

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

JULY 2015

TRANSCARPATHIA, UKRAINE

Blessings and Peace to you!

Blessing and Peace is an English translation of the Hungarian phrase *Áldás béke*. This phrase has long been a source of fascination for me. It is a greeting used between members of the Hungarian Reformed Church community. The idea of having a unique greeting used especially among Christians, and identifying you as a person of faith, was novel to me. It is one of the most common expressions you will hear in the village of Peterfalva where we live. The words are quite possibly over used, the weight and significance of asking for God's peace and blessing to be upon those who you meet loses some of its sincerity in the overuse of this common expression. Nevertheless there is something special and unique in the greeting. I like the concept of a special greeting shared between brothers and sisters in Christ, asking for the Lord's peace and blessings to be granted to each other.

We hope and pray this letter finds you in good health and enjoying the last days of spring. The changing of the seasons is again a reminder of God's faithfulness and

provision granted to us through His mercy. The beautiful creation around us testifies of God and His handy work. Daily we are reminded that our strength is not in ourselves, but found only in God. That our hope is found in Christ alone is a message that we hope and pray our lives testify too, and that God uses us to be Christ-like examples sharing the Good News of the Gospel and encouraging the faith of the people of the communities of Transcarpathia, Ukraine. We hope this letter provides an update on our work and calling here in this corner of Eastern Europe.



This time of year is a transition period as the routine of the school year comes to a halt and the busy summer camp season soon begins. We are always grateful for a couple of weeks during this period to rest and reflect on the events of

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.

the past semester and to prepare for the most intense and busiest time for us, the upcoming summer English and outreach camps. This year new doors have opened and we will

be a part of and organizing six different camps with hundreds of young people in three different countries.

Time marches on. It is difficult to believe how quick time can pass by. Winter seems but a moment

ago and here we find ourselves in July with summer here in earnest. The days became longer as spring quickly passed by. Spring is possibly my favorite time of year here in Ukraine. The beauty of a Ukrainian spring is surprising and astounding as winter disappears into a sea of green and color. Fruit trees of many varieties grow in abundance, coloring the landscape in spring with vivid colors of pink, white, and red, their blossoms providing the promise of delicious fruit later in the season. Tulips, roses, and many other flowers of all sorts and shades grow in perfection. Winter this year was relatively mild with little snow; it could hardly be described as a Pasternak winter. Dr. Zhivago painted my imagination of what a winter in this part of the world was like. Thankfully these expectations have not been fulfilled and my experiences of Ukrainian winters so far with the exception of a few extremely cold snaps have not been that dire. As much as I love this country and this part of the world it never ceases to amaze how bleak winter can sometimes be with its gray days and backdrops of drab crumbling Communist architecture, winter darkness, and pervasive Transcarpathian mud. The Hungarians in the local community live on Central European time instead of Ukraine time which makes for 3:30pm sunsets in the peak of winter.

Not wanting to sound like a pessimist, I must also confess that

winter is intriguing and I am thankful for it. A fresh blanket of snow and the smell of wood smoke lingering over the village can be a beautiful site. I am also thankful for the time and quiet evening winter provides for visiting and building relationships with students. It is fascinating to watch a rural agrarian society change with the season. Everyone seemingly hibernates away the long dark days of winter, while in the bright days and long evenings of summer, sleep is forgotten and people seem to work around the clock in their fields and gardens. Summer is here, and we are thankful for the evidences of God's promises and faithfulness and thankful for the opportunities that await us.

New Opportunities. In our past newsletter we wrote about new opportunities that have been made possible for us through a grant from the Zondervan Family Foundation. The Zondervan Family Foundation is a small non-profit organization that supports and provides grants to other Christian non-profit organizations working in the field. We wrote in our last newsletter about the first new opportunity we have been able to begin. The project in the Roma camp continues, please look back at the previous newsletter or look on our website for detailed accounts about the program in the Roma camp. In this newsletter I will write about the second opportunity made possible through this grant, an English language Bible Retreat.

The weekend of May 1-3 we traveled deep into the Carpathian Mountains of Ukraine with around 45 young adults and students for an incredible weekend of fellowship, singing, Bible studies, prayer, and hiking. The group consisted of Hungarians, Ukrainians, four Americans, and three Dutch (aid and mission workers living here in Ukraine) who shared English as a common language. The majority of the participants were local Transcarpathian students, but a group of seven traveled over five hundred miles from Kyiv to join us for the weekend. Two participants even hitch hiked from Kyiv to join us for this retreat. We were able to rent a bus and travel to as a group to the Ukrainian mountain city of Yasinya. There we were able to stay in different guest houses with the home owners providing meals for us. Mornings were spent in small group devotions.



