

PARTNERS IN MISSIONS

Training National Leaders for "Ministry"

Ray and Pam
Trantham

 **Odessa Missions**
Training National Leaders for "Missions"

Return to Odessa: At the beginning of the month, I returned to Odessa for classes, and plan to remain until the end of the school year. Sasha received special permission to leave Ukraine during February for a three week visit to the States. He and I returned together, while Pam and Regina stayed in Mississippi. All airports in Ukraine remain closed, so we flew in through the neighboring country of Moldova and drove across the border and on to Odessa. In our last newsletter, I mentioned the rising tension between Moldova and Russia. This instability continues and accusations of Russia's interference and attempts to unseat the pro-western government of Moldova persist. The issue of the country of Moldova is especially concerning to us in Odessa, because it is the Odessa region that borders Moldova.

Glad to be back: The last three weeks have been exceptionally busy, but it feels good to be back in my office at the Bible college, as well as working in the church. The winter has been exceptionally mild this year and our house has remained in good shape. Because of power outages, the freezer inside our house had thawed. We have a second freezer, outside in an unheated storage building, which made it through the winter without thawing. In our area, power has remained on, most of the time. Last week there was an airstrike in the Odessa area that knocked out power for less than a day. Our church and Bible college each have a large diesel generator. The first Sunday we had church services using the generator.

Air-raid sirens: As I sat down to write this newsletter, the air-raid sirens began to sound. My office is located in the basement, and is one of the most protected locations on our campus, so I just continue to do my work. The beginning of the week, and about 9:00 AM is the most likely time for air-raids. This is because all public businesses close during air-raids, and this is one of the most disruptive times. I was recently in a grocery store when the air-raid alert sounded, ... everyone immediately left their shopping cart and then left the building. Because most alerts last about an hour, everyone leaves and comes back the next day.

The drone is flying: Our local church has several members serving in the same unit of the military. Our church has committed to assisting these members any way we can during their military service. This often means providing food and personal items for these service members. Because of historical cruelty during the Soviet Union, many Christians have frowned on the military and military service. This is changing, and the church is using the current conflict to evangelize people in the military. By providing assistance to service members, the church is showing itself to be patriotic and is winning a hearing among unchurched people who are looking for hope and answers. Two weeks ago, it was announced that the servicemen in our church had asked the church to buy their military unit a surveillance drone. They explained that they were responsible for guarding a certain area, but they had no way to see their surroundings. The drone they requested cost \$3,500 and it was uncertain how church members would respond. We took up a special offering and the following Sunday it was announced, "You gave the full amount, the drone has been bought, and **the drone is flying.**"



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Humanitarian aid and Military Chaplains: As I mentioned, the church has historically kept its distance from the military. (and police) The church sees the current crisis as an opportunity to minister to people in need. Many churches, and Christian organizations like our Bible college, have opened their facilities to refugees. Churches have become one of the major distributors of international humanitarian aid. Our Bible college campus has become a regional center for receiving, and then distributing humanitarian aid. Ukrainian churches are more organizationally connected to each other than American churches. This "structure" serves as a ready-made network for the distribution of aid. The rise of "Military Chaplains" is also a new development to minister to those in need. Trained church leaders, who do not wish to serve in active combat, are now serving as military chaplains. Our Bible college recently brought in specialist and hosted a conference on "Overcoming War Trauma." This was for area church leaders as well as military chaplains. Here is what some people said about the conference:



- *Valery: "I serve disabled people. When you deal with real cases, you usually have many questions. For me, this seminar was an opportunity to answer them. And in fact, I did get some answers. Still, I have some new questions now. However, I know that this is how things usually work when you get deeper into the issue."*
- *Tatyana: "I can say that some things were revolutionary for me... In our church a small group of believers regularly visits wounded soldiers in a military hospital. It is not just their bodies that are wounded. It is their souls as well. The material I received was what I really needed."*
- *Roman: "I am a psychologist. What I really liked in this seminar is how well the medical information was combined with spiritual truths and a Christian worldview."*
- *Neonila: "I decided to apply some of the things I heard to my personal life."*
- *Another: "When I come back home, I will start a small group from among women whose sons or husbands are now in the war."*
- Our Bible college plans to start a one-year training program for people serving in this field.



An additional note: I have been asked by concerned American Christians about reports that the Ukrainian president is cracking down on the church and restricting religious freedoms. I am aware that there are some American news stories that report a loss of religious freedom in Ukraine, but I would always urge "verification." There are four things that I can say as a first-hand observer in Ukraine:

- The English reports that I have seen claiming restriction of religious freedom, have offered simplistic explanations without a consideration of the context.
- The reports that I have seen claiming restriction of religious freedom, have not matched my personal experience in Ukraine. (I formally visited the church in Kiev that has been in the news.)
- I have heard no such restrictive claims by the church leaders that I work with on a regular basis.
- The Orthodox Church in question, is known for close political ties to Russia, and support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

