

For those of you who would just like the bare facts, here you go -

Between March 13 and April 28th, I was in Crimea. The purpose of the trip was to follow up on the past year of ministry and get an idea of the current situation so as to make decisions about future ministry. I visited (interviewed) all 22 pastors that I work with, as well as 7 Sunday School teachers and 2 medical colleagues. In general, the church ministries continue but the medical work in Crimea has stopped. Personally, the trip was a gift as it did much for me to be able to see and talk with all the people I have worked and been friends with for the past 16 years. I am now in England for a week. For the same purpose as my trip to Crimea, I plan to be in Ukraine from May 6 to June 28th.

And, for those of you who want details, here you go -

*"Following Jesus is not a hobby or a pastime, or engagement in uncommitted discussion, or an area of study, or a moral code, or membership of a club, or going to church, or any of the other commendable but purely human varieties of involvement that we could list.....following Jesus is, in one sense at least, like entering the door of an alien spaceship. When it takes off we will have no control over our destinies, no clear idea of where we are going, and no option of returning. Either we trust the captain of the ship or we don't go." Adrian Plass*

I was nervous. This trip would be the first of it's kind for me - I was going into Russia and it didn't know yet what that meant. Yet, several truths fought back fear and kept me putting one foot in front of the other: 1. God had provided a visa. 2. There is only one enemy and it is not Russia. 3. Decisions needed to be made ministry wise and first hand information from the field would lend wisdom. 4. Being able to see & talk with colleagues and friends would do much to heal my heart. So, I chose to *'enter the door' and 'trust the Captain of the ship.'*

So one year and 8 days after I had fled Crimea I began the return trek. On March 9th I flew from Oregon to England. For 3 days, I stayed with a CMF missionary couple who work outside of Birmingham. Tim and Tammy provided an oasis between busy chapters [the full throttle speed of preparation and a packed 6 week visit ahead]. Then the night of March 13th I flew into Moscow and then on to Simferopol, Crimea. All of my worries about passport control and customs were for nothing as there were no problems anywhere along the way. The most difficult part of the travel was my back. I had hurt it before I left and lugging 2 heavy bags hardly helped. It took about 2 weeks for my frustrated body to heal but it did. Thank you Lord and thank you for your prayers!

#### **44 days in Crimea -**

Outreaches to kids & teens: It was a crazy schedule I set up for myself but I was driven to meet with every pastor I worked with and to have as many as those visits as possible happen on their home turf. 22 pastors and 7 Sunday school teachers later I had a steno pad full of notes. To crunch this all into a general summary is hard but let

me give it a try.

Satan has used politics as a divisive weapon within every church and it has brought out the 'true colors' of many in the congregation. Meaning, it showed who was hoping on the government and who was hoping on God. However, the unity among the pastors has stayed strong and the division within the congregations is starting to heal.

Ministry outreaches to children and teens that our we are connected with all took place last summer except for one (due only to health reasons of the youth leader). I was proud and pleased to hear that the majority of the pastors/youth leaders plan to hold outreaches this summer. It was exciting to hear was that 4 new 'fronts' have opened. Meaning 3 VBS's are planned in places that they have not yet been held in and 1 new outreach to teens has started. My trip provided a way to get provisions into their hands for these upcoming events.

Not all is 'ministry as usual' though. Due to fear, 3 VBS's will not be held. Even during the Easter outreaches to children, 2 outreaches had immediate police follow up. Nothing bad happened and the situations ended well but the unexpectedness of the threat threw a new scent of fear in the air. The freedom Crimea has experienced for the past 20 + years is no longer. The rules have definitely changed but what exactly the new rules are is unknown.

A major struggle the local churches face for over a year now is that, on paper, they do not exist. Meaning, they have not yet been able to complete their registration with Russia. The reason? No one knows the real reason. But the reality is that without official registration, they can't pay their utility bills, can't publicly announce events (i.e. Easter programs, Vacation Bible School), they cannot give invitation letters for short term teams or missionaries to get a religious visa and the documents they have for the ownership of their church buildings are worthless. Obviously, this is a issue that the local pastors are working to solve as quickly as possible but progress has been painfully slow. This heavy factor of the unknown (unknown rules, unknown timeline, unknown outcome) has etched weariness into the faces of my friends.

