



newsITEMs

Volume 2, No. 2
Equipping reliable leaders in sound doctrine
Summer 1999

Story of Opening Doors

The Origins of ITEM, Part II
--by Dr. G. Van Groningen
 ITEM President, emeritus


The first installment concluded with the reference to the change in leadership and to the move of the office from Denver to St. Louis. By late 1995 the transition was made. It was decided that leaders would work from their homes to avoid too much overhead expense. The prevalence of the computer made communication between leaders comparatively efficient.

A new board was formed. Regional committees were organized and three members of each of these committees served on the board. The executive committee consisted of persons residing in St. Louis. Efforts were made to have good working relationships between the Executive committee, located in St. Louis, and regional committees. This effort was not as successful as had been hoped. But the cause of Christ For Russia unfolded in various ways. It became quite obvious that the projects in the former USSR became real challenges. Possibilities for outreach and development kept coming to the attention of the board.

The work in Donetsk was blessed. Some financial assistance was given for the completion of a

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How Long, O LORD?

From the President
--by Dr. David R. Ludwick
 ITEM President

The last time I wrote to you I was in the comfort of our home preparing for the routine of the next day... which by His grace He brought.

Today I am reflecting on the trip that Dr. Mare and I made to the Donetsk Regional Theological College to teach in the Bachelor of Theology and Certificate programs and to tell you of the successes that we have had in that school alone! Programs that many of you have helped establish through your prayers and support are indeed bearing fruit as we have more than 50 students in these programs in this school alone and nine men have traveled there this year to teach Reformed Theology to eager students.

The last time I was describing the people of the former Soviet Union based on my knowledge and I affirm what I told you then that the need for training of pastors, teachers and lay leaders has only intensified with the years since the fall of the East-West wall. The men who have gone since January have reported that the work there is intensifying as the economy and the socio-economic structure of the government rise and fall and the market economy flounders in Communism as they strive to coexist in the same geographical regions.

The last time I wrote to you I told you of the cry of the people, "How Long, O Lord?" and our prayer for them. I continue to ask you for your prayers that the laborers will rise up that even maybe your pastor will be called by your congregation to serve with us for a few weeks each year and that someone of your elders, being apt to teach, might also be called to go so that they would be able to report to you the awesome responsibility of Kingdom service in these mission fields.

It is a daunting responsibility to seek to guide and share in the service of our Lord as well as the men and women of God who are represented by the groups sent and those supporting them who are receiving reading this very newsletter.

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 Three Hills, Alberta T0M 2A0 CANADA newsITEMs is free upon request
 Tel. +1.314.568.0174 e-mail: item@item.org R. David Ludwick, J.D., M.Div, President
 Rodney Gorter, Th.M., Professor, Odessa Presbyterian Seminary, Odessa, Ukraine

good venue for class work.

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The educational effort saw dramatic progress. Four to six lecturers spent three to six weeks twice a year teaching eager Ukrainian men to prepare for ministry. The school developed; it began as a regional Bible school, then it became a Bible Institute and now it is a recognized theological seminary.

Approximately thirty-five students attend. These receive scholarships.



Professors' apartment in Donetsk, Ukraine

Now an effort is made to have at least two lecturers spend a week or two each month in the seminary. Recruitment of qualified lecturers from supporting church bodies is a constant challenge. Although the initiation of the work in Donetsk was to a great extent the fulfillment of the desires and hopes of Ukrainian evangelicals, by and large of Baptist persuasion, Reformed theology has been heartily accepted. In fact, the seminary administrator in Donetsk has requested that Reformed theology be clearly and consistently taught.

In the earlier part of 1997 the board decided the time had come to call someone to work in the Ukraine full time. The Rev. Rodney Gorter, who had lectured for a six week period in Donetsk, accepted the call to work in Odessa in S. W. Ukraine. The First Christian Reformed church of Oak Lawn, IL, issued him a call on behalf of the Christ For Russia board. After receiving cross cultural and Russian language training, Rev. Gorter with his wife and four sons arrived in Odessa in early 1998. His main assignment is to lead in the development of a Reformed/Presbyterian seminary in the greater Odessa (Ukraine) region. This seminary development is done assisting the Mission To the World (PCA) to train pastors for the churches being planted in the area. The support of the churches in the USA and Canada has been a source of great encouragement.

