

REFLECTIONS

MARCH 2020

Dear family and friends,

Yesterday, to get ready for writing this newsletter, I prepared a record of “Activities to Report”. My organized list started with our return to Barnaul on Thanksgiving Day last November. (We had been in the States visiting most of you last fall, giving personal reports of our mission activity.) Today, I realized my last written newsletter was distributed in March ... one year ago. This stirs several emotions:

- I am ashamed to have so publicly failed in my goals to keep you all connected to the work throughout the year. You deserve to be treated better.
- I am amazed at your grace and faithfulness. You continue to remember us regularly and support our efforts with gifts and prayers despite a lack of written information. You demonstrate such faith!
- I am grateful to God for His generosity and faithfulness. He has chosen to entrust His important work to us imperfect followers. And, even when we fall short of what is right and good, He continues to provide and guide so that what we do manage to accomplish brings Him deserved glory.



In my defense, I think there are circumstances that should be considered. Since my goal was to produce quarterly newsletters, you should have received one in June, September, and December. In June we were overwhelmed with final preparations for summer camp. In September, we were about to visit you in person. And, in December we had “just” finished visiting you all and I was being treated for pneumonia.

Thank You! Anyway, thank you for your grace and understanding. I’m confident that you know that if you ever have questions about what’s happening over here, you can always write or call and get a personal update. And, if you are ever wondering about our “silent” partnership, please assume the best — we’re really busy with the opportunities God has placed before us. For example, today is Friday. This evening, the brothers who serve as leaders in the church will gather in our home 7:00-10:00 p.m. for planning worship assemblies and future events taking care of member’s needs. Sonia will prepare supper for everyone since most brothers are coming in after work. Tomorrow at 9:00 a.m., Sonia will have a Bible study with one sister and then host the ladies weekly Bible study from 10:00 to 12:00. Then, from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m., seven church servants will gather for another session of Pastoral Care training. (See photo on right.)

And, from 5:30 to 10:00 p.m., the youth group will eat and talk and fellowship here. (See photo on left below.) At 9:00 a.m. on Sunday, I’ll teach the teen’s class and then speak at the worship assembly. And after the assembly, we’ll have a parent’s fellowship meeting to launch a new format for the teens ministry.



That is our plan for this weekend—and a good example of many weekends we’ve experienced since the end of January. It’s a lot to handle, but it also is our privilege to serve. And, the truth is, we cannot do any of it without the LORD and His blessings—many of which come through all of you. We share this detail so that if some day in the future you are wondering why you haven’t heard from us as often as both you and I desire, then you will say a prayer that will strengthen me so I can write letters, too.

So, now I would like to present that list of “Reportable Activities” to give you an overview of the FOUNDATIONS ministry activities for which you have prayed and provided these past few months:

November

- Returned to Barnaul from USA on Thanksgiving Day (very sick)

December

- Received treatment and recovered from pneumonia (again)
- Assisted brother’s with preparations of the church’s Christmas and New Year’s celebrations
- Assisted the camp team with preparations and plans for the winter’s event “Footprints in the Snow”
- Updated my financial records of Upstate Church of Christ’s “Russian Ministry” donations

January

- Accomplished “Footprints in the Snow” in Chelyabinsk
 - Served as co-counselor for the younger teens group
 - Also, assisted with management and flow of related finances
 - 74 people were involved from 3 or 4 years old to 60+. About 30 were teens from at least 8 cities located in 3 of the 4 "sections" of Russia - European, Urals, and Siberia (almost the width of the continental U.S.A.). All ages had classes. Teens studied and discussed "Mythbusting" - Biblical answers to myths about God, his church, and ourselves. Everyone involved, except those from the church in Degtyarsk and Yekaterinburg have connections to the summer event "Footprints in the Sand."
- Planned and coordinated Pastoral Care Training by missionary Joel Petty from St. Petersburg, Russia
 - Negotiated schedule, communicated goals, recruited committed participants
- Began planning/preparing for a leadership training course and “Church = Family” seminar in March – a joint venture with Milwaukee Avenue Church of Christ (Lubbock, TX)
- Began Pastoral Care training taught by Joel Petty
- Prepared annual “Russian Ministry” receipt letters for Upstate Church of Christ
- Prepared the Barnaul church’s 2019 Budget Report and 2020 Budget Proposal
- Prepared curriculum and launched a new study of Malachi with the teens group in Barnaul
- Started planning for launching a new teens ministry season offering separate classes and events for school-aged teens and college-aged young adults



February

- Presented the Barnaul church’s 2019 Budget Report and 2020 Budget Proposal
- Continued Pastoral Care training taught by Joel Petty
- Reviewed and revised summer camp craft designs
- Researched and ordered summer camp craft materials
- Confirmed camp location and issued preliminary announcement of camp dates (05-18 July)
- Assisted brothers with the preparations for Women’s Day (March 8) celebration for the church
- Participated in Q&A session about creation at a local kindergarten where a church member works.

