

REFLECTIONS

OCT-DEC 2018, JAN 2019

Dear friends and family,

I meant no disrespect by being silent for so long. I sincerely want you to be informed and feel involved, valued, and appreciated, for all of this is appropriate and true. Yet, I still delayed writing this newsletter. You all faithfully supported the work with regular funding and prayers. (Thank you.) Sonia and I diligently accomplished the mission day by day. But, I have struggled with composing not sentences of information, but thoughts that truly express the effect of these activities—and the weight of them as well.

From one vantage point we can look back and be amazed at all that God has been doing through us and through the people around us. We can also see how He exhibits His goodness right now. And, looking forward, we can see great potential for growth and maturity that comes from trusting Him.

But, what has been weighing on me, what has kept me from writing sooner, are internal questions. “Why won’t he respond to my apology?” “Why won’t they commit?” “Why is she feeling the love of God more elsewhere?” “What more can I do?” “What more should I have done?” “What did I say?” “What did I fail to say?” “What should I say?” “How can I be sure that this is what we need to be studying now?”

I’m going to briefly report our ministry activities for the last four months so that you know what you have been involved in as a ministry partner. “Briefly” means I’m going to mention only the highlights and skip the ordinary (sermons, lessons, mentoring sessions, and service work). However, for as many of the activities as possible, I will include some personal comments to show the effect or degree of influence these events are having. As you read, think of the people. Please notice how God is reaching out to them, investing in them, and caring for them. Then, remember He is doing that through us, and we are enabled by you. You are involved and should be encouraged.

October

Sonia and I traveled to Irkutsk to help our long-time friends, Stas and Marina Sushkov, reach out to Stas’ coworkers at Sberbank, the largest national bank in Russia. I customized a ScreamFree™ Leadership presentation for the event that received the approval and thanks of the regional manager. His endorsement may open opportunities for presenting it in other regions. We invited Stas’ coworkers and local church members to the ScreamFree™ Parenting seminar we did the following week. Stas used the opportunity to openly express his faith to his coworkers. Some responded with interest in meeting regularly to continue discussing the ScreamFree™ Parenting principles.

We do these seminars not just to share the ScreamFree™ concepts, but to help local churches have a practical tool for reaching out to others. Stas and I talked about what I could do to develop materials to help people like him continue to use the ScreamFree™ Parenting material as a tool for following up with new contacts. I have started the process of organizing a “follow-up” package.



November

I traveled to Kaunas, Lithuania, to work with Vladimirus Rancevas, who is serving to plant the LORD's church there. I presented *ScreamFree™* Parenting to a crowd of 50-60, most of whom were new contacts and who were eager for follow-up activities. At least 6 members of the church there are involved in prison ministry. So, I also visited the local prison and talked with a group of 17-18 year old boys there about self-control. I thought I was then going to meet with a group of women inmates also, but a last minute change resulted in me giving a 90-minute summary of the *ScreamFree™* principles to the prison administrators and their staff psychologists. This engineer (me) was a bit intimidated to be teaching relationship principles to a room full of professional social workers! By the end, though, they were all very receptive, even asking questions about using the principles in their own families. Then, over tea, the director expressed a desire for me to return and present the message to all of the inmates. We just might be able to make that happen this spring.



After Kaunas, Sonia joined me in Minsk, Belarus. This was our second visit and this time we presented *ScreamFree™* Parenting at the private school where one of the church members works. (This is the natural progression we hope for: first present to the church, then help the church present to people in their circles of contact.) It was an intense couple of days, but the response was so ... amazing. They were open, eager, sharing, asking questions, excited, and so appreciative. They saw the value and the truth. After the first session, they brought husbands and invited friends. During breaks people talked over the material in small groups, and we talked and prayed with individuals about their difficult family situations. One feedback message to the church member who organized the event said something like, "It was jaw-on-the-floor revelation from beginning to end!" And one woman drew me aside after it all and said, "Thank you. Your effort is needed and appreciated. I'm glad the parents of the children I teach were here to hear what you said. I know they need to hear it. And, I know how I can use this in the classroom, too. Keep doing what you are doing. People need this."