The city of Kiev, the main Ukrainian metropolis, has presented a number of challenges. A missionary teacher from The Netherlands and a lady from the USA, with missionary enthusiasm, have begun discipling and teaching activities in that city. Contacts are continuing with them with the possibility of joining with them in developing the theological educational work there. At present, a Presbyterian oriented group sends lecturers periodically for a week. Some cooperative effort has been attempted with the leaders of this work.

In August of 1997, a pastor from Riga, Latvia visited in St. Louis and though he had been inclined to liberal theology, through his reading of Reformed books he became convinced that Latvia and surrounding countries needed and was open to

Reformed theological education. In March of 1998 an exploratory visit was made and the result is that the Riga Reformed seminary has been organized. It has a Latvian based administrative committee. Three lecturers have taught there to date. Theological courses make up the curriculum. Every other month a lecturer has been and is scheduled to teach there for two weeks per visit. Approximately thirty-five younger people attend the lectures. Translation is in both Russian and Latvian. Exploratory visits have also been made to Campina in eastern Romania. If finances were available, needed support for a small initial effort to train pastors there could be made available.

What about work in Russia? Attempts were made to work with various people who had begun educational and literature distribution work in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Russian Duma (its main governing body) passed laws strictly limiting the efforts of any organization not present in Russia twenty-five years ago. This has been a major hurdle for Christ For Russia.

With the expansion of the work into different former USSR countries, it was deemed wise not to continue to use the title Christ For Russia. The new title is International Theological Education Ministries (I.T.E.M.). Divisions have been established, e.g., Christ For Ukraine, Christ For Russia, Christ for Latvia etc. As classroom education continued to develop, the need for more Reformed literature became a real need. Translation work has been begun and continues of works selected by Ukrainian, Russian, and Latvian leaders.

The efforts in the various countries of the former USSR are indeed blessed by our Sovereign Lord. We of I.T.E.M. are very grateful for the Lord's guidance. Mention should also be made that there have been some changes in personnel on the home base. Terms for membership on the board have expired for some. A few have indicated that they would serve another period. New members have been and are being recruited.

The greatest challenge that the board and committees face is financial. A severe strain on the budget in 1998 caused some temporary (we trust) curtailment. Contributions, amounting to \$20,000 to \$25,000. a month are an absolute requirement if students are to receive scholarships, lecturers' expenses are met, translators are paid, translation work continues, and libraries are developed. The intercessory prayers of God's people in the denominations involved in this work is absolutely vital. And when consistent prayer rises from hearts to the throne of our sovereignly reigning Lord, then outstretched hands with contributions follow.

In closing this historical summary it must be added that there is heartfelt appreciation for the prayers and financial support that have been and are offered. Thank you all! Let the Lord of Vineyard and Harvest be praised and may His glory be demonstrated world wide. ■

GVG

Teach Me Right, Please

Teaching students in the CIS. We give you the full version

--by Gary Fisher

Allendale United Reformed Church, Allendale, MI

In the Autumn of 1998, I was asked a question I had never expected to hear: would I be “willing to consider taking several weeks in the Spring to teach at the Donetsk Regional Bible College in Donetsk, Ukraine?” Although I have led a few university-level seminars and have taught the Heidelberg Catechism for twenty years, I had never considered myself qualified to teach seminary students even at home, and had certainly never been drawn to foreign missions—in fact, I had never been outside Eastern North America, and would have been quite happy to leave it that way. And yet, the moment the question was put to me, I knew I had to consider the matter.

And so, on April 12, 1999, I found myself making final preparations for the trip with my teammates, Rev. Steve McGee of the Covenant Independent Reformed Church of Byron Center, Michigan, and Rev. Dennis Royall of the Cornerstone United Reformed Church of London, Ontario, Canada. I serve as an Elder in the Allendale United Reformed Church of Allendale, Michigan. What follows is a brief overview of our trip, organized through International Theological Educational Ministries, formerly Christ for Russia / Christ for Ukraine, of St. Louis, MO.

