



## The Bilyaks in Ternopil, Ukraine

### 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Report, 2020

#### October

Greetings, dear brothers and sisters!

In my letter, I want to thank you for your support of our ministry in Ternopil here in western Ukraine.

Due to the quarantine, complicated times have come for the ministry and for communication. We can only dream about future trips. As with you, our mass media instills fear in people. Many people try not to leave home without a special need for it.

In October, the coronavirus visited many people in our church. Starting about October 15, many people at church fell ill. We had to close the building for two Sundays. For two weeks, we met only by Zoom. Many were sick.

In our family, I got sick, and so did Katya and our daughter Karina. The sickness spread very quietly. We lost our sense of taste and smell, and we had slight fevers, but there were no complications. The Lord was merciful to all of our brothers and sisters. Nobody from the church died. None of them even had to stay in the hospital from the coronavirus. Those who did fall sick rested and recovered at home.

But on October 11, the Lord gave us a marvelous chance to celebrate the Harvest holiday. This was a genuine holiday of thanksgiving that centered on the Lord. There were many people. We are always a bit concerned when we meet that the police could show up and punish us for not precisely adhering to the dictates concerning the quarantine. More than the maximum number of people always gathers; most people don't wear a mask, and we don't strictly observe the social distancing. A few protestant churches in our city have closed their services and switched totally to online formats. Before a service, I always have these concerns, but when the time comes to begin the service and I see that the church has filled with more people than are supposed to be there, my heart fills with joy and thankfulness. These people are not afraid to take a risk and to come and bow before the Lord and to spend time in fellowship with one another. This year, I've noticed that many of our people in the church have begun to treasure fellowship more than in the past.





When the Harvest holiday arrived, we were all together. It seemed that, for a time, we forgot that outside of our church walls there was a quarantine and a sickness that was taking people's lives or their health. All of our focus was directed toward the Lord, who protects us from death and cares for our lives. We reminded ourselves and visitors from the city that we have something for which to thank God, the Giver of all blessings. It's important to remember that no kind of material blessings should take away or overshadow the accomplishment achieved on Calvary. Our brothers prayed and expressed thankfulness for the bread, salt, water, and the Bible. This prayer was in gratitude for both the physical and spiritual spheres of life. At that service, we also had unbelievers in attendance, including some who have often heard the Gospel but still have not made the decision to follow the Lord. This was also an evangelistic service. After the

service, we shared a meal together. Each person brought some food from home, and we ended up having a wonderful meal and fellowship.

Please pray for people who have not yet repented even though they visit our meetings on Sundays and the home groups or small group Bible studies. Pray for the Lord to save people and to add them to the church. Much work has been done. Many diverse ministries have taken place, many testimonies and Gospel sermons—but very few people are joining the church.

## November

Dear brothers and sisters, coworkers and partners of the BIEM mission—we greet you in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ!

It would appear that missionaries and the church must now learn how to live in new circumstances. The coronavirus, quarantine, political summons, and the rising of liberal powers are trying to establish requirements that are not acceptable for Christian things. The impossibility or difficulty in travels... funerals with closed caskets with no opportunity to hold funeral services... discrimination as quarantine limits for churches are set at 20 people while there are no limitations for big supermarkets with crowds of people... All of this forces us to think about how to live and what to do. As they say, the world is changing not by days but by the hour. We don't have time to adapt or even to understand the demands that the authorities gave two weeks ago regarding how and when to quarantine let alone to figure out what they dreamed up yesterday.

In New Life Church, we strive to maintain our services and meetings. So far, the police have not showed up. It's our understanding that those overseeing the Greek Orthodox church basically ignore the demands, which gives us a certain kind of boldness not to turn our attention to demands that are sometimes absurd or strange from the authorities.

Probably, the ministry that has suffered the most has been the outreach to the orphans at the New Village orphanage. Before the quarantine, a group of our brothers and sisters visited the orphans at least once a month. Now, visiting these children is extremely complicated.

The administration there must uphold the demands of the quarantine, and those requirements forbid visits by outsiders. We've had to adapt, and now we try at least once every 2 months to go to these children unofficially. Unfortunately, we don't have a single photo of these meetings, since by law such encounters aren't supposed to happen. Because our meetings with the kids are now less frequent, when we do go, each time we can take various kinds of aid and gifts for the children plus things for general use. Now, besides sweets and fruits for the kids, we also take sanitizer for the boarding school, cleaning products, disposable diapers, and other things.

I'm very glad that I can meet with the men from our church. This provides an opportunity to cultivate leadership. Out of the 31 members of the church, we have 11 men in the brothers' council. These are special, godly people, with various amounts of spiritual experience. Several are quite young and naïve; others are more experienced and zealous. On Mondays we have our get-togethers. Our Monday meetings alternate—one day, it will be a brothers' council, where we can discuss the church, and the next Monday we'll have a brothers' supper, where we eat together and read the Scriptures and pray. All the men of the church are welcome to join in these suppers, including those who aren't on the brothers' council.