March (through 14th)

- Continued Pastoral Care training taught by Joel Petty
- Assisted brothers with the Women’s Day (March 8) celebration for the church
- Updated forms and letters and officially announced the beginning of summer camp recruiting and registration
- Officially announced and launched the new teens ministry season
- Updated FOUNDATIONS partnership list
- Prepared and distributed this newsletter (Hurray!)

Joseph’s other activities

- Preaching (shared with other brothers)
- Teaching teens class
- Men’s Prayer Breakfasts on Mondays
- Brother’s Council meetings on Fridays
- Personal Counseling with individuals
- Updating and revising passport, visas and residency documents

Sonia’s mission-related activities

- 2 mentoring studies with teens
- 1 personal Bible with adult sister in Christ
- Hostess for Sister’s Bible Study every Saturday morning (restarted and now with 8 participants!)
- Hostess for Sister’s 2 Masterclass Events: On March 1st, the topic was “Italian Cooking”
- Hostess for most weekly Brother’s Council meetings, preparing and providing supper
- Interpreting for Joseph’s sermons
- Translating for Joseph’s Russian correspondence
- Administrator for summer camp

Such a list (see previous page) is good for communicating quickly all that has been happening during the past few months. But it isn't very personal. So, I want to finish with a people story that will remind you why we are all involved in this ministry.

On the Sunday when the sisters were having their Italian Cooking masterclass in our home, I stayed behind after the worship assembly with a few other brothers. We decided to eat lunch at the cafeteria that is in the same building where we rent the church's assembly hall. Three times while we were eating and talking—sometimes in English—another customer walked by and looked at us intently. As we stood up to leave, that customer approached and introduced himself. He had heard us speaking English and asked where we were from. When he learned I was an American, he invited me to join the group of English students that was gathering at another table in the cafeteria. I joined them and introduced myself, mentioning that I was a member of the church that met upstairs.

I had never met any of these young people, mostly high school or early college age—except for the two organizers, including Pavel who had invited me to join them. Polina sat at the other end of the long table; there were several people between us. When she learned I was a believer, she immediately dominated the conversation. She asked, "What church do you belong to?" "What is your church's core belief?" "How is your church different from other churches?" She told me, "I've talked to others, but consider myself an atheist right now." I answered her amazing questions only briefly, sensing Pavel was uncomfortable with this unexpected direction of conversation. Others asked why I had moved to Russia and what I did in the church. I talked about my first interaction with Russian children and how their lack of basic Bible knowledge motivated me to move here and serve as a teacher. I briefly mentioned our teens group and summer camp as part of "what I do". Then I said, "I'd be happy to talk more about the church and our beliefs" looking at Polina because she was asking most of the questions. She was quick again, asking, "When? When can we talk?" It was a personal question, not a request to meet again with the group. I left with her phone number and since then we've exchanged messages, setting up a time for her and a friend to come visit Sonia and me so that we can "talk more about it".

Of all the projects and activities listed on the previous page, this short spontaneous interaction gave me the most joy related to fulfillment of purpose. Our other activities are important; some even quite fun. But sharing faith with a real seeker ... that's an amazing experience. I look forward to seeing what God will do.

It may not seem like it these days, but there really are seekers out there—even among the younger generation. There is someone to help, someone to encourage, someone to teach. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

Thank you for helping us be in position ... ready and available to talk with Polina, ... involved in organizing and conducting seminars, ... engaged in teaching classes and mentoring teens. This is the LORD's ministry that He is accomplishing through us. I hope you are encouraged by all that has been happening.

And there is more to come—things to pray about:

- Summer camp "Footprints in the Sand" July 05-18
- ScreamFree Parenting seminar (with Sonia) in Crimea May 1-4, in partnership with local churches there and also the church in Saint Petersburg, Russia.
- ScreamFree Parenting and all-new ScreamFree Marriage seminars in Irkutsk, October 2020
- ScreamFree Parenting seminar in Biysk (Pending; date TBD)

Thank you for your continued partnership and interest. May you be blessed by the news of the LORD's work. Grace and peace to you in the name of our LORD, Jesus.

Joseph, Sonia, and Mason Rhodes
Volunteer missionaries

An elder suggested I include this statement for your convenience:

If you would like to be a partner in this ministry financially, send your gift to "Upstate Church of Christ, 1136 Brown Road, Anderson, SC, 29621" with the memo: "Russian Missions".