

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

APRIL 2015

TRANSCARPATHIA, UKRAINE

Blessings and Peace!

Greetings! We trust this letter finds you well and enjoying the daily richness of life which is ours through the grace of Christ. Last week we celebrated Easter, remembering the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ and remembering, as we must do daily, the grace and salvation that

we have received through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We hope you all had a blessed Easter with family and

church family. We enjoyed celebrating Easter with our Brothers and Sisters in Christ here in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. We hope you had a blessed year thus far as winter turns to spring. In this letter, we hope to provide you with an update. It is our hope and prayer that we can, through God's grace alone, serve the people of these Eastern European communities in both Hungary and Ukraine, and

bring glory to God, serving Him to further His kingdom.

Unexpected Blessings: In the end of January, Stacey and I were able to return to Ukraine. We are so thankful to be here working and to be back in this community of believers here in

Transcarpathia, Ukraine. It is such

a blessing to be among friends and students whose lives we enjoy being a part of. We are thankful to God to be back

and we are thankful that western Ukraine is peaceful, despite what is happening in the eastern part of the country. We will be here in Ukraine and in Eastern Europe until August of this year. Our stays in Ukraine have been dictated these past two years by my health. After being diagnosed with non-Hodgkin Lymphoma last February and receiving radiation therapy, we returned to Ukraine for the spring and summer months. We returned

He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Luke 24:46-47

OUR MISSION

International Christian Community Development seeks to bring God glory through obedience to the Great Commission given to us by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In humble service, through God's grace alone, we strive to set a Christ-like example, promoting a Biblical world view in an effort to encourage the seed of faith to not only grow but to flourish. We seek to build relationships with those we serve, pointing them towards Christ. Recognizing that we are in fact foreigners, we work with and partner with local Pastors, teachers, churches and organizations to support their efforts and outreach.

to the U.S. in August for checkups and while my tests, labs, and scans came back clean, a biopsy taken of a second growth on my head came back again as non-Hodgkin Lymphoma cancer. In December I received four weeks of intravenous drug treatments with a drug that is similar to chemotherapy, but thankfully not as harsh as chemotherapy. I feel great and we will wait until August when I must

return for more tests to see if all the cancer is gone. Openness and sharing with others about sickness is uncommon in Eastern Europe and it has been remarkable how often I have been asked to speak in both Hungary and Ukraine to groups of people about the cancer and how God has worked in my life through this. This sickness has been an unexpected blessing as a way to share the Gospel with people and to give an account and testimony of God's grace in our lives.

The Autumn Months: This past autumn Stacey and I both enjoyed our time back in Michigan and North Carolina, being back among our home congregations and church homes. It was great to be near family and friends and we were very thankful for this time. We are also thankful to all the friends and family who provided us with lodging and employment. I was again able to work during the harvest season. I enjoyed working on farms and helping with the corn, soybean, and cotton harvests. Stacey was able to do a variety of jobs. She was a nurse, waitress, secretary, and janitor on any given day. We are thankful for the jobs and opportunities we were able to have.

Transcarpathia: While living in Ukraine we live and work among a minority Hungarian population in the most westerly province of Ukraine, Transcarpathia or Zakarpats'ka. This area has a long and storied Calvinist heritage, leaving a small and struggling bastion of the Reformation here in

Eastern Europe. For a millennium this area of Ukraine was part of Hungary; today this heritage and tradition still lives on among the 170,000 or so ethnic Hungarians who still live here. The past one hundred years has not been so kind to Transcarpathia. The turmoil and tumultuous history has brought nothing but hardship, blood, and heartache. This area has been five different nations since the outbreak of WWI one hundred years ago. Anyone blessed with longevity, and has seen the last century pass, has been a citizen of the Austrian/Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, USSR, and today Ukraine, all while possibly living in the same village and home they were born in. Anyone in the upper 90's or older (there are not many) could have remarkably lived through WWI, the Russian Revolution, WWII, 70 years of communism under the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and now the chaotic years of post-communism where Ukraine now finds itself. Transcarpathia is a cosmopolitan place, with Ukrainians, Hungarians, Rusyns, Roma (Gypsies), Russians, Hutsuls, Romanians, and Slovaks all calling this little place on the map home. This remarkable diversity in this corner of the world, which few places in Europe can rival, makes this area a fascinating place of intrigue that few people have heard about. We work primarily with the Reformed Hungarian population, but changing situations have opened new doors and

opportunities to work and minister to an increasing amount of Ukrainians and Roma.

New Opportunities: Two new opportunities have been made possible for us by a grant from the Zondervan Family Foundation. We are planning a Bible Retreat Weekend in the spring, dates May 1-3. This Bible Retreat has been made possible through this grant. Please keep this in your prayers. We will write more about this Bible Retreat Weekend in our next newsletter.

