



The Bilyaks in Ternopil, Ukraine

2nd Quarter Report, 2020

April

Ministry during the time of quarantine

Dear brothers and sisters, greetings!

In this letter I would like to tell about a new experience – ministry during a time of quarantine. Although even Solomon says that there is no new thing under the sun, for us this is something new, and an unusual page in the history of the church and of our ministry. Of course, diseases and quarantines have happened in the past, but not with us.

In my last letter, I already wrote about some changes in ministry. About the switch to online ministry, about meetings that take place via the Zoom program. Many of our brothers and sisters originally accepted such novelties enthusiastically. As one sister said, “It was unusual and interesting.” But with time, it all began to grow old. People began to miss meetings with the church family for genuine worship, corporate prayers, and joint times of fellowship with refreshments. Although in March we spent more Sunday meetings in home groups, by April such meetings were banned and it was permissible only for groups up to 10 people to gather and to conduct an online worship service.

For all the preachers and musicians, conducting a worship service in an empty auditorium was a serious challenge. The majority of us don’t know how to “work on camera.” There was some awkwardness. Suddenly, the broadcast gets interrupted; the internet connection might not be working properly... This is without even mentioning how preaching, singing, and praying in an empty auditorium is hard enough. You don’t see people’s reactions; there’s no response. But we understood that doing this was important.



Several analysts, observing the philosophical tendencies in society, concluded that due to the quarantine the church had lost its voice in society. In the past the church determined moral standards, and declared what is right and what is wrong, but analysts said that now churches have

“closed their mouths.” I understand such statements, but I disagree. Because, thanks to the quarantine, the internet and social networks became filled with Christian content. Of course, not everything was useful or correct, but based on what I’ve seen, never before had the internet carried so many sermons, testimonies, and Christian songs. All of this is encouraging. Christ’s church is not conquered, just as Christ promised.

Ministry to orphans during the time of quarantine



Most of the ministries for youth and children halted because of the quarantine. Before the quarantine, at a minimum of once a month our youth visited a children’s home where there are approximately 110 children from various problem families. Literally 2 weeks before the beginning of the quarantine we had planned to bring about 30 children from the children’s home and several of their teachers to our church for a worship service. They had practiced several songs and memorized Bible verses in order to take part in the service. At that time, we thought we would

serve them a lunch at the church and give them a tour of the city... But the quarantine interrupted our plans.

Furthermore, by law, all of these children were supposed to return to their disadvantaged families all over the Ternopil region. The government takes a very superficial view: during a quarantine, children should be with their families. Only 12 children remained in the children’s home. These were children who had nowhere to go, orphans and kids whose parents had lost parental rights. In mid-April I telephoned the administration at the children’s home. I understood that they would not permit a group to come and visit those children, but we could somehow support these kids and the collective of the children’s home. In talking to them, I learned that they needed funds for sanitizing, disinfecting, toilet paper, and masks... My wife and I drove to stores to buy the necessary items. In addition, we bought sweets, cookies, and fruit for the kids who had not gone



home. As it turned out, we were the first guests to that children’s home in two months. Of course, we didn’t have an opportunity to give the children a Bible lesson, but we were able to chat with them, to offer encouragement, give them some sweets, and to leave many essential items for disinfecting, cleaning the kitchen, bedrooms, and bathrooms... Now they have asked whether we can help these kids with shoes for summertime. I will write about this in one of my

future letters. For now, we're using some of the funds leftover due to the youth being quarantined.

Please pray for the ministry to the orphans and children from problem homes (the parents are addicted to drugs, prostitutes, alcoholics, and mentally deficient...). The leadership of the children's home is concerned about their pupils. The majority went home to very poor families in difficult straits. The courts have already returned some of the kids to the children's home due to their families' horrible living conditions.

May

The Easing of the Quarantine. A baptism.

Greetings, dear brothers and sisters, coworkers of God in the work of evangelism. I'm glad to share with you some of the blessings from May of 2020.

