade pancake-doughnut breakfast and waited eagerly for the children to arrive. This was the first day we had any craft materials from the tubs. Only a few children arrived because the local summer school teacher was not willing to release children for our presentations — as had been allowed in previous years. The craft was done while watching a movie on a projector left by John Yenter last year. When these children departed, many of us took a nap, some in their beds, and some on the lawn. After a few hours, these children and more returned for a second lesson. After the craft there was a rowdy session of parachute and "the knot game," even though the temperature remained quite hot.

After the younger children left, a new group began to trickle in. Before long, some village youth, mostly teenagers had gathered. Sitting on a blanket shaded by the cherry tree, Uri and Aaron played their guitars, leading an impromptu jam session. Songs were chosen that were common between English and Russian/Ukrainian. About 12 people, including the 7-member team, sang for a while and enjoyed one another's company. The evening concluded with all 7 walking through the village to a World War II memorial, which made it clear the Soviet presence in Ukraine has not been eradicated. Later we were greeted by a number of villagers, including a goat herder, excited to talk to Karen about her German heritage. We walked past a school, noted by the borders of white-painted tires. Much of the housing in this area reflected a diminished standard of living, which was also evident to a slightly lesser extent in other areas of the country.

Our last day here included one last meeting with the village children. All of them were excited to participate in the final skit "Jesus is True God/True Man," even though the felt storyboard could not be found. We improvised by making the skit interactive — the children were assigned roles as varying parts of creation. After the games, we presented them with gifts of toys and bouncy balls. Picture postcards were given to the children who wanted them and many asked for autographs. It was time to say goodbye to children who, in just a few days, had become such good friends. Luggage for 7 members was loaded into both the van and Uri's car and the team was off to our next location, Savran. We felt our time in Kagarlyk was well spent. Uri seemed to have a real heart for the people, especially the youth. His aspirations at seminary bring hope that this church will soon have their own full-time pastor. There seems to be a need in this village for outreach to both young adults and adult men. The team would like to pursue mission opportunities here in these areas in the future.

Savran

We drove north to Savran, which was a new mission area for our Ukraine team. During the drive we were split between two vehicles; while most in the van slept, those in Uri's car had a good opportunity to learn more about the Christian focus of the youth director at Kagarlyk.

We went to the church, which was also our living quarter for this part of our mission. Again we stayed in 2 rooms above the church. After meeting Pastor Nikoli Smokvin (Vlad's father), Vlad took us to the local river for a much needed cooling off in the water — it was great. We returned for dinner and met Valentina, pastor's wife and our cook for the time we were there. We all ate together with Pastor's family and 5 boys from the orphanage that work with him during the day. After dinner we had an informal meeting about our upcoming schedule.

Wednesday was our first meeting with the children of 2 local village churches. We drove to the church in Ocharedna and met Pastor Vladimer Popal and his wife Nina who are parents of Uri in Kagarlyk. Despite the continuing heat and humidity, they helped us find tables, benches and a shady place to work with the almost 20 children. After lunch back in Savran, we continued to a "retirement home" where our time was very limited by the director. We had to begin with a tour of the facility, and then met with about 20 residents in a small room, where we believe Pastor Nikoli holds a service for them at times. Pete gave a very abbreviated talk, and Nikoli followed. We sang a few songs and were allowed to visit for a few minutes. Many of the elderly people wanted to talk and, with the help of our translators, we listened to a few stories of their lives. We were done for the day, so after dinner the team walked to Savran's center to find an Internet café to send emails home.

On Thursday we visited an orphanage about 40 minutes away where about 120 children ages 7 to 18 from 3 orphanages join together for summer camp. Some of these children really put a lot of detail and effort into their craft project. We spent half a day there, enjoying every minute. After leaving gifts for the orphanage, we had a hard time leaving — children ran along side the van! After lunch at Savran, we presented our program to a small church in another local village, Ostrovka, where church is held in the pastor's house. Some of the children here were from Ocharedna, so we were beginning to learn names. The adults enjoyed doing the scratch off cross craft as much as the children did.

Our last day here we return to Ocharedna for our final program with these Christian families. Everyone enjoyed playing Frisbee and parachute for the last time. After we got back to the Savran church, we presented Pastor Nikoli with quilts, work gloves, 3 Christ candles, directories, and T-shirts. He agreed to distribute them evenly to each of these churches. Afterward we were treated to a riverside swim and cook out. We played a game of volleyball with Vlad, the 5 boys from the orphanage, Nikoli and his grand children. Every one relaxed and we talked with Nikoli about the future for these boys. He is concerned where they will go after aging out of the orphanage. Overall, our mission work in Savran was good, however we recommended to Pastors Nicholi and Alexey that, in the future, more visits are needed to the orphanages and "retirement" home, and fewer to the church children.