The work went well. Due to the lack of available teachers, we were asked to provide coursework beyond what was originally planned, filling in as much as possible of what should have been offered in May and June as well as April. We were to teach for both a “Certificate” group of eighteen students and a Bachelor’s Degree group of thirty nine advanced students. We began with Dennis teaching eight hours a day and Steve and I four hours each (we had only two translators for the two levels of classes). Within a day Dennis surrendered one of his hours to Steve, who had more course material to offer than could be squeezed into his available hours, and the rest of the time was spent with Dennis in class seven hours a day, Steve for five and me for four. Mondays and Fridays were shortened days and on those we each taught four hours. Teaching through a translator took a little practice, but providentially those hired for April were exceptionally competent, familiar enough with ecclesiastical terminology to let us teach fairly fluidly. One of our translators, Olga, who also had experience as a teacher, stayed with the Certificate students all day, while the other, Natasha, who has a more recent University education, spent the day’s eight hours translating for the Bachelor’s Degree students. These ladies worked extremely hard, interpreting our lectures and student questions as we spoke (simultaneous translation), giving students our Scripture references according to their own Bible, which has different chapter and verse divisions than ours, and so on. They worked the full eight class hours each day, as well as during breaks and before and after each day’s sessions, and I must say were continuously in my prayers and, I’m sure, Dennis’ and Steve’s as well. We were bushed by the end of each day’s classes, but these dear sisters were genuinely exhausted and rightfully so, yet never complained. At the end of the last class session, due to the lack of American professors, both were out of work. Natasha is due to give birth to her second child in June, which will pose a genuine financial strain on her family, so Olga is returning to her children

and home in the Ural Mountains of Russia, hoping to find work there. Prayers for both of these dear sisters would be valued. The students were a privilege and a pleasure to work with. Ranging from some in the Certificate program who had been Christians only a year to some Bachelor’s students pastoring for as long as ten years, the students were both challenging and rewarding for us. With few exceptions, they listened attentively to our every word; then like the Bereans checked us against the Scriptures. While it wasn’t particularly surprising to be asked for theological details by the Bachelor’s students, even the young man identified as the newest Christian in the Certificate program frequently raised very legitimate questions based in the Word, and offered us ample opportunity to delineate the Doctrines of Grace from mere tradition. The sight of the eyes of a questioner, and of the rest of the class, gradually moving from questioning to understanding as an explanation was presented made me treasure challenges when they came. I found myself many times each day thanking the Lord for bringing His Word to my mind just as I needed it, like a runner discovering unexpected breath when each new hurdle threatened to topple him (Lk. 12:12). This brings another point to mind. While it’s not so hard to intellectually assent to the promises of God, actually living in those promises is a test we sometimes fail to see faces us moment by moment. Since one of my assigned courses was to teach catechization, I came to the realization as I prepared for this work that my only hope, my only comfort, would be, as I’ve taught for years, to fully acknowledge that “I am not my own,” in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism. Although I was convinced proper preparations had to be made (1 Cor. 3:10, Pr. 20:18), I saw no way to raise the required funding, nor to find the time to be away from my work, nor to leave my family and home for such an extended period. And so, by the Grace of God, I saw the entire matter had to be placed in the hands of my loving Father. The first hurdle my eyes saw was funding; there seemed to be no way I could raise the recommended amount, nor could my small church be expected to take on this burden alone. After turning the matter over to the Lord, I continued my preparations and decided simply to describe the work to those who expressed an interest and trust the Lord to supply the needs. When the very first person I talked to in depth—without mentioning the cost—phoned a day later and said he and his family were convinced they should aid in the funding of the work, I silently prayed they would offer perhaps as much as a 20th of the total. I thank God He supplies not what we ask, but what we need; this one brother in Christ offered almost half of the total cost. The next day another of God’s families called to say the Lord had laid upon their hearts to give, not a twentieth, but twenty percent of the total. And so it went, with the Lord showering an embarrassment of financial support upon me. Looking back, although the funds were managed through my church and so I don’t know the exact amounts given by each donor, not one of those I’m aware of was as small as that 20th I had thought would be generous. To my timid request God’s response was indeed “pressed down, shaken together and running over.” In fact, not only were all my expenses covered, but there remained a substantial sum to send on to Christ for Ukraine/I.T.E.M. for the continued support of the efforts in Ukraine. Because the work would require three weeks away from my job, I was unsure whether my partner would agree to release me from my responsibilities for so long. *continued on p.4*

