



## **The Bilyaks**

**January 2019**

Dear brothers and sisters, I send you greetings in the love of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In Ukraine, January is a month of holidays. There are very many different holidays. People begin to celebrate in December. On December 19 there is the holiday of Saint Nicholas, and then Christmas according to the new style, which some people call “Catholic Christmas.” Not everyone celebrates it, although there is a certain respect for those who do. Last year our church began to celebrate Christmas 2 times. The first time, along with the rest of the world to uphold the Protestant tradition, and the second time for the sake of our Greek-Catholic friends. There’s a feeling that the real Christmas is celebrated on January 7-8. Next comes a holiday whose name is a challenge for the brains of translators. It’s “old New Year.” ☺ This is connected with the Orthodox tradition; religious holidays are recognized according to the [older] Julian calendar in order not to recognize the Gregorian calendar, which is connected to the Catholic Church. And the 3<sup>rd</sup> great holiday is Baptism. As with Christmas, the Baptism holiday has a lot of traditions connected to it, but this holiday exists in the shadow of Christmas. There is a ritual of bathing in a hole cut in the ice; priests sanctify the water, and then they walk to homes and sprinkle this “holy water” there. For them, this is a season to earn money—people pay for this rite of passage. This whole time, from January 6 through January 20, is called “carols” (Christmas carols). In our city, even greetings are different during this time. Instead of saying “Good day” or “Hi,” people say “Christ is born!” and the reply is “We praise Him!” And only on January 19-20 they greet people with the words “Christ is baptized!” and others reply “In the Jordan River.” And then for a few more weeks they continue to use the Christmas greeting.

Concerning Christmas traditions, especially in western parts of Ukraine, you could write whole books. Unfortunately, amidst all of this religiosity in our city, very often you can’t even see Christ as the Savior. Our assignment during these days is to turn people’s attention to the meaning of the holiday. And of course, we use the atmosphere of a holiday to share the Gospel with the maximum number of people.

The aid that we receive through the BIEM mission is greatly appreciated. We especially feel it at Christmas time. As you know, the New Life Church in Ternopil is a young, new church in a very religious area of Ukraine. Our modest-sized church is engaged in many diverse ministries, and our church budget is barely sufficient to cover the most crucial needs. As we were preparing for the Christmas services, when we learned of your support, we sighed with relief and praised the Lord, because this opened various opportunities for us. Normally children in the Ternopil region receive gifts for the religious holidays of “Saint Nicholas” and, practicing the distribution of gifts on Christmas, we also try to shift the emphasis of children’s perceptions. After all, Christmas should not be in competition with any religious holiday, but here kids wait for the arrival of “Saint Nicholas” more than they do Christmas.

We held a series of services. We had a Christmas service with 40 children participating (2 children's groups and a teen group from our Christian clubs). Each child there received a Christmas gift with candies. Primarily unchurched kids visit our children's and teen clubs. Only some of the children have believing parents who come to our church services.

In addition, we had 2 services, which about 130 children visited. They watched a Christmas puppet show put on by a team connected with the Christian children's magazine *Little Path*. Over half of those children were sent by the city social service, and these were kids from families who, for one reason or another, fell under assistance of this service. At the end of the holidays a group of youth from our church took a Christmas program to the boarding school where our church is involved in a new ministry.

Thank you for supporting us in our ministry. We greatly appreciate it, and this glorifies our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please pray for people to have a spiritual hunger for the Lord and His Word. The Devil shifts their attention to religion, but it's not rituals that people need. They need a living relationship with God.

With best wishes and blessings to you,  
Your brother and coworker,  
Vitaly Bilyak

### Several photos with a Christmas atmosphere



The very youngest participants in the Christmas service praise the Lord!

The middle children's group put on a play about a gift for Jesus. The subject is simple, yet meaningful. Two girls encounter characters from the Christmas story, and they try to guess what kind of gift would be best to give Jesus for His birthday.







It's impossible to convey songs in photographs, but this was sincere and wonderfully prepared. Pray for the children's ministry. The children come to the meetings only if the parents prompt them. Smartphones and computers have created much unhealthy competition for our meetings.

Our youth and young adults also participated. They performed several well-done songs.



The puppet show «Christmas for Two.» All attention was on the stage. Everything important was happening down front. While the kids watched the show in one room, the parents drank tea in another and had a chance to talk and get acquainted with us.

We hope that the seed that was sown will bring forth results in the children's hearts.





Behind the scenes. Only from this angle do you realize how much work goes into a presentation, so that everything happening on stage will be interesting and will hold attention.

Every child received a gift from the magazine *Little Path*.

## February

Dear brothers and sisters, coworkers with God in His work, greetings to you!

In this letter I'd like to thank you tremendously for yet another blessing. In February of 2019 we opened yet another portion of our building for a ministry of the church—classes for Sunday school. This was possible because you have supported us in this project materially and prayerfully. Thank you for your large hearts. Thanks to you, we are continuing to feel the genuine church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is not limited by borders or continents. Our God is indeed great!