The second new opportunity has been an outreach program that began in October in a Roma camp in the city of Beregszasz. Beregszasz is a fascinating city. Historically it has been a city with a Jewish and Hungarian population and heritage. Today it is a city of officially around 30,000 people, half claiming Hungarian heritage, the other half claiming Ukrainian heritage, many being bilingual in both Ukrainian and Hungarian. Beregszasz has an unofficial population of around 5,000 Roma (commonly known as Gypsies) living in a massive camp, with deplorable living conditions on the outside of the city.

Making inroads into the camp to address the spiritual and the physical needs of the camp is a daunting and overwhelming task. With what feels like a small battle in a war on physical and spiritual poverty in the camp, we have partnered with a young Dutch lady working in the camp by the name of Mirjam, to develop a small

outreach program. The program consists of a weekly meeting of 7-15 Roma teenagers and young adults who come for an English lesson, Bible devotions, games and activities. Two university students, Bogi and Csilla, go one evening a week to teach English and to run these activities under the guidance of ourselves and Mirjam. Some of you may know Bogi, who last year lived with Eric's parents and studied for one year in McBain, Michigan. One aim of the program is to provide these teenagers and young adults with basic English knowledge, which is a difficult task as many of them do not know how to read or write in their mother tongue. More importantly, the goal is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, showing a Christ-like example, mentoring, and attempting to bridge the racial and cultural gap between the Roma and the rest of the Hungarian/Ukrainian community who share the city of Beregszasz as their home.

These ladies do a remarkable job and we are very proud of them. We are also very thankful to the Zondervan Family Foundation for making this possible. This opportunity has also led to other opportunities as we were invited to assist in planning, as well as to take part in and speak at an afternoon seminar in the camp. Low self-esteem, troubled relationships and physical confrontation are all common characteristics of the Roma community. The seminar addressed behavioral issues

towards ourselves and others. The theme was addressing how God sees us when we are in Christ, how we can see ourselves when we are in Christ, and how we can see others when we are in Christ. Recently, we have also been invited to the Roma Youth Group for Eric to share about his experience with cancer. Please stay tuned to our website and blog for pictures and accounts of these activities in the camp.

English: One of our primary tasks here in Ukraine is teaching conversational English. We teach English in a variety of setting and schools. In the summer months we are involved in a series of English and outreach camps, but during the winter and spring months we are able to teach English in two Reformed High Schools and in a local college. Students come voluntarily to practice their English: to practice both listening and comprehension, and to practice speaking with native speakers.

It is our hope and prayer that we can not only teach conversational English, but that we can also use this as a means to befriend, serve, and witness to the young people here in Ukraine. It is our aim to build relationships and friendships with these students, to be a Christ-like example and witness, and to be someone they can talk to and trust. Students in the high schools come for conversational English classes during their study halls and free time. We have enjoyed going to the Nagyberég Reformed Lyceum,

as well as holding lessons at the Peterfalva Reformed Lyceum in our home village. We also have enjoyed going to the Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Iskola, a local college/university, in the city of Beregszasz once a week for a conversational English lesson. We enjoy being reconnected with past students from both Peterfalva and Nagyberég who are now studying at a university level.

The conversational English classes cover a wide range of topics and activities. I hope to try to blog in the future and write in more depth in the next newsletter about the individual schools and locations of our English classes as well as to highlighting some specific classes we have conducted. The students learn grammar and English in formal English classes in their weekly studies at the school. Because of this we try to focus our classes on being interactive with the students: teaching English through conversation and role play, games and activities, songs, power point presentations, video clips, and even through hand crafts and projects.

Bible Studies: Monday evenings are a time of fellowship and worship for us and a small group of about 10 university students and young adults in the nearby city of Beregszasz. Every Monday this international group of American, Hungarians, Dutch and Germans meet to visit, play games, worship and sing, pray together, share

about what is going on in each other's lives and our walk with the Lord, and to study the book of James. We meet at the Kriszpont, a local Church Youth Center, which has a second story that also doubles as a Christian Dormitory for around 15 girls attending the local university. The group consists of former students and colleagues we have known from teaching in the high schools, current university students, and volunteers working here in Transcarpathia. James and his teachings on grace and works, with his practical and frank insights are very applicable to our lives and has long been one of my favorite books of the New Testament. It has been a joy to study this book of God's Word with this group of young people, getting to know them, and building each other up in faith and love. We are thankful for this opportunity.

We recently have been able to begin a second Bible study in the city of Ungvar (or Uzghorod in Ukrainian), the capital and largest city of Transcarpathia. Ungvar is home to the National University of Transcarpathia. We received permission to begin a Bible Study in a community room of a massive 5,000 student dormitory at the university. We have been encouraged by strong turnout of near equal numbers of Hungarian and Ukrainian students. A small number of students in the dorm are Hungarian students, some of whom are former high school students of ours, and who have been eager helpers and recruiters for this

endeavor. We have only gone twice so far so we will write more on this in the next newsletter.