Again I was convicted; my partner not only agreed to my absence, he offered to help if my family needed assistance during my time so far away. And in fact, the work got done, and those matters for which I am particularly qualified and needed in my job simply didn't come up—until the very day I returned. Even my fellow workers noticed that. It was my family that concerned me most. My wife Donna and I hadn't been apart for more than one or two nights at a time in our twenty years of married life, and leaving her alone with our five children seemed like a large burden to place on her shoulders, yet we were both convinced the Lord had called me—us—to this. The assurance of aid and prayers from our brothers and sisters in Christ helped, but the devil did indeed attempt to attack through my family, on the day my teammates and I were making our final preparations after bidding our farewells to our families. Had I known of this, I can't imagine it would not have affected my ability to do the work before me, but Donna, knowing this, told me nothing of it. While I was gone, with the help of our Pastor-elect and of Donna's Christian employer and other Christians, Donna pursued the matter (Pr. 31:27), tracked down the truth, and boldly faced the situation on behalf of her family. By the time I heard of the matter, over a week later, it had been resolved. During our entire time apart, Donna, our children and I suffered none of the loneliness of separation which we had expected; while our hearts were always with each other, our longing was for the work of the Lord, who sustained us both physically and spiritually. Knowing so many were praying for us helped, but the answer to those prayers was so evident one of my teammates, who has known me for years, was openly amazed.

Ukraine is a tremendously impoverished country, due both to the practices of the former Soviet leaders and to the lack of Christian influence among the people. While the US and Canada cannot be called Christian nations, Christianity has woven some sense of stewardship into the fabric of our governments. This sense is lacking in Ukraine, where materialism far outstrips the concept of responsibility for those goods entrusted to our hands by the Lord. Ukraine has long been known as "The breadbasket of Europe," yet while lush fields miles on a side are owned and worked by the government in a system held over from Communism, most citizens are out of work, eking out a living, selling the produce of gardens they've planted in roadway medians, railroad rights-of-way, or along tenement curbs. Outdoor markets can be found everywhere, apparently organized ad hoc when someone decides to sell a few extra radishes or beets and others appear alongside to sell whatever they can spare. Like one man I spoke with on my first day in the country, many in Ukraine have been out of work for months, with no clear prospect of improvement. The food is simple, usually including borscht (soup) and vegetables at every meal but little meat. Yet bread is served in abundance; salt and bread are the symbols of hospitality in Ukraine, and neither meals nor visits are complete without some of each. Yet despite all their material need, Christianity brings out a sweet spirit in these people. As we broke briefly between class sessions, the students spontaneously organized into small groups around the piano or a guitar, or with no accompaniment at all, to sing beautifully the Psalms and hymns of their churches, to teach and to learn the songs of the faith and to simply express their joy. One young man, his arms still bearing the marks of his former slavery to drugs, sang to his own accompaniment with the calm assurance that can be

explained only by the work of the Holy Spirit, or led others in quiet, yet joyous, praise. And these Christians, most younger than their mid-twenties and some younger than most North American high school seniors, did not require or demand Christianized versions of popular culture, though both western and middle-eastern popular music is prevalent on the streets. Rather, their music expressed a serenity which belied both their youth and their economic and political situation and recalled the Psalms and hymns sung in the churches of my own youth. Our students represented a number of churches, and an equally varied doctrinal background. Most came to the faith in Baptist or Mennonite churches, and found our Reformed and Calvinist views challenging. We were often pressed to prove our views from Scripture, which we did, and although we did not leave behind us a new Geneva, we were confident the Lord had used us to touch the hearts of those who heard us. Now we pray He will cause these seeds to sprout and grow to His glory. Although we seldom discussed our lesson plans with each other, I was amazed to find we frequently covered identical points, both from identical and different portions of Scripture, in our daily lectures. The students were well aware that we represented separate churches and even two different denominational affiliations; the fact that we agreed with and reinforced each other while teaching entirely different subjects may well have said more than our intentional lessons (Dt. 6:4).