These brothers are my priority in the ministry. This is the future of the church. However, not everything goes the way I would like. Yet, the Lord is raising up ministers. A year ago, the church chose two deacons and one minister for a trial period. And at the end of November, we had a church members' meeting. At that meeting, the church confirmed the ordination of the deacons, but didn't confirm the brother (he was already a deacon) for the pastoral ministry. I had hoped that the addition of a pastor to the church would give me an opportunity to start a new ministry. But it's evident that I still need to pray and consider how to proceed in the future. For now, I remain the sole pastor in the church, but we have the good news that we now have a third deacon.



Despite the quarantine, in November we were also able to hold our “Following Christ” school in the church. We all sat at spaced-out desks, but due to the quarantine our instructor couldn't come in person, so he delivered his teaching online via Zoom. It was a bit unusual, but the course was interesting, and we were glad to be learning after such a prolonged time of not holding such classes. We learned how to evangelize to people who live with some sort of religious belief. Yaroslav is a former Greek Catholic priest who got saved. When he accepted Christ, he began to preach the true Gospel in his church. As a result, he was kicked out and they stripped him of his title of priest. Now, he's the pastor of a church in

Zakarpatskoy region. He explained many valuable things concerning how better to share the news of salvation with religious people.

Another significant event in November was the brotherly conference of the Brotherhood of Independent ECB Churches and Missions in the western region. Our church is relatively new, and for our people it's very important to understand and to feel fellowship with other brethren, and to feel their connection to a larger community. There were around 70 brothers and ministers. This was a very warm time of fellowship in brotherly worship and reading of the Word.

Please pray concerning the leadership of our church, that the Lord will raise up new ministers and missionaries from among the members of our church.

On December 20, we have planned a baptism. Two young people are preparing to be baptized. Pray for these men. I'll write more about them in my next letter.

Pray for other people to get baptized. There are others in the church who need to be baptized, but they are shying away from this matter for various reasons.



## December

Greetings, dear brothers and sisters, coworkers and partners of the BIEM mission!

During this complicated time, God has given us the special grace of holding a holiday in our church. The occasion of this holiday is a baptism and a salvation decision.

From time to time I ask you to pray for various people who delay being baptized. There are always such people, but thanks be to God that there are also others who hurry to serve the Lord! Such people bring encouragement and a holiday for the church.

Yesterday, on December 20, almost at the end of a year that hasn't been the easiest, two young people, Eugene and Eva, were baptized. Both of them are students. Both are fruit of the youth ministry in our church.

When we began the class for discipleship and preparation for baptism, there were 5 or 6 people in it. But when the time for baptism arrived, there were only two left. One young lady from the youth group decided that she would get baptized at a later time. And we ministers of the church had advised two men from the rehabilitation center to wait and undergo the class a second time and to be baptized with the next group.

As for holding a baptism in the wintertime, usually we hold them in a pool of one of our city's hospitals. But this time it wasn't realistic to rent the pool. This hospital is one of those that receives Covid-19 patients, and the pool is closed. The swimming pool that we normally set up at the rehabilitation center is very large for building, and it takes a lot of water. For some months I'd already been considering that we need to make or to buy a baptistry for the church. We don't have the opportunity to construct a permanent baptistry in our building, which is located in a building with many floors. We needed a portable one. We can't buy a baptistry in Ukraine, and it's extremely expensive to order one from outside the



country. I resolved to make one myself. I searched for photos of wooden baptistries on the Internet, and I watched videos of baptisms that used baptistries. Thus was born the idea of making an 8-sided baptistry.

I didn't find any ready-to-use designs on the internet, so I mapped it out on the floor of the church in order to see how to do everything. There, I counted the size of the floor tiles, calculated what kinds of screws to use...

One particular difficulty was ordering a polyurethane cover. One company that glues tent covers for trucks declined to take special orders. But a second company accepted my dimensions, and it turned out excellently.

As a result, two full days spent in wood shavings and sawdust ended up giving me success. I should say that this was a miracle for me, since I never trained to do any sort of woodworking. My training was to be a dentist. But thanks to my father, I understand a lot about working with wood and metal. While I was working in the church basement, there was poor cell phone reception and no wifi. and I had time for reflection. As I worked with the wood, I considered how our Lord Jesus had a relationship to carpentry. They called him the son of the carpenter. This was a good time for thinking. I received pleasure from this sort of labor and its result.

But an even greater pleasure for me was to conduct the baptism of Eugene and Eva in this baptistry. It turned out to be a remarkable holiday for our church. There was much music and singing, the Word of God was preached, and especially loud were the replies of Eugene and Eva to my questions. Each one replied, "I believe!" That was a longer worship service than usual, but everyone was in a jubilant mood. This was my first experience baptizing indoors in the church building as part of a church service.



Friends, please continue to pray for Eugene and Eva, for their faithfulness to the Lord. Young people will go through many temptations and trials. Pray for them to serve the Lord faithfully.

Also pray for newcomers to the church, that the Lord will add saved souls to the church. Ten days ago, the brethren from the church and I analyzed the ministry of the church. We noted that we have much evangelism in the

church. There has been much personal evangelism, there is evangelism conducted among the youth, and at the rehabilitation center. Many hear the Gospel through the sports ministry, and through the distribution of New Testaments and evangelistic calendars and other pamphlets, as well as in the camps for children, families, and youth. But despite all of this, we have few baptisms.

Thank you for being with us in this ministry.

With best blessings and wishes for good,

Your brother,

Vitaly Bilyak