A special event in this month of May was that the authorities of our region began to ease the restrictions of the quarantine. As I wrote in my previous letter, people have begun to miss real fellowship. In the middle of May, we began to conduct home groups. On May 24, we held our first real worship service after the quarantine. It was a little bit unusual. We were supposed to maintain a physical distance of 1.5 meters for those sitting in the worship service, except for the members of each family, who could sit together. Those who were not up front on the platform were supposed to wear masks, disinfect their hands, and observe other guidelines printed for our worship services. But, friends, we were prepared to put up with all of this for the chance to pray and sing together with one voice to the Lord. We have a saying here: "Better to drive poorly than to walk well."

Something interesting happened. We were supposed to have a meeting of the brotherly council in order to discuss having a baptism. Since we could have this discussion in less than an hour, I suggested having our talk via Zoom. But the men's reactions really surprised me. They declared we need to have a genuine meeting. Since public transportation still isn't running in the city, those who have cars picked up and brought the rest of the men to this meeting. I was very glad for such enthusiasm. It seems that quarantine has taught us to truly appreciate real fellowship.



Baptism

Yesterday, on May 31, the long-awaited event took place—we baptized two men, Ruslan and Volodya. This baptism had been canceled two times. This was already the 3rd date we'd set for it. Our first date was set for the middle of March.

We decided to hold it on the property of the rehabilitation center. It was good that we'd already had an easing of the quarantine. We hoped that the last day of spring would be warm. We wanted the baptism to be outside, in the open air. We invited people, but as each day passed, the weather grew worse. One day before the baptism, the temperature was only 48 degrees. All week, a non-stop rain had been falling. The wind tore down our tent. Those who have visited our rehabilitation center know that, for about 500 meters, we have no road. Just dirt or grass. All of this caused concern. Will people come? Will they want to walk through a swamp in the cold? It seemed that, because of the rain and the cold, everything that we had planned to do outdoors would need to be done inside. But events held inside buildings have totally different



quarantine requirements. I informed the church that the baptism would be held regardless of the weather. We prayed about it.

And the Lord blessed that day. The holiday took place. People were so eager for fellowship that weather difficulties didn't influence them at all. The water in the pool was cold, but there was warmth in our hearts. Outside there was wind and rain, but no one paid attention. We arrived at 11 a.m. and departed to our homes at about 7 p.m.

A few words about the men who were baptized:

Ruslan – He's a young brother. He came to our church as a teen. Along with other young people, he came to our children's camp when a group from BIEM was here (the time the group arrived by train) and we held the camp on the schoolgrounds. He went through various periods. There was a time when he stopped coming. Then he showed up again. Disappeared again. Then started coming again. Now Ruslan is a happy young man, radiating the love of God.

Pray for Ruslan; he has the heart of an evangelist. In the church, he already leads meetings with his unsaved friends. They play games, sometimes watch a film, and he testifies to them of Christ. It's possible that Ruslan is a future youth pastor, or regular pastor, or missionary...

Volodya is a young man from the rehab center. His time of rehabilitation has come to an end. He has been through prison, an experienced drug addict. He's a local fellow, from Ternopil. It

seems that he might turn out to be a good minister for the rehab center. Pray for Volodya, that he will not fall away from the right road and will be faithful to God.

Thank you for your ministry and support for spreading the Gospel in the world.



June

Created unto good works!

Dear friends, these past several weeks have been special. This was a time when action was needed, not words. In this letter I want to share with you how we were able to use our assignment to perform good deeds. As the Apostle Paul said, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Based on this text, it becomes clear that God occasionally allows times when people expect good from the church. Such a time came to western Ukraine.



As you know, here the majority of people live humbly, even poorly. The Lord has allowed that after an arid spring, we received rains. Someone added up and said that rain fell for forty days in a row. It wasn't that the rain was nonstop. It simply rained each day. But then there were heavy downpours. According to reports of scientists, in four days we received the same amount of rain that we normally get in three months of summer. While all of this water was falling, flooding began. Rivers overflowed their banks. From the mountains flowed streams of mud that swept away everything in their path. In its wake, the water left ruined bridges, damaged homes, flooded fields and gardens. Sewage from septic tanks got into wells. Flooding left behind mountains of debris, broken trees in gardens, along with a half-meter layer of dirt and rubbish.



When all of these things began appearing in the news, we began considering how we should help. But what did we have? The first thing that came to mind was that we had about one ton of humanitarian aid. We'd been holding these items for poor people in the city, but it became clear that there were people who needed it more. We made the decision to begin using what we had. At the time, we provided information to our friends in other churches and requested aid from the BIEM mission. We thank the mission for the fast response we received.