On both Sundays during our stay, "the American brothers" were given opportunity to preach. On the first Sunday, Dennis offered a sermon before the Gethsemane Church in Donetsk, and on the second Steve and I preached in the Transfiguration Church in Makaiivka. For Steve the experience of preaching through an interpreter was new; for myself it was new to be in the pulpit at all; although my text was Isa 61:10-11, my mind was also on Isa 55:11, which was my fervent prayer. On the last Friday, we administered final exams. Although some remained to be graded (by the translators) by the time we had to leave, those which were checked against our answer keys indicated the students had heard and retained well what had been taught; on one particularly tough test almost every student achieved ninety to one hundred percent! After the examinations, the entire school assembled for a time of fellowship and praise. Without formal rehearsal, the students sang, first the beautiful Ukrainian hymn "Pray for Ukraine" and later a moving setting of Ps 42, and each of us who taught spoke briefly from Scripture. The students also offered encouragement from the Bible, as did the school administrator and its President. I am not ashamed to admit I wept as our plane left Ukraine. The need there is great for the Word of God, both within the Church and in the society. It broke my heart to know brothers and sisters in Christ who remain in impoverished conditions, yet I am humbled beyond words that the Lord would have used me to speak to the souls, not only of our students, but perhaps through them to many others as they continue in ministry. Know that our Father has reserved unto Himself children in Ukraine as in every tribe and tongue and nation, and know that He has given us an opportunity to serve Him through our brothers and sisters there. Consider whether you might be one of those He blesses with the privilege of living among these lovely children, or if some of the blessings the Lord has showered upon you might be meant to support the work in Ukraine. Keep God's people in Ukraine before your mind, and before His throne. Pray for Ukraine. ■

"How Long, O Lord?" continued from page 1

Prayer Requests

"Prayer is a strong wall and fortress of the church; it is a goodly Christian weapon"

--Martin Luther
Table Talk: Of Prayer

➤ As the Spring semester ends pray for the students in Donetsk, Riga, Odessa, Kiev, Moscow and St. Petersburg in



Students in Donetsk are taking their finals

their time of testing academically, economically and politically. Pray for their Summer holidays and for their preparations for the Fall semester to come.

➤ Pray for the professors who have served that their service will continue to bear good fruit that His Hand will remain on their hearts as they proclaim and teach His Word in missions at home and abroad.

➤ Pray for the professors who will serve; for their preparation, both personally and academically; for the preparation of their families, their congregations, and the students that He will send for them to teach.

➤ Pray for the staff and Board of Directors of ITEM that they may continue to see and lay hold of the vision of missions involving Theological education and the preparation of God's people to lead and teach God's people.

➤ Pray for Dr. Gerard and Harriet Van Groningen as they celebrate their 50th Anniversary and as they continue to labor with ITEM as prayer warriors, presenters of the vision and for his work as an author of Reformed Theological literature—and for the completion of the translation of *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* into Russian.

➤ For the work of Barry and Debbie Klaassen as they tirelessly present the vision of our Lord's work through ITEM in the preparation of pastors and teachers throughout the Kingdom.

➤ For Rev. Nicholas Vogelzang, founder of Christ for Russia and for his wife Eleanor and their ministry in Colorado.

➤ Pray for the translators in Riga, Odessa, and Donetsk, especially Natasha (Donetsk) who anticipates her second child this Summer and that it will not put a strain on her work as a translator.

➤ For Andre Bouravnev as he undertakes the translation of some of Francis Schaeffer's works into Russian.

I can tell you truly that the ground swell of interest in professor positions on a short-term basis is rising and yet we need more and more qualified men as more and more students come and cities call us and ask us for help in training and preparation of their church leadership. The curriculum involved in these growing regions will have to be enculturated in such a way as to meet the needs of the people whom our trained teachers and pastors will serve in the local churches. Church planting has become a viable means by which the spread of the Gospel is taken from the evangelistic level to the next level and in order to accomplish effectual church planting theological training of the type done by the work of Christ for Russia, Christ for Latvia, Christ for Ukraine is essential.

Your prayerful underwriting of these activities is a crucial key to the success of this ministry's effort and of the bringing of the Kingdom to God's people throughout the world on the basis of the biblical doctrines of Reformed theology. I thank you each and all on behalf of those whom we serve and the lives that will be touched by the teaching that you have provided by your faithfulness. Please recommend to your pastor that he consider going and teaching. Please consider contacting us for a presentation of the work at your church, Christian school, at a breakfast or coffee given for the purpose of spreading the word about His work through ITEM. Christian people of the countries of the former Soviet Union are crying out to you in prayerful expectation... Thank you for hearing their cry. ■

News Items

❖ Dr. Phil Long of Covenant Theological Seminary has completed a teaching term in Riga, Latvia, while on sabbatical at Cambridge in England.