Saturday afternoon the entire group did a rainy seven mile hike through the mountains. The rain let up just enough to allow us to build a fire to cook lunch. Saturday night we were able to use a local school for an evening of testimonies, singing, and Bible Study.

The Lord richly blessed this weekend and it is our hope and prayer that for years to come the fruit of this weekend will continue to show. Many of the participants came from Christian backgrounds and families, but for just as many, the message of the Gospel and Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross was something they had never heard. It is our hope and prayer that this retreat was not only a great time of fellowship, but also that the faith of many was strengthened and that God planted seeds of faith in many others, and that Holy Spirit will work in them leading them to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.



Incredible conversations were had and we look forward to following up on many new relationships and continuing to share the Gospel with students who came with us for this Bible Retreat. Reading the Bible, discussing God's promise, praying, sharing our faith and worshipping the One true God from four different cultures and languages was an incredible experience for us, and we are very thankful for this opportunity.

University Bible Studies. This week and next week will mark the end of the year for our university Bible studies. Exams and summer are coming soon. In Beregszasz, a

university town near us, we have enjoyed studying the book of James with a group of students and young adults. It has been a smaller group this year but a very loyal and dedicated group and many nights have been filled with great conversations, Bible studies, games and fellowship. Please see our last newsletter for more detailed information. In March we were 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. It takes about six hours round trip to travel there so we have limited it to an every other week Bible Study. The turnout has been great and we have strongly been encouraged by the students we have met and have come to know through these evenings spent there. It is our hope and prayer that God will use these opportunities to lead young people to Him and to strengthen their faith. Many of the students

who came on the Bible retreat were students we met through this Bible study. For a number of reasons we chose to travel to

Ungvar for the Bible study with public transportation and to spend the night at a local youth hostel.



We wanted to have sufficient time and not feel like we had to rush home at night, we also wanted to keep the kilometers and the wear and tear of the Ukrainian roads off our van, and lastly we thought it would be interesting to experience and see how so many locals travel around on the public bus. We enjoyed these evening of fellowship, singing, and Bible study and we were encouraged and blessed by an invitation to join a small group of students for a prayer hour they faithfully have every Wednesday night in a dorm room.

New Faces and Changing Dynamics. We have continued to hold English classes in two Reformed High schools and the local university in nearby Beregszasz. We have enjoyed these classes and the opportunity and we are thankful for the doors that are opened through English classes which allow us to build relationships and get into the lives of many students. We were invited to begin an English club on Tuesday evening in Beregszasz which has been regularly attended by students, children, and adults. This too has introduced us to many new people. If I had categorize and described the last months, the

repeating theme has been opportunities to meet so many new people this past spring and winter through, classes, English club, and Bible studies. I can't really recall any other period of time in Ukraine when we have had so many opportunities to meet so many new people. One changing dynamic for us has been that the majority of the new faces we have met this year are Ukrainian and not Hungarian. This in part can probably be attributed to the conflict in eastern Ukraine as we continue to see many Hungarians, especially students and young adults, leave for other countries. It is sad to see so many Hungarians leave and while the focus of our work here continues to be ministering and building up the minority Hungarian populations, it has also been a rewarding experience to meet and be introduced to so many Ukrainians and their language and culture these past months.



Mission to the Roma. This spring we have tried to continue to reach out to the local Roma community. With limited success we have been able to go on a somewhat regular basis with a group of students from Peterfalva Reformed High School to the local Roma camp to

conduct a student led Vacation Bible school program of Bible stories, singing, praying, and games. We were encouraged by a core group of students who faithfully came with us. The Roma children enjoyed these afternoons and we hope little by little the racial divide between Roma and non Roma may be broken down through these afternoons. It is our prayer that the students will see the Roma children as who they are, children. And that through their example, their family and fellow students will come to see past the stereotypes and dirty faces and see the Roma as children of God made in His image. We were disappointed that due to our schedule and the school schedule that we could not make this program a more regular part of our weekly schedule.