One of the questions I asked each pastor was - tell me your 'top 3' prayer requests. Here are the categories that their requests fell into -

That the church would stay faithful to Christ; would remember the Great Commission and take it seriously

- To get our church registered.
- Unity within the congregation.
- More laborers in His fields
- For wisdom and health

You would have enjoyed these visits with the pastors. The 'Welcome back!'s were warm and 'tea' usually looked a whole lot more like a 3 course meal. They had much to

say - struggles, losses and 'God intervened' stories. They wondered what you thought of the situation and were also eager to hear news about those of you who have visited before. Every pastor wanted me to communicate to you their greetings and that your continued support for their outreaches to children and teens is a practical encouragement and they are grateful. And, they send a huge heartfelt thank you for your prayers.

Medical aspect: The church clinic I work most closely with closed last June. That was expected for me, as they usually close during the summer. However, unlike our usual schedule, they did not restart up in the fall. There are several reasons for why it remains closed. A huge factor was the new government. With the church unregistered, new rules unclear and now the introduction of social medicine - our pastor felt it best not to reopen the clinic. Another door that closed this aspect of the ministry is the sanctions. The shipping of supplies to Crimea is, for now, stopped. And, sadly, in September, our pharmacist, Natasha developed severe headaches. In short, after an MRI, it was found that she had cancer in her brain and lungs. The Lord was merciful to His faithful servant and her time of suffering was very short. Natasha went to heaven in November.

We had not expected to stop the ministry and God had blessed us with a lot of supplies. We did not want them rotting on the shelves when they could be helping others. So last fall, when the border was more porous, the staff worked hard to send many supplies onward to the other 2 clinics in Ukraine. During this visit, besides seeing a few patients, I worked about 5 days to sort and send on what we could to other local ministries. While the clinic is closed, the ministry continues in a different way. At the age of 76, Dr. Ludmilla continues an active ministry doing medical phone consultations. The wound room remains functional and Tanya, the nurse I've trained in wound care, still sees patients within the church.

"Never yet was there a laborer in God's vineyard who was not overpaid."

R. Somerset Ward

So what is it like? On the surface, everything looks much the same but under the surface everything is different. When I arrived I asked the 2 pastors that I work most closely with for advice. What should I know? What has changed? They both gave me the same advice: 'Do not bring up the subject of politics.' I promised not to but had to laugh at that advice later because in 100% of the cases, the subject of politics was brought up by the person I was talking with and usually within the first several minutes of our conversation.

In the many discussions I had (with both Christians and non Christians), I heard the entire spectrum of feelings. I can introduce you to a couple (she is a patient of mine) who are completely satisfied with the change. And, I can introduce you to my next door neighbor who has lived scared for her life for well over a year now. Interestingly, the

excitement of many of those who were in favor of the new government has cooled. Many promises made, in reality are hurdles of paper work, exhausting lines or years from coming true. Anger, fear or haughty pride mark the saddest situations; those Christians who have hung their trust on one government or the other...rather than God. Yet, the quiet heroes are many; those Christians accepting the situation as from God and desiring to trust & obey God in it.

It is not difficult to figure out that Crimea peninsula has turned into one large military outpost. In all my traveling, I saw myself that every abandoned post is now active. I was told that the highest wages in Crimea go to the military personal and police that are being brought in from Russia.

Those folks receiving a pension are doing well, despite the inflation. However, the hardest hit is the working class - for two reasons. One, the economy has slowed to a sluggish crawl. For example, Crimea's economy was built around goods and services for tourism. Hardly any tourists came last year and there is little reason to think it will be any different this year. In Feodosia, the oil port was the next biggest employer. But because they sent their oil products north into Ukraine, they shut down. Most businesses/services that had ties with Ukraine had to shut their doors. In other words, because employment has crumbled the working class can't find work. The second reason is the large influx of refugees. These are people who are pro-Russia but fled the fighting areas in Ukraine. Having next to nothing, they are willing to work for less wages just to be able to put bread on the table.

Personally, my 6 weeks in Crimea was a gift. To be able to hug friends that I thought I might not get to see again was precious to me. As I got to spend a little time with them I understood that, for each, life had turned a sharp corner and question marks of How? When? What now? hung over them too.

"My comfort is not God's highest ambition."

Gary Thomas

So what does this mean for ministry? I don't know yet. I have lived in the uncomfortable place of 'I don't know' for well over a year now. But, like Thomas said above, my comfort isn't God's highest priority. My confidence in Him, however, is and that is the place where I am trying to stay. As I move into the second half of the trip - a 2 month research visit into Ukraine - I covet your prayers for travel safety, wisdom and obedience.

June