We decided to provide assistance through believers who live in those villages. All of our trips made strong impressions. There were a lot of emotions, much pain, disappointment in the government, tired people, someone crying, someone else attempting to joke, another was glad for the aid, and another was panic-stricken and didn't know how to go on. Many people were sick from drinking poor water.

These trips were precious to us, because we could remind ourselves and understand that the church is the hope of the world, that our assignment is to remind people

that there is a loving and caring Lord.

To distribute the aid we had assembled, we planned three trips to villages that were suffering from flooding. There were 2 trips to the village of Beliye Oslavy in Ivano-Frankovskaya region and 1 trip to the villages of Revno and Streletsky Kut in Chernovitskaya region.

The things we gathered and purchased were:

- 2.2 tons of food (2.1 tons purchased; 100 kg gathered)
- 354 packages of laundry detergent
- 170 one-liter bottles of dishwashing liquid (Fairy brand)
- 1 ton (approximately) of humanitarian aid (clothing, shoes, sheets, towels)
- Over a ton of bottled water (each bottle was 1.5 gallon)
- The brethren from our rehabilitation center “House of Salvation” rendered much help in this work, as also did the men of our church. They provided labor, assembled grocery packages, and they traveled on the trips.

Here are several stories from our trips:

During our second trip we visited a local pastor. In his village, everyone fondly calls him “Uncle Vanya.” He’s already elderly. They respect him and love him. His home was situated right in the middle of a torrent of water. We were there 10 days after the water hit, but what we saw there was very depressing and sad. When we arrived at his house in our two vehicles, we saw how an elderly woman, with no shoes, was pushing a wheelbarrow full of mud out of the yard. This turned out to be his wife. He had recently suffered a stroke and wasn’t able to do this work. Local brethren helped him very much, but it was still very sad to see.



They hadn’t even begun to pick anything from their garden. Everything electrically powered and operated by gasoline engines was knocked out of order by the water. One wall of his barn had collapsed. The walls of his home were still wet. Even in the midst of all of this, he thought about his neighbors. He was concerned that we may have forgotten to take someone a package of food and household cleansers.

This trip was special because many people accepted a New Testament. We didn’t want to give them out immediately to everyone, because many people already own one. We asked each person, “Do you have a Gospel or a New Testament?” I didn’t count, but in the second trip alone, we distributed more than 50 New Testaments and about that number of New Testaments with pictures for children.



Literally yesterday we took our last trip. It turned out that, all the night before we arrived and all day while we were there, heavy rain fell. People were frightened. All night long, lights were burning in the windows of houses. People

didn't undress. They had gathered their papers and valuables; they even had suitcases packed and ready to leave.

They were afraid that the river would once again overflow its banks but, thanks be to God, they didn't need to flee. In the morning when we knocked on doors to deliver some aid, many were sleepy. They were frightened and discouraged. They shared with us their anger at politicians. Many had come and promised them aid and protection. They made big promises on camera in front of powerful earth-moving equipment. But all the equipment followed the politicians when they left, and one by one people were left with their poverty and fear of new disasters. For them, our coming was a true example of the Gospel. We reminded people about God, who loves them more than anything, cares for them, and desires fellowship with them.



During the first trip to the village of Belye Oslavy, when we took humanitarian aid, we drove our minibus from the rehabilitation center to the ford over the river since the bridges had



been wiped out. Doing this ruined the clutch. After this trip, the repair cost \$620. For now, we have borrowed the funds needed for the repair. We will be thankful for help.

Please pray that the Lord will continue to work with the people we helped.

Also pray for summer camps.

We have adjusted our dates for holding summer camps. We still

have a quarantine, but we hope that will not hinder us from evangelizing children, youth, and families.

Our plans for July – August:

July 12-17 – Day camp for children

July 12 - 17 – Evening camp for youth

August 7 – 13 – Youth Extreme Camp in the Carpathian Mountains

August 17 – 22 – Family camp in the Carpathians

With words of gratitude and greetings,
Your brother and coworker in evangelism,

Vitaly Bilyak