Developing Patience amidst Frustration. As in any period of life the last months have not been without their frustrations and difficulties. For many years we partnered with the Peterfalva Reformed High School with a program to take students one or two afternoons a week to a local hospital to care for abandoned babies. This program was always very popular with students and it was encouraging to see them develop relationships with babies and toddlers and to see student dedication for this program. It was also encouraging to see the development in the babies who were mostly abandoned with the exception of one afternoon a

week when the students came to spend time with them. Two years ago the hospital told us we must stop coming and ever since we have been looking for a way back in. We were introduced to a local Hungarian man who has good relationships at the hospital through working for a Dutch organization that provides basic needs like diapers which the hospital does not always get from the Ukraine State. He diligently worked with us and advised us at trying to make this program rise from the ashes. We wrote a detailed letter and proposal to the hospital had it translated into Ukrainian, went for a meeting with the hospital director, all to in the end be denied and turned down again. Please pray that maybe this opportunity will still develop or a new door will open somewhere else.

Another source of frustration in the past months comes from an unlikely source: Holidays. Ukraine has an incredible amount and variety of holidays. Religious holidays such as Easter and Pentecost are significant three day holiday weekends here. Ukraine, as an Orthodox nation, most years celebrates Easter and Pentecost on different dates than the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. This results in all religious holidays being celebrated twice. The Religious holidays are joined by old Socialist holidays such as May Day and Women's Day, and historical holidays like Victory Day. While we are thankful for holidays, especially Easter and Pentecost, the vast

amount of holidays makes the March-May period extremely difficult to keep to a routine schedule of events. We have found that continuity is important for Bible studies and classes and the ever-changing school schedules have made it challenging to keep to a routine.

The Blessing of Fellowship. In April we enjoyed a visit to Kyiv. We went to visit four friends working with the Navigators organization in Kyiv. They came and helped us last year with our Peterfalva English camp and it was good to see them and to see a little of their work and outreach sharing the Gospel with university students in Kyiv. We had not visited Kyiv in some years and it was both interesting and sad to see the changes occurring during these difficult and political times here in Ukraine. Two of the Navigators (Jon Bierma and Katie Price) joined us for our Bible retreat. Helping us as small groups leaders and bringing a group of students from Kyiv with them for the Bible retreat. We have enjoyed getting to know them and partnering with them, and learning about their work in Kyiv.

The Situation in Ukraine. The situation here in Ukraine has thankfully gotten better. Fighting and skirmishes continue in Eastern Ukraine but for the most part, the cease fire signed in February has held. Tensions are still high and it remains to be seen if this "peaceful" trend continues. The economy and the Ukrainian Hryvnia (currency) have stabilized

to an extent, but inflation is still high and the Hryvnia is still 300% devalued compared to before the conflict. People are still leaving and fleeing the country but there is more hope than there was a few months ago.

I recently was making a long drive one early morning and saw a former student of mine from the Peterfalva High school, a 2006 graduate, who I had not seen in years waiting for the bus. He is a professional soldier and has been in the army through all of this. He rode with me for an hour and then we had coffee so we talked for a while. He showed me pictures from the front. He said he saw a lot of death and had many friends die. He spent two tours for a total of 9 months on the front. The first 6 months he said they were only fighting rebels and mercenaries from Chechnya, but the last three months they were fighting Russian regulars and it was much more difficult and bloody. His parents never heard from him or knew where he was for those first six months. He was on a scouting patrol and they had to sleep in the mud and sometimes had nothing to eat. He spent a month in the hospital after an explosion put shrapnel in his back. He is a very accomplished painter, very gifted, but he said he can't paint anymore because his hands shake. He is still in the army; his contract is over but the army will not let him go. He is at least off the front line and is training new soldiers at a base in

western Ukraine now. It was hard to hear his stories.

Ukrainian Residents at last!

After many trips to government offices here in Ukraine, and a trip to the Ukraine embassy in Budapest, Stacey and I were able to get temporary Ukrainian residency permits, allowing us to be in Ukraine without trouble for two years. Many dear friends and kind acquaintances were instrumental in helping us in this long and tedious process.

Our Heartfelt Thanks! Thank-you for your continued prayers and support. We could not be here serving in this calling without your prayers and support. We are thankful for the many opportunities that the Lord has provided this spring. It has been a very hectic and busy spring, but we are thankful to God for the many relationships we have been able to make and the opportunities we have had. We are excited to be here in Ukraine and to continue serving the Lord here.

Please keep us in your prayers as we are finishing up a busy two months of camps here in Ukraine, Hungary and Croatia. Pray that many will be reached with the message of the Gospel, as well as for traveling mercies. We will write about the camps in our next newsletter. Thank-you for your continued support and prayers. To God be the glory!

In Christ,
Eric & Stacey Hoeksema

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www.iccdabroad.org