Mykolaiv

The team arrived in Mykolaiv early evening on Saturday, June 19, after a longer than anticipated trip from Savron. On Sunday the team attended church at Pastor Miller's Concordia Lutheran Church, where Pete attended the full service, and the others conducted Sunday School. Pete delivered his message, conveying Christian greetings from ROA, and he also assisted in the distribution of communion. For several team members, the act of receiving communion from Pete and Pastor Miller was one of the trip highlights. After the service, the team informally spoke with about 45 church members. Conversation was limited with only 2 translators; however, a few church members spoke some English, which helped.

After lunch, the team and the Millers went to Ura Maskov's church to conduct our VBS type program. We were greeted by Viktor, Julia, and family, but we could not play games because of limited space at this church. The children were very engaged in singing songs. They knew a lot of the songs, singing in Russian as the team sang in English, making this a special moment during our presentation. The remainder of the day (3 hours) was spent sight-seeing in Mykolaiv, including seeing a German Lutheran church in the center of town established in 1852 that had recently been returned to church use after misuse during long Communist rule.

On Monday the team went to a men's home (mental institution) and a boy's home (juvenile rehabilitation facility). An additional visit to a children's facility was rescheduled by that facility for the next day, resulting in visiting only 2 locations on Monday and 4 on Tuesday. Prior to these visits, we purchased gifts for the men's and boy's homes. When the team arrived at the men's home, the men were very excited to see both the team and the Millers. In a courtyard we met about 50 residents where the team briefly introduced ourselves and Pete gave a short version of his message. The team sang a few songs and distributed faith bracelets (made the night before) and the team card. Both items were very popular and the men seemed grateful. Members also spoke individually with some men. One resident of the men's home, Ura, had in past visits established a close relationship with John Yenter. The team was concerned, due to John's absence, about Ura's feelings. Pete gave him a picture

book and message from John. He also gave Ura a necklace of a fish with Christ's name on it. Ura, while at first upset John was not there, came around and seemed happy. He recorded a video message, which the team brought back to John. Ura's message is a beautiful witness to his faith; strengthened by his friendship with John. We were here 1.5 hours.

After a late lunch, the team went to the boy's home where about 25 boys attended, and were engaged and happy we were there. After VBS, we gave them 3 soccer and volleyballs, which were put to immediate use, and also played with the parachute and Frisbees. The boys were happy to play and teach us their games. The team spent about 2 hours here.

On Tuesday the team visited 2 children's rehabilitation facilities, a TB sanitarium and the boy's home. The first was a rehabilitation facility for children with mental handicaps, where about 20 children attended. We were only given 45 minutes by the director, so we did not perform a skit, but sang songs and helped the children with a craft, which the children enjoyed. The workers were engaged, helping the children dance during some of the songs. At the TB sanitarium, where we had prior permission, the Millers had to re-negotiate our admittance, causing a 45-minute delay and only 30 minutes with the children. Megan and Aaron were too sick to go inside, so the rest did the VBS. Because the team was not allowed physical contact with the children, we could not do a craft or play games. We did hand out cakes, toys and bible-story books (from the Millers) written in Russian to 28 children.

Upon arrival at another rehabilitation facility for children with mental and physical handicaps, the director only allowed 30 minutes. Due to these time restrictions, we only presented a skit, and sang songs for about 30 minutes. The 20 boys were engaged and especially enjoyed singing "Father Abraham." We left a craft for the staff to help the children assemble.

These visits were the first time the Millers were allowed to bring mission groups to the TB sanitarium and the second rehabilitation facility. While our visits were abbreviated (and at the time did not seem to produce results), these were important first steps supporting community outreach. We pray God will use these first steps to pave the way for other mission groups, including future ROA teams.

After a late roadside lunch, the team drove back to visit the boy's home again. We had noticed the day before their volleyball net was in tatters. So we bought and gave the home a new net, played a quick game of volleyball with the boys and said our goodbyes. This day was the busiest day of the entire trip, with more than 3 hours driving and seeing over 80 children. At the end of the day, everyone felt tired and drained. This day is a good example of how mission team members must deal with extremes (driving distances, patience with other cultures, etc.) while always reflecting God's love.

Wednesday, June 23 was our departure from Mykolaiv. The team was treated to a delicious lunch at the riverside – a kebab cookout by the Millers. Then we met Pastor Sasha, who was our van driver back to Odessa.

ROA can be proud of the team's actions during this mission trip, and particularly the last full trying day. All acted as Christians, both with fellow team members and with others. Aaron and Megan especially should be commended — both were quite ill the last few days with fever and other symptoms. However, with the exception of the TB hospital, both fully participated in the presentations and happily shared God's love with the Ukrainian children.