

2011 UKRAINE MISSION TRIP

Odessa

After traveling 2 days by air we were met in Odessa by Oleg, a pastor, and Bogdan, our driver for the trip. Our entire luggage had arrived, which is a first when flying LOT into Odessa. We were able to stay at the almost completed seminary on our arrival and departure from Ukraine. It has indoor baths (1 & ½), complete with shower, flush toilets, and a laundry area. We were also surprised to use the WIFI to contact people back home. At the seminary, Pastor Oleg Schewtschenko lives and manages the quarters, supplies, and schedules. He is a young pastor with much enthusiasm and vision. As we toured the grounds, we took pictures of some weather damage to the bricks in the surrounding wall that ROA had sponsored. Repairs will be needed so Oleg will research this before winter. After our mission work, Pastor Alexey and a team from Dneepro stayed overnight here also. We enjoyed the visit with him.

Kagarlyk

Kagarlyk is the small village in western Ukraine, only twenty miles from Moldova, where the Rock of Ages (ROA) mission team has visited for the past four years. This year the team's goals in the village were much the same as they have been in the past, but there were a number of new developments during our time there.

The team met with village children one or two times a day during our three days there. Our groups this year were some of our largest in memory in the village, some times exceeding forty children.

For the first time, the team had a van and driver that stayed with them for the duration of the trip. This was thanks in part to the donations of ROA congregation towards the purchase of van by the Miller family in Mykolaiv. The village of Kagarlyk is small and remote. Having a vehicle that stayed with the team enabled us to expand our mission to new locations near, but outside of, Kagarlyk during times that were not already filled with mission work.

One place that we were able to go this year was an orphanage about thirty minutes from the village. A welcoming staff and about twenty children greeted us. Although they called it an orphanage, this place was more of what we would know as a foster care center. The children here were very excited to be visited and receptive to our messages. The team hopes to keep doors open to visit this location again in the future.

Back in Kagarlyk we all noticed the repairs that had been made to the church, thanks in part to ROA contributions. The church has two rooms in the attic area, which are used for sleeping quarters for guest, including our team. One of these rooms had been repaired. Also, the wall in the sanctuary, which had been deteriorating, was repaired.

The time in Kagarlyk is always one of the more intimate times with the people we see. Each year we see new faces, but some of the old ones return, looking a little older and sometimes bringing new, younger siblings along. The church currently has no pastor and is maintained by an elder named Misha. Traveling pastors visit to perform services. A seminarian named Uri, who worked as the youth director in Kagarlyk last year, hopes to return there after graduation and be the pastor for the church.

Savran

The team was in Savran for 4 days, and visited 3 Lutheran churches, 4 orphanages and a "retirement home." We spent much less time with the church children than last year, allowing us to visit more orphans. We also met with 2 Danish missionaries who have developed a

Russian-language website and print magazine focused on youth ages 13-28. Like last year, when visiting a church or an orphanage, the team presented a bible story in skit form with crafts, songs and games supporting the themes of that bible story.

We brought ROA greetings to these 3 Lutheran churches as well as gifts. All 3 churches received a felt banner with pictures of ROA children, to which were added pictures of that church's children. These were provided so the Ukrainian Sunday Schools can pray for the united family of Christ as depicted by these photos. These "prayer trees" were inspired by Ephesians 3:17, where Paul prays the Ephesian church will have power to understand how great Christ's love is for us. The churches were deeply touched by these prayer trees. Two churches were also given wooden Bible stands for their altars and one church was given a cross crafted specifically by a local Colorado Springs artist after learning this church did not have a cross for their altar. The churches gratefully received all of the gifts.

Of the 4 orphanages, the team had only visited one of them in 2010. At the end of our 2010 mission, the team told the Ukrainian Synod leaders we wanted more visits to orphanages in the future. These visits were good with the children being very responsive and the staff appearing grateful we were there. During these visits, the team shared God's Word with over 150 orphans.