The needs in these locations were very big. When we finished the first floor for worship services and fellowship, we were glad because that opened the opportunity to hold our worship services here. The children's meetings (2 groups), teens, young adults, training, work groups, music rehearsals—all these have taken place on the ground floor in these main rooms. Occasionally we had difficulties with this. For instance, after worship services we like for people not to hurry home but to stay and fellowship with one another, drink tea, and pray. Yet, in less than an hour after the end of the worship service we



have a class for children, and we have literally needed to rush people out of the building to make room for the children's classes. During the time when the children's classes are going—up to two hours after the morning service—there have been people fellowshiping in the church.

Men from the church did the great majority of the work. The guys in the rehab program at the Rehabilitation Center also participated in the repair work. The rooms turned out very comfortably. The brethren who are specialists in construction did the repair work, and whoever wasn't a specialist worked as assistants. They



carried out rubbish, picked up, and cleaned.

The first meeting held in this newly finished part of the building was a meeting of pastors from independent Evangelical Christian-Baptist churches of the western region. Most of them had never been in our church before. I considered this to be a remarkable opportunity. About 20 pastors were the first to pray in these classrooms. It was inspiring.

Now two children's groups and the teen group use these rooms. As opportunities permit, people also use them to fellowship, to pray, and to hold organizational meetings. Besides that, our wives and the other women hold fitness training in the bigger room. Previously they used the small cafeteria room. That was not comfortable. While they were there, we locked the building. Now they use this location, and the rest of the building remains available for use. Unbelievers attend these fitness gatherings, and it's one means of evangelism. I will write a little more about this later in one of my letters.

Please pray concerning the completion of the repair work in other parts of the basement. Our young people ask that we make a youth-sport area. They dream of having a hall where they can set up a Ping-Pong table, have table games, and invite their unbeliever friends simply to spend time while sharing the faith with them.

We also have two rooms that we're considering using for a guest room and also for doctors to do medical examinations of people from the church. Those rooms also need work. They are about 60%-70% ready. Relatively few resources would be needed.

Please pray, too, for our church's camps. For teams to work with children, with teens, with young adults, and with people who have addictions, for the growth of young leaders into pastors and deacons.

Please pray for the political situation in Ukraine. There is a big possibility that under the next president Ukraine could become a very liberal country where there would be no room for God and the Bible.



## March

Greetings to you, dear brothers and sisters, coworkers of the BIEM mission.

As I promised in my last letter, I want to share with you some of our blessings in the ministry, and also some prayer needs.

When we held a family camp in the summer of 2018, we had more unbelievers in the camp than believers. As happens after every camp, we faced the question of how to continue working with these people in the city. Our guests were open in the camp, but we've already been down this road—when people return home from camp, they're different. They close up. When you invite them to a meeting, they come reluctantly or simply don't come. One of our sisters, Veronica, is a good fitness trainer for women. In the camp she conducted several lessons, and somewhere along the line somebody commented that they would come to such classes if we offered them. So, when we returned from camp, we began to consider the possibility of such meetings. For us, this was, to say the least, quite unusual: "Fitness-meetings in the church." We weren't sure and decided to ponder and pray about the idea for

some time. Our basement gym was not yet ready. Where could we hold such meetings? Another question was, “Where should people change clothes?” If we had a physical fitness class for women and girls, how could we work it out so that, during this time, no men would be there? Fitness – this is only a sport. How should we make these meetings into something Christian, so that people would read and consider the Gospel?

The matter of arranging it was much simpler; the matter of the spiritual element was complicated. Then Veronica found a Christian course for sportspeople and it was decided that we needed to try it for 1 or 2 months. Because for us this is something new—we needed to understand how the Lord is leading in this matter. Whether there’s a use for it.

The results surpassed our expectations. No sooner had we begun to hold these meetings for the women from the family camp and their friends, than the girls from the church youth also requested that we do a group for them. As a result, we have two groups of about 10 people. They meet 2 times a week (Tuesday and Thursday). At first they met in the smaller meeting room, the adult women in the morning and then the students in the evening.

A normal meeting consists of two parts. First is the sport time of 1 hour, and then about an hour of fellowship. It’s remarkable that new people whom we didn’t previously know have begun to come to these gatherings. They are the friends of friends. The very fact that people have stepped over the threshold of the church and here they read the Gospel already gladdens us. Please pray for the opportunity to reach their hearts through the preaching of the Gospel.

It seems that these women enjoy fellowshiping; it’s a useful use of time. We have gone through this many times as well, that when people hear that the Gospel demands a decision from them, in the best case scenario, only a few remain. Please pray that the Lord will perform miracles of transfiguration in the hearts of women and girls.



In my previous letter I wrote that, by God’s mercy and your support we had completed repair work in the Sunday school classrooms in the basement of our building. Our largest meeting room temporarily changes into a mini-gymnasium. This helps by allowing the other rooms in the church to remain available for other meetings. But it’s already evident that if this ministry grows, we will have to do refurbishing work in the room planned for a future gym. Please pray for the development of the evangelistic sports ministry in our church. For the ability to do that refurbishing work for a gym. For spiritual fruit from this ministry.

I want to ask you separately to pray for family camp, which we are planning for June 21-26 this year. Pray for the resources for this camp, and that even now God will be preparing married couples and family members who won’t go simply for a getaway, but who will be ready to receive the Word of God into their lives. We are planning a camp for 80 people (families with children).

Thank you again for your open hearts and for joint ministries to our Lord.

With best wishes for God’s mercies,  
Your brother,  
Vitaly Bilyak from Ternopil