❖ Dr. Warren Lammers of Second CRC, Kalamazoo, will be traveling to Riga, Latvia, to teach in July; he has previously taught in Donetsk, Ukraine.

❖ Drs. Mauro Meister and Augustus Lopez of the Andrew Jumper Graduate School of Theology, Sao Polo, Brazil, will be teaching in Donetsk in August.

❖ Teaching openings are available for late Fall of 1999 and Spring of 2000. Please make your inquiries or recommendations to ITEM's St. Louis address or call (314) 568-0174.

❖ Rev. George Stulac and Greg Johnson (Ph.D. candidate in St. Louis University) of Memorial Presbyterian Church (PCA) of St. Louis completed the academic year and were a part of the closing ceremonies at the Donetsk Regional Theological College.

What's Going On In Odessa?

Excerpts from our Rod Gorter's monthly reports

As of June 1999. **MINISTRY**

We have just completed a class on Pastoral Counseling in the Odessa Presbyterian Seminary. Clay Quarterman and Rod taught part of the course, and part of it was taught by a visiting professor from Wheaton College--Dr. Mark McMinn, along with Brent Ellens, a doctoral student who accompanied him. Rod will be working with the pastors and the counselors in the church's counseling center as they apply what they've learned. Because of the vital need for such training here, we are considering a broader program for training in counseling.

In May we had our 3rd semi-annual meeting of Proto-Presbytery (like Classis in the CRC). The Ukrainian leaders are taking more and more responsibility and demonstrating increasing leadership skills, for which we are thankful.

The women's Bible study which Lydia was leading has recessed for the summer. There were a couple of young Christians who especially benefited from these studies.

This month the "Odessa Project" begins. This annual ministry lasts 2 months in the summer. Approximately 10-12 young adults from the U.S. are matched with the same number of Ukrainian young adults. They receive training and experience in missions and ministry. It is quite intensive, and generally has a transforming effect on the young adults involved. God richly blessed the national Young Adults Retreat on April 30 - May 2, where Rod was one of the speakers. About 130 young adults from all over Ukraine participated. They enjoyed the time together and many were deeply moved spiritually. God also blessed the women's conference which our church sponsored on May 3-7. Both main themes--Family Health and Family Life--were greatly appreciated.



Statue of Duke Richelieu, Founder of Odessa

CULTURE

In the past year, Rod has had the opportunity to witness 3 Ukrainian weddings: one Presbyterian, one Baptist, and one Eastern Orthodox. All of the couples had to first get married officially at a government office. The Presbyterian wedding lasted about 30 minutes, and had a Christ-centered, joyful atmosphere--a real celebration. The Orthodox wedding lasted over an hour. The atmosphere was very formal, with little emotion shown--it seemed like empty routine to the couple. Unusual parts included the kissing of icons, tying of the groom's right hand to the bride's left hand, sprinkling the couple with holy water, and the lengthy chanting of the priest in old Slavonic (which most Ukrainians don't understand). The church gave the couple two icons as a gift. The Baptist wedding was about an hour, and had a very solemn tone, but it was God-centered. It was very meaningful when, during the ceremony, the fathers of both the bride and groom, as well as the groom himself, each knelt to pray for God's blessing upon the marriage. Today, when it was hot, Rod went to buy a cold drink for the boys. The lady selling it asked in shocked disbelief: "Cold drinks for the CHILDREN?" Ukrainian culture believes that cold drinks (especially with ice) causes people to get sick. Even at McDonalds, you have to ask for ice in the soft drinks.

PRAYER REQUESTS

1. Praise God for His gracious working in the counseling course, Lydia's Bible study with women, the Proto-Presbytery meeting, the women's conference, and the young adults retreat.
2. God's blessing on the Odessa Project.
3. Wisdom in applying the counseling course insights to ministry for the many who need Christian counseling here.
4. Protection and blessing on our family during our vacation to Turkey (June 14-26).
5. The marriages in Ukraine. Divorce rates are very high, few have closely bonded relationships.
6. For Rod's teaching and for the seminary students' learning.
7. God's blessing on the ministry groups coming this summer...

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