



## **The Bilyaks in Ternopil, Ukraine**

### **1st Quarter Report, 2022**

#### **January**

Hello, dear friends, coworkers and partners of the BIEM mission.

It's a big pleasure for us to share with you some of what's happening in our lives. It's difficult to explain and describe what's going on in Ukraine now. You've probably already heard a lot about Ukraine in the news, or read about it on Facebook, or talked about it in cafes. It seems that Ukraine is the main news in the world. Thank you for your prayers, for your messages with encouraging words, which we receive via letters, Messenger, and Facebook. Thank you for your open hearts for praying and supporting us believers in Ukraine.

What's now happening here in Ukraine forces us to examine our lives afresh. To reevaluate our values in life. Many Bible texts sound forth in a fresh way. Various prayers have become special. For instance, when the church comes together, there is the prayer, "Lord, thank you for one more week of peace!" that is pronounced very sincerely and deeply. We are learning to appreciate traffic jams on our roads. It's better to drive to school in a traffic jam than to be caught in a jam of traffic fleeing from war. It's hard to answer a child's question, "Papa, has the war started yet?" Quarantine restrictions, masks, and vaccines have already ceased to be problems. It's like in that joke, "If you encounter the tick from a bear in the forest, you don't need to worry!" Of course, all this create a backdrop in life that is difficult to ignore.

Given this disturbing new reality, we think about what we can do as a church. For us, this challenge is the new reality. How can we calm people? Which Bible texts and truths can encourage believers? How can we respond to the concerns of our unbelieving friends and acquaintances? How to preach the gospel and talk about God's love when there is so much anger and hatred around? How to talk about hope in God when every new day is unpredictable? How to learn to treat enemies, how to love them as people because the Lord loves them, while at the same time defending your country, being ready to shoot? These are just some of the questions that people are interested in today.

Despite all these challenges and pre-war tensions, we are conducting all our ministries according to our plans and schedules. We are planning our spring and summer evangelistic outreaches. We are discussing holding camps and family holidays.

My personal emphasis at the outset of 2022 is the ministry among men. As I've already written earlier, my priority is to emphasize the brethren and men in the church. I have two groups in this ministry. The first group consists of all the brothers and men in the church without differentiating based on their age or faith... The second group is the leaders of the church, those who are dedicated to a greater or lesser degree, those who are already in a ministry. All these men are members of our brotherly council. We have 12 people, all of whom except one already have families. They are all younger than me, nearly all of them have young children. Such a gold reserve of the church. Some of them are weakly grounded in the faith, but others are the opposite, in good spiritual shape. For January, the men from our church had planned our annual brothers' retreat. This is a special time when we can pray together, read Scriptures together, and praise God. Our retreats consist of two components. The first is spiritual, and it consists of some sort of spiritual theme. The second component is organizational matters. Touching on the spiritual aspect, in this year we decided to underscore our attention on Jesus Christ. We named these meetings "Praising Jesus Christ." Before the retreat, each of the brethren read specific passages, books of the New Testament, so that our focus was on all the books of the New Testament. At the time of our discussion, we all shared—or you could even say offered praise—based on what they had read about Jesus Christ at home.

An important part of this meeting was the re-ordination of all the brothers to serve in the church. It was like a moment of accountability, like an opportunity to say to each other, "You can count on me to serve the church."

Please pray for the team of leaders. For their families, for their spiritual growth, for their effectiveness in ministry.

Two more prayer requests:

1. My son-in-law Sergei and daughter Karina have decided to complete their ministry in our church and instead to go into church planting in Ukraine. This will be in Kyiv. They still aren't sure exactly where they need to labor, in which region of a city with a population of 3 million. There are still a lot of undecided questions. Moving, renting a place to live, a team to work with, finances for ministry... Please pray with us for God's guidance and overseeing of all these matters.
2. We greatly need a projector. In our ministries, we are using a projector all the time. We have one old projector attached to the ceiling of our auditorium. Another small LED projector was always with us in camp, at children's meetings, in teen meetings, and at youth and leadership meetings. Unfortunately, it broke and no longer works with any computer, except one very old notebook computer. An expert repairman told us that it can't be repaired and that it will soon cease working completely. This is a very urgent need. We will be thankful for help.

Thank you, that we can really sense your prayers and support, to be part of a large team of God's coworkers.