December

There was much to be done when we returned to Barnaul from Minsk:

- Prepare and produce a sermon series leading up to the Christmas celebration and year's end
- Plan and prepare for the church's two-Sunday Christmas celebration
- Develop and prepare a proposal for the theme and sermon series topic for 2019
- Prepare 2018 church budget report and 2019 church budget proposal
- Prepare and propose a lesson theme for Wednesday's study in 2019
- Develop, print, and distribute a Bible Reading Schedule for the church in 2019
- Develop and prepare a proposal for the lesson theme for the teens in 2019
- Prepare for our winter break teen's event (a.k.a. "winter camp")



*On Dec 23rd, the church celebrated God's gift to us—His Son, Jesus.
The following Sunday, the church celebrated God's other gift—each other.*

January

During winter break the last 3 years, we've taken our teens to another city for a joint youth event with the local church, giving them some personal role or responsibility so that they learn to give as well as receive. (Example: They are doing a skit in the picture to the right.) This year, it was my hope to go to Degtyarsk, a small place outside of Yekaterinburg where we met an amazing home church a couple of years ago when we did a ScreamFree™ Parenting seminar there. We were unable to find lodging and a facility in Degtyarsk, but our brothers and sisters in Chelyabinsk heard about our plans and they invited us back—agreeing to let us invite the folks from Degtyarsk, too. The word spread among our teens from summer camp that there would be a teens event in Chelyabinsk during the winter school break. Soon we had teens from Irkutsk on the list to participate. And then Novosibirsk. And then Omsk. And then Biysk. And then even one from the Moscow area confirmed he would be flying in! Almost all the teens from our summer camp were planning to attend winter camp.



Maybe you remember me writing about the unity God has accomplished through the summer camp work. This winter's camp event is testimony of it. The families and individuals from Chelyabinsk who participated in the summer camps organized local transportation, housing, meals, facilities, crafts, and excursions for the three day event (Fri-Sun, Jan 4-6). They housed and fed 40+ guests in their homes and apartments with the help of others in the church. They administrated the whole event. The church also provided funding—as did the churches in Omsk, Biysk, and Barnaul (and all of you). My point is that it was a united effort. They did what they were equipped to do, as did we. The team from Barnaul was responsible for the program content. We conducted 2 general assemblies daily, taught 2 classes daily, held nightly devotional events for all the teens. We also lead the worship assembly on Sunday and I preached the sermon that concluded the program.

The excitement was real even before we arrived. We boarded the train as 13 people in Barnaul, and disembarked in Chelyabinsk as a group of 25 people, having “picked up” teens along the way. (The 2 from Irkutsk were already on the train when we boarded.) So ... very ... cool.

FOUNDATIONS (that's you and us) sponsored everyone from Degtyarsk. (Most are shown in this picture to the right.) They drove the winter roads to Chelyabinsk. Natasha Podrachikova from Yekaterinburg drove round trip twice, wanting to help but not available to stay. Entire families came, including foster kids—and they even brought one sister's co-worker and her family, someone the sisters in Degtyarsk have been trying to bring to Christ.



During the planning, when it became obvious that this was now a full-fledged camp event, equal in complexity to our 2-week summer event, we expanded the plan to include a program for the pre-school and elementary children who would be there from Chelyabinsk and Degtyarsk. Tanya Pronskih took responsibility for that (as she does during the summer, too.) And Tanya's husband, Alex, joined the team of volunteers and taught the adults from Chelyabinsk and Degtyarsk.



We split the teens into two groups, 11 and 13 youth in each. The older group had already heard our lesson series before, so their teachers committed to exploring the topics on a level deeper than presented previously. Sonia and I were co-teachers with Ivan and Tonya Zheltyakov for the younger teens.



And, on Sunday, we all worshipped the LORD, our God, together with the church in Chelyabinsk.

At least 60 people were directly involved in this winter camp which was called, “Footprints in the Snow” - an appropriate expansion of our “Footprints in the Sand” summer camp program. This is only our 4th year of the winter program. I believe we need to give it more attention and preparation.