One visit in particular seemed inspired by Isaiah 49:15-16 where God tells us he will not forget us – that he has engraved us on the palms of his hands. Although told this was an orphanage, it looked more like an abandoned village. An overgrown forest surrounded the common square where we met, with a single building on one side. Slowly 2 or 3 kids at a time would arrive followed by a few adults. We started with about 20 kids and adults. When we ended to play games, there were about 50 people of all ages. At the end, the director said she was grateful we had remembered that they existed. She said their own country does not acknowledge them and God must be great for him to bring us to them. After leaving, the translators said this was a cluster of foster care homes, which was why there were no typical institutional buildings. Pastor Kola, the pastor of the Lutheran church in Savran, said he and his members are planning on helping the people who live there to rehab their dilapidated buildings.

The "retirement home" was in effect a warehouse for the elderly. We did note that the workers and some residents were more positive and upbeat than they had been last year. Also, some of the residents remembered our last visit and all appeared happy to see us and hear our Christian message.

A possible future project near Savran is a joint effort between the 3 Lutheran churches. In the small village of Ostrovka, a farm with a house and nearby industrial-type buildings is sale (total price about 8,000 Euros). They want to purchase this property to provide for a residential training program for orphans who reach "maturity" – at age 16 orphans are no longer in the custody of the state. Most are simply turned out with little employment training or a support system. Many of these orphans end up like Misha, one of the Christian orphans the team met in 2010 in Savran. Once Misha reached 16, he went to Odessa to find a job. Pastor Kola and others told Misha this was not a good idea, but Misha left because his employment prospects in Savran were dim. When they last heard, Misha had been imprisoned. The plan is for orphans to have a place like this farm so they can/will stay in the area, gain employment training and be supported and guided by the churches. The team was not directly asked for funds to support this project. However, the evident thoughtful planning and foresight of these church leaders impressed the team. While needing further research and prayer, we believe this project could well be worthy of future support.

Mykolaiv

Although the team has visited Mykolaiv for many years in the past, this year many new opportunities arose for us.

To begin with, the living quarters above the shops had been remodeled. This is one of the projects our congregation gave contributions toward. The changes included a bathroom (with a shower room, and toilet with sink) and a small meeting area with couches. In the past we have gone outside to the businesses for all of these facilities.

Our first day, we were surprised with a scheduled visit to a government office of the Ministry of Education. While there, we were invited to work with all children centers in Ukraine. This is an unprecedented move, not only for our team, but also for Christian mission groups in general. We were shocked to hear that they wanted us to visit an orphan camp of six hundred children. Even Gyena Miller, our host, was surprised. The plan was made to go to this camp on Monday and stay until the end of our time with Miller's.

With only three days to spend in the city of Mykolaiv, we began our mission work immediately after the visit with the Ministry of Education. We visited, for the first time, an orphanage with only children of high school age. 30 youth attended. This was fun as we usually are not able to focus on the older children. Our normal visit to the "men's home" came later that day with about 100 men. Uri, with whom John Yenter has built a very personal friendship, showed personality changes. Gyena informed us this was due to a stroke in the winter. Uri and the many familiar faces among the men were happy to have us visit them again.

Another day we re-visited the T.B. center where we had had so much trouble getting into last year. This year we were welcomed enthusiastically and a few staff joined us for the program. The walls in the room had been newly painted with murals reflecting Christianity.

Later on our mission took us to the Alouda "boys" home. There were only about 25 boys here this year. We recognized two of them from a previous year.

On Sunday we attended Gyena's church and after, lead the Sunday school with ten children and three adults. WE were then invited to a prayer meeting with the church elders. Our usual visit to the other Lutheran church in Mykolaiv did not happen this year. They are without a pastor and have service only twice per month. So instead we free time with the Millers and prepare for our trip the following morning to the camp at the sea.

When we arrived at the Eagle summer camp for orphans, we were pleasantly surprised by the conditions. The leaders were very involved and seemed to have personal roles with the students. The huge camp brings together orphanages from different parts of Ukraine and gives the youth incentives to compete in the arts- often winning national competitions. We stayed at the camp two nights meeting with the children in different small groups about 5 times. There were many opportunities for witness at this camp. Our team is looking forward to future involvement there.

At each place we visited, we presented our program of bible skits and songs and most of the time we incorporated the crafts. At the camp our crafts would have been impossible, so we filled in with songs, weaving bracelets, and photography.

It was incredible building new connections and continuing to strengthen old friendships with people in Mykolaiv. The opportunities we were given this year through the Ministry of Education will impact all future mission trips.