With best wishes,  
Your brother,  
Vitaly Bilyak

## February-March 2022

“Marathon.” That is the exact word and feeling that can describe how I feel today. This marathon has already lasted 44 days. It began on February 24. At daybreak I usually sleep well, but on that morning I picked up my phone and read the fearful word *war*. The word is unthinkable in this civilized, high-tech 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Why marathon? Because it lasts a long time. In the first days of the war, news broadcasts assured us that this would not last long. Marathon—because we are all plenty tired. In the early days it was fearful and we did a lot of things on adrenaline, on enthusiasm. Then we did things because they were needed. And because the war has not ended and has no end in sight. A marathon, because you don’t know what will await you “around the corner of tomorrow.” Some people call on the phone and talk about what they would like to do in a week. I don’t say it, but I think, “Call me a day before that, and then I’ll try to help you, because I don’t even know what will happen tomorrow.” A marathon, because on particular portions of the road—especially in the first days of the war—we had the coolest support group. I had never received so many letters of encouragement and promises of prayer. People wrote about existences, which I had long forgotten. One would be ready to pray. Another would write words of encouragement from the Scriptures. Another would want to know about our needs. Friends, you are incredible! Thank you for all your messages, for the voice messages, and for the encouraging stickers. A marathon, because there was no opportunity to write extensive letters. Today has been the first day when I could get dash home from the church and sit down calmly at the computer and begin to compose a letter. For several weeks I have been reminding myself that partners and friends in ministry are waiting for a letter, but I simply couldn’t find a little time to do it.

It seems that this will turn out to be a letter of report for three months because there is something to say, if only I can find the energy, inspiration, and time to describe it all.

### **You can’t be thoroughly prepared for war if you don’t know what that is...**

Although the threat of war had already flown through the air and throughout the internet and news, nobody actually believed that it would happen. When, 6 weeks before the war, I wrote to a church group a short letter of instructions on the theme “What we will do if war breaks out,” a few of my brethren at church didn’t understand. They shrugged their shoulders or reacted as if the pastor had committed some sort of mistake. And before it began, I myself didn’t believe it

and wasn't ready. For example—I knew that our sons' had expired passports. I understood that, if war comes, I would need to send my loved ones outside the borders of our country, and I constantly recalled this unresolved matter. But I never started the actual process of getting those passports made. I will say in advance that the Lord was merciful concerning my negligence in this matter, and in the end, their temporary passports were extended, so they were able to leave Ukraine and are now in safety. Most of the points in my message for the church turned out to be prophetic and useful in real life.

### **Uncertainty.**

Now, looking back, we have already become experts in many matters, but in the early days of the war everything was terrible and unknown. On the very first day, 9 relatives from Zhytomyr came to our house. Their city had been shelled in the first hours of the war. The first evening. It was time to go to bed. But is it possible to sleep on the attic floor or only in the basement? I smile at this myself now when I remember, but on the first nights we slept dressed in tracksuits to be ready in case something suddenly happened. On the very first day, we filled a clean container with drinking water, and suddenly there would be no light or drinking water. Lines formed in the stores. There were lines at ATMs, and not mere lines at pharmacies, but long lines. People bought everything, and on the first day of the war we had no bread at home, and many people came, so I bought more than 10 loaves of bread to have left for a "rainy day." In the city, on the streets, there were practically no cars. Only the bypass road was filled with cars as people drove toward the borders. On the first day of the war, I was in church. I recorded a video message to our people. It was a relatively calm day, but full of uncertainty. We didn't know if we would be allowed to hold services. We did not know which of the men would be drafted into the Army, we did not know that refugees would be ready to sleep on the concrete floor of the church. We did not know that when we read the Psalms of David and Asaph, we would weep. These were days of faith and trust. We were scared, but we knew the Lord was with us. Most worried about children and women.

### **Pain and tears.**

I have never been whiny. But during these 44 days we have seen a lot of tears and cry ourselves. At first, we cried and thought that over time we would get used to it and stop, but we didn't get used to it. We cried because it hurt; it was an inner pain. We cried during songs and prayers in the church and when we sang at home. We cried when we looked at our children and worried about our relatives. We cried, saying goodbye, when we sent relatives abroad so that children and wives would not live in constant expectation of something worse. We wept while listening to the stories of refugees and watching the news. We cry while looking at the photographs of children standing at the grave of their mother, hastily taken right in the yard of a house in Bucha. Today we are crying because in Kramatorsk the enemies dropped a super-powerful bomb, "Point U," on people who came to the evacuation train to escape from the war. Fifty people were killed, including 5 children. More than 100 people were injured. We cry, too, repenting before God for being indifferent to human grief, that we did not cry with the people of Syria, who were bombed by the same pilots who today drop bombs on our cities, did not cry with the Georgians when blood was shed there... All our tears are prayers. Sometimes we have no words to express to the Lord. There are tears and sighs. At such moments, I

remember Paul's words, that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with unspeakable sighs. Now we understand this in a special way.