Experiencing New Cultures: I have always found that immersion into other cultures can sharpen faith, making one more articulate and aware of what one believes and what values one holds to. At home, surrounded by friends and comfort, routine and like-minded people, we are not often stretched out of our comfort zone. Being abroad, it does not take long before we find ourselves meeting someone or in a situation where we have to give an account of who we are and what we believe. I have also found living in another culture can heighten our awareness of our need for God, and the need to put complete confidence and faith in God and not in ourselves. Countless times we find ourselves in situations, at the mercy of strangers or people we hardly know, depending on God's provision, quickly realizing our own strength and ability is not adequate.

International Student Program: Over the past few years we have enjoyed a relationship and a partnership with both Pella Christian High School, in Pella, Iowa and Northern Michigan Christian High School in McBain, Michigan. We have been very grateful and appreciative to both of these schools for their generosity, commitment, and willingness to work with us in an International Student Program. We have been able to send a number of students

from the Reformed Lyceum of Peterfalva to both Pella and McBain where they have been warmly welcomed and received by the schools and by kind and gracious host families. The students who have participated in this program have returned with polished English language skills as well as invaluable skills and knowledge gained from the experience of spending a year abroad in a new and different culture.

It has been the aim and hope of our International Student Program to provide this opportunity to better educate and equip these students to serve God in their home communities. It has been our hope to see these young people return from their year in the States with a heart for the Gospel and a desire to be God-fearing leaders, teachers, business men, pastors, fathers and mothers, (where ever God calls them) that Transcarpathia, Ukraine and the society here so desperately needs. We praise God that we have seen this happen with these students. We have been able to rely on our former exchange students in many different capacities, such as helping us with English camps, assisting us in organizing university Bible studies, working with Dutch mission groups, and many other tasks. They truly have developed into exemplary young men and women that these communities so badly are in need of.

We will highlight only the two most recent exchange students

from the 2013/2014 school year. Krisztina and Bogi, have been instrumental to us here in our ministry since their return to Transcarpathia this past June. While university students, one has also become an English teacher/Sunday school teacher/Mentor for Roma youth in a nearby Roma (Gypsy) camp (Bogi). They have worked with mission groups from the Netherlands on Vacation Bible Schools for Roma children (both Bogi and Krisztina). They have worked with us on English camps (both Bogi and Krisztina). They have helped us organize a new Bible Study in Ungvar, (Krisztina). They have helped us organize a Bible study among university students from the local college in Beregszasz (Bogi). Krisztina has worked as a translator for researchers from University of Maastricht who have been researching the effects of alcoholism here in Transcarpathia. Both of these young ladies have also been highly involved and active in their local youth groups, living in such a way that is a testimony to Christ. We are very proud of these ladies as well as all of the past International students. It is really exciting to see how the Lord is using their gifts for His purposes and to further His kingdom. We are excited again to have a student this year at Pella Christian. We ask for your prayers for these students as they seek God's will and direction for their lives.

The Situation in Ukraine: Many people have asked about the situation in Ukraine. This winter has been a difficult one for many in Ukraine. War has raged with thousands dying and millions displaced in Eastern Ukraine. A cease fire has been holding since the end of February and the far eastern part of the country has been much quieter and more peaceful in recent weeks. The eastern part of the country has been devastated and the entire country has seen the effects of this conflict in the form of a collapsed economy and currency, inflation, sons and husbands being taken into the army, separation of families, mass exodus of people from Ukraine, and creating a hopelessness for many people in their future and direction of their country. We are thankful that in Western Ukraine (1,000 miles) from the war zone it has been quiet and peaceful and we have been in no danger. We are also thankful that this conflict is not jeopardizing or affecting our ministry and summer camp plans. Ukraine needs your prayers. Please pray for peace, healing, and that God can use this terrible situation for His glory and the spread of the Gospel. Please visit our website for a much more in depth account of the situation in Ukraine.

English Camp Volunteers

Needed: We are still looking for volunteers for our English camps this coming summer. We are looking to organize and take part in six camps this summer from June

4 - August 3. If you or anyone you know is looking for an adventure abroad and an opportunity to serve this summer, please contact us. Volunteers can come for as short as one week or as long as two months. Please visit our website for more information on our summer English camps as well as in depth blogs and stories about culture, our work, and the situation in Ukraine at www.iccdabroad.org

Parting Greeting: We are humbled to be working Ukraine and Hungary. We are thankful for the call to work here and to serve in this community. God has richly blessed us these past few months opening doors and bringing new opportunities to share the Good News of the Gospel. Please pray for continued opportunities to reach out to young people of Ukraine and Hungary, being a Christ-like example to them, building relationships with them, sharing the gospel and encouraging them in their faith. We thank-you and are grateful for your continued support, prayers and encouragement as we serve here; we could not be here without you. We ask for your continued prayers on behalf of the church and community here, as their struggle continues. Please also pray for peace to prevail in eastern Ukraine and for the country during these difficult economic times. We find assurance knowing that God uses all things to further His purposes and to further His kingdom.

In Christ,

Eric and Stacey Hoeksema