What I saw or heard before, during, and after the event:

- ✠ Adult brothers and sisters were eager to get together and work together—even at great personal expense or effort. Katya Yuhamenko told Sonia, “We’re so very glad for the chance to serve!” Her husband, Yuri, was very sick while making all the preparations.
- ✠ Tanya Pronskih’s daughter was also very sick just before the time to leave. Tanya prepared everything for the children’s program, but then canceled her own participation in order to stay home with her sick child. Then her child got well. Her husband Alex had them board a plane immediately so they could participate and be encouraged even though a day late. Various brothers helped with the cost of the plane tickets after the fact.
- ✠ The guests brought by the sisters from Degtyarsk commented, “This is unlike any church we have ever seen. We kept expecting someone to ask us for money. No one ever did. You all were like family with each other—happy to see each other and ready serve one another, working together with joy.”
- ✠ When the Omsk church interviewed their teens who attended, asking what they learned, one answered, “I started to understand Jesus’ job in my life. I knew He was Lord and King. But I learned that what He really wants to do is take out the trash.”
- ✠ And, on Facebook, the mother of a teen-age girl who attended posted a picture of a message that appeared on their refrigerator door notepad the morning after the kids returned home: “ ‘We should control our phones; not let them control us.’ —Joseph ©” So, I guess someone was paying attention when we were talking and playing Ligretto™ while waiting for the bus that last evening. I’m just not sure I can claim the copyright, though.

✝ And, while we were on the train, one of our teens from Barnaul, Misha Markin, saw the opportunity to express his faith to those around us. He purposefully started discussing with someone in our group a current hot-topic, homosexuality, in the train corridor so that other passengers could (over)hear, and perhaps consider the validity of, the LORD's truth.

The previous 2 pages have been about just 3 days the first week of January. And, even though I got very sick with pneumonia and was homebound the rest of the month, there is still more to report for the month of January.

✝ Arkasha and Natasha Lezhnin, workers in the church in Omsk, visited via Skype and I was able to share the details of our 2018 sermon series based on all the "one another" and "each other" verses in the New Testament. It looks like they want to teach the same study to the church in Omsk. So, the LORD is using our efforts to bless another congregation in another city.

✝ Because of my illness, we could not be hosts for the church leadership meetings as we usually do. Our youngest brother in the leadership, Sergei Markin (21), began hosting the meetings. It's kind of comical to realize that, even though he is serving as a church leader he had to ask for his mother's permission to host the meeting at home—but I know she was glad to agree. We want our young men to step up and participate. Some of them, like Sergei, are.

✝ And, while I was down and out, Sonia was up and about. She took care of me, helping me navigate the clinics, the x-ray services, and the medicines. Somehow, she also managed to continue mentoring her 2 young students, host the sister's group on Saturday, and also teach English to a small group of interested church members on Saturday evening.

There is no shortage of testimony available for the work of God through us and among us. We praise and thank Him for that. But, neither is there any shortage of struggle. Not everyone responds. Some walk away. Some never come closer than the outer fringe. I'm thrilled to report all that I see God doing. I'm so glad and thankful to be a part of it. I'm glad to now be over the hurdle that has kept me from reporting all this until now.

I don't believe my late report will cause you to waiver in commitment to our ministry. I think you will, instead, relate to the reason why it was late. Various questions and concerns dominated my thoughts and prevented me from writing the news. Sonia assures me that everyone serving the LORD has these questions. So, I hope that your response will be to pray. Pray for those we serve—the church members here and those who live in other cities, the teens who live all across the country, and the younger kids coming up in the camp program. Pray for those with whom we serve—those who serve as leaders, co-teachers, and organizers. And, pray for us. The load of responsibility is real. What we do ... or don't do ... has eternal implications. It always has, of course. I just feel it more as the ministry grows. Do you?

Grace and peace to you in the name of our LORD, Jesus,



Joseph, Sonia, and Mason Rhodes
Volunteer missionaries
Barnaul, Russia

By the way, if you are interested, more pictures of the winter camp are available in the album link on the Facebook page for the church in Chelyabinsk: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/chel.churchchrist/permalink/2239433066329625/>

