

February 29, 2004

Dear friends,

Jackie and I greet you in the name of Jesus from Krivoy Rog, Ukraine, where we have been since last week. If you feel it's been a while since you read a letter from us, it's because we missed sending one in January. Everything in our office was packed up in boxes for cabinet construction and painting, resulting in no letter going out. So, most of you wouldn't have known that we left the USA for Ukraine on February 19. Here we are, staying in our "home away from home", the little cottage in pastor Gregory's back yard, being overfed by Ukrainian hospitality three times a day.

The highlight of this week has been the pastors' conference, which happens every month during the last week of the month, with pastors and church planters coming from all the ten regions of Ukraine where there are now Churches of Praise. As always, it was a powerful time, with strong praise, and fervent prayer. I hope my teaching was also powerful. I was asked to teach the Blood Covenant, which I was of course happy to do, since it is our mandate from God to teach it wherever we go. The newest generation of church planters had not yet heard this teaching. The time allotted went quickly, but I believe the "spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him" was present with us.

Having taught this once again, my heart is more burdened than ever to get it into print, so that village leaders and families will have this important foundational teaching in their hands. An increase of prayer covering is needed for this project. It seems there is a great spiritual resistance against its completion.

The day after the pastors' conference illustrates a day in the life of Gregory. Following breakfast with Gregory in our little dining room next to the cottage (which before reconstruction housed Marta the goat), we accompanied him to his office, where several of the church planting teams waited for a turn to speak with him. The team of four that we prayed over in October, which was sent to western Ukraine, was first in line. All four had been drug addicts and three had been in prison. After some time in the church rehab center, they were sent as a church planting team.

It was humbling to hear their stories of facing practical obstacles -- getting to villages, figuring out how to eat, how to stay warm, and where to sleep. In some villages, people opened their homes to take in the church planters. Other villages were not so friendly, and the team had to find an empty building or some sort of shelter. Getting wood to build a fire was not easy. It is illegal to cut wood from the forest. The young lady on this team reported how desperate she became in one village, not knowing how they were going to get warm. Since they had started meeting with a few people in a home, and some had repented, a church had begun. She began to wonder if she should recommend to the people to bring an offering of firewood to the meeting, though she knew this was not the way to do things. Trusting God was the way, not asking people. It turned out that the people of their own volition began to bring firewood as an offering, and she was praising the Lord for His faithfulness.

One team reported how a new church cell had grown to nine people. Then, it suddenly dropped to two. Visiting the homes and searching for the reason, they discovered that one family had previously put a curse on the son of another family and he died. The family who had lost their son wasn't about to be in a room with the cursers. This required the church planters to bring about reconciliation between the families in order for them to come to the meetings.

Another team reported how, after spending all day in a village, they had no means of transport to return to the village where they had found lodging, and needed to spend the night in this village. The only place they could find was a half destroyed hut. Since it had a door, they knocked. Inside two homeless people had taken refuge and welcomed them in. They shared their bit of straw with the team, assuming they were also homeless people. Morning came, and off the team went to their next adventure!

These church planters are our heroes!

From the meetings with these planters we went to a nearby neighborhood to a funeral of a 24 yr old man, Andre, the son of Sasha and Tanya, prison outreach directors. Drug addiction had put Andre in prison two times, and during this last imprisonment his health deteriorated and he died in the prison hospital of tuberculosis and cirrhosis of the liver.

We were so thankful that Andre was in one of the ten prisons where there is a Church of Praise. Because of the men in that prison church, he gave his heart to the Lord before he died.

Funerals are done right on the street in front of the family's home. The deceased is in a simple fabric and lace covered box at the roadside, and a lace curtain covers the body with the face exposed. Family, friends and neighbors gather around. At this simple funeral, Gregory and Galena led in prayer and worship. I then preached a short message, and led people in the prayer of repentance.

After this, six men (former drug addicts and ex-prisoners, now believers) lifted the casket on to their shoulders and slowly moved down the street, women following behind them carrying the flower arrangements. Other men followed behind, carrying the casket lid. We all proceeded in this way while singing a hymn to a waiting old canvas covered military troop truck, into which the casket was laid. The cover was placed on the casket, and the immediate family climbed into the back of the truck with the casket. The rest of the friends got on a chartered old bus.

Friends from the rehab center had dug the grave in the cemetery near the main church, where Andre's body was placed, and a lunch was served at the church.

Early evening of the same day, Gregory was late picking us up for the midweek service. A brother had come to his office, frightened and asking for help. His car had bumped into a car full of mafia, and scratched it. The men of the mafia had taken his keys, and were threatening him for money. They allowed him to go get the money. It was obvious to Gregory that this brother should not go back to meet these bandits alone, so he and two big guys from the rehab accompanied the brother. The mafia men yelled and screamed at the brother, and Gregory finally intervened. In his God-given wisdom he calmed the scene and brought about an agreement that satisfied everyone.

At the church service that evening, we heard several wonderful testimonies. One was a boy whose arm had broken and was in a cast for less than a week. After prayer, he was so sure he was healed, he asked for the cast to be removed, and his arm was normal. The next day his doctor confirmed it. Another young man testified of being healed of a sexually transmitted and incurable disease, also confirmed by doctors.

One of the new church planters told her story of being 20 years a drug addict. After prayer and repentance some months ago, she experienced immediate freedom from drugs with absolutely no withdrawal symptoms. She went on to relate her experience of evangelism in the villages, and of God giving her the supernatural ability to share the gospel.

A day like this is not uncommon in the Churches of Praise.

The following day there was a funeral for a seven-month-old baby, the daughter of one of the younger pastors. His wife, who had aids, had died during the birth of this child.

The baby girl had no sign of aids for five months, and then became ill and struggled to live for two months before her death. Since this pastor is also a Bible College student, these deaths affected the college quite deeply.

In the midst of healings and miracles, there are also times of great sorrow.

Church planting fire continues. Only God is the explanation. Pastor Galena, (not Gregory's wife) who has opened more than 60 village churches in the last 18 months, now has five of her leaders ready to go out and do the same. Each of them hopes to open 60 churches in the next year!

Local leaders are now leading many of the new churches in the villages. Some have progressed to the point where people from the village church have already opened other churches themselves.

It is interesting that quite a few people from the rehab center have been put on church planting teams, and finish their rehab as evangelists and church planters – under close supervision and accountability, of course.

Much prayer is needed for this movement. Finances are also needed. The budget is \$30 per month for one year for each new church. Humanly speaking, the sum total that will be needed this year is quite staggering. Perhaps now is your time to give for a church to be planted!

We have a video presentation of the work here now available to you if you would like one. It is either on DVD or VHS tape. Just write your request on the response form that you want one (and which format), and we will send one to you free of charge.

It is possible that Gregory and I will go to Kyrgyzstan (Central Asia) before I go home. Jackie would return to Minnesota ahead of me, on March 10. Pray for wisdom about this.

We continue to thank the Lord for each of you who remember us and pray for us, and give to the work as the Lord enables you. With this expanding move of God, the ministries of prayer and giving need to also expand greatly.

We continue to trust that God will bless you in every way -- in your family, your work, and your service for Him.

With love,

John and Jackie.