I'm writing all this because I don't want to forget. Because I'm afraid that when peace and tranquility come, we will forget the lessons that we received.

### **Refugees and the Ministry of the Church.**

The first refugees arrived in cars on the first day of the war. How could we minister to those fleeing war? By feeding them. By giving them an opportunity to rest, or sleep. We didn't have beds or mattresses in the church, but we did have mattresses and sleeping bags. These were places to stay. Our guys brought several mattresses from the rehabilitation center.

On one of the first days, a refugee family with adopted children came to us. These were not small children. All of them were teenagers. Only 9 people. We decided that we could accept them for permanent residence in the church. What does "permanent" mean during war? "Live here as long as you want." We have 2 rooms and a bathroom in the basement of the church. We decided this would be a refuge for this family. After 2 days, our men from the church made a simple repair there, bought a shower stall and a toilet. We also made a small class available to them. They are still with us. This whole family has been a great blessing to us. Mama Luda has prepared food not only for her family, but also for many refugees, the girls helped clean the room and prepared beds. And the guys have loaded more than one ton of various aid.

Starting on the 3rd day, the military situation began to escalate, and evacuation trains with refugees came to our West. Each train brought at least 2,000 people. Ternopil has become a hub for refugees. People spent the night, and in the morning traveled further to Poland, Romania or Slovakia. There were times when more than 50 people spent the night in our small church. The first weeks we kept statistics, recorded the number of people... But at some point it no longer mattered. When people stopped coming by train, they again started arriving by car from other regions, from the center and the north. Refugees from Chernihiv replaced those from Kharkov, and then refugees from Irpin and Bucha came instead of refugees from Chernihiv. At some point, there were people from every part of Ukraine where there was grief. For the last two weeks, there have been fewer transit refugees, but with each new day more and more of the refugees who have settled here in Ternopil come to us for assistance. And we continue to listen to their stories. We pray with some. We cry again. Although many of our women and children are abroad, our Sunday services are filled with people we have never seen before.

### **Bomb shelter.**

As you know, our church is situated in an apartment building. There are 108 apartments above us, 108 families live in our building. We are on the 1st floor, and we have a large basement. Two or three weeks before the war, our city authorities started talking about the readiness of bomb shelters in case of air alerts. Even long before the war, for the past few years, at 3:00 pm on Wednesdays in the city, the alarm siren was always turned on. I'm not sure, but I have not heard of this in any other city in Ukraine. This was done to make sure the warning system was

working and that people could hear how the alarm sounds. When the topic of war became looming and real, we decided to equip our church basement—which we had been preparing to make a gym for sports ministry—into a bomb shelter. Even before the war, we bought drinking water and laid out chairs. We prepared an announcement that the church would offer its basement as a shelter in case of air raids. It was something prophetic. On the very first day of the war, our basement became the most popular place.

During the first days of the war, it was overcrowded. We men of the church decided to establish a watch. Every night, one or two brothers are on duty in the church. The siren sounds almost every night. People come. Our attendants offer hot tea to people, pray with them, and read the Bible. What is happening is amazing. People who used to bypass our church have become family. They know us by name, and we already know many of them. Some people began to offer their help. One family constantly brings stew at manufacturer's prices. We buy from them much cheaper than in stores, but the main thing is not even the price, but the fact that when the war began, this product was not in stores. This stew has become part of the food packages that we distribute to refugees here, and we take it to where explosions are heard and blood is shed. I think we have already bought more than 1,500 cans of stew through them.

Several times already, our neighbors have been forced to sit through our services. When we are going to worship and the alarm sounds, our church family also goes down to the basement. Usually people from home are already waiting for us there. We pray with them, we sing songs, and hear a sermon. Sometimes I go into the shelter, and people are sitting there all silent and gloomy. I say out loud, "Hello family!" and start to smile. We joke. We ask about their problems. Ternopil was not bombed for a long time, so people decided it was not necessary to go to the shelter. Then only a few came. This Sunday evening, Ternopil was shelled. The explosions were not far from the church. People saw flashes, felt the shock wave. Within 5 minutes, our shelter became popular again.

There is much more that could be said, but I will save other comments for another day. Some other time I will tell you how the Lord guides us.

I understand that asking you to pray is superfluous because you are already praying. I want to ask you to pray for the strength to serve. That we run this marathon to victory. I thank each of you for your donations, for your kind words, for your kindness! God bless you!

Vitaly Bilyak

