



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

### **1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Report, 2023**

#### **Special Letter**

Greetings, dear friends, brothers and sisters, staff, and associates of the BIEM mission!

In this letter, I want to talk about the ministry of our rehabilitation center and about a need that arose. This ministry exists to help men who are addicted to alcohol and drugs.

For more than 10 years, our young church has been ministering to addicts. This ministry began with personal meetings. Now it is a good rehabilitation center, where more than 10 dependent men can live simultaneously. During these years, we've seen many lives changed. We've seen God work powerfully in the hearts of men who had been abandoned by friends, family, and relatives. We've seen how men who were dying in the literal and figurative sense of the word come back to life. What happens at the rehabilitation center is always a miracle. These are stories about contrasts. These are stories of miraculous change and rebirth to a new life. These are stories of ups and downs, disappointments and hope, stories of recovery, healing, and hard work. Currently, 8 men are living at the rehabilitation center. In January, two of them were baptized and are now helping new people. Today, a new man was admitted for rehabilitation.



Not everyone stays for full rehabilitation. Some return to the old life. But those who really need and desire a new life remain. Such men go through repentance. At some point, they realize their addiction is a consequence of the destructive effect of sin in their lives. And the first thing they do is bow in a prayer of repentance before the Lord, asking for God's strength and help in a new life.

In the beginning, with God's help, we bought an old, dilapidated house near the forest, far from town. We partially restored it and began to accept the first applicants for rehabilitation. A few years later, a fire occurred. Today, this is a beautiful building, where there are good conditions for changing lives.

Now our rehabilitation center is undergoing another test. We went through the fiery trial several years ago. Now comes the water trial. It's still going on, but we can already see the end.

About a month ago, the well lost water. And having water for the rehabilitation center is a vital, strategic matter. It's not just a question of convenience and hygiene. We run a big farm—about 100 sheep and goats and about 10 cows, bulls, and calves. All the animals need water. The nearest house with water is 500 meters [over 1,640 feet] away. Moreover, there's no proper road to this house. Not in the sense that the asphalt is poor quality; it's that the approach is just dirt, and now due to the rainy season it's 500 meters of slippery swamp.



The brothers tried to reach the pump but then realized that they could not do it. The pump was jammed at a depth of 40 meters [131 feet]. It would not move up or down. We began consulting experts. We found people who guaranteed they can help. They are quality specialists in this field. As a result of many days of work, they concluded it would be more expensive to renew the old well than to drill a new one. Therefore, they've begun to create a new well. As of now, the new well is almost ready. The final cost to us will be \$2,500 –



\$3,000. This is an amount we don't have, which we are borrowing to pay for labor and materials. By human reasoning, this is all happening at a bad time. But apparently the Lord has His own plans in this matter.

Friends, please pray for the ministry of the rehabilitation center, for the men who are now working through this difficult stage in life. If you can help financially with this issue of the well, we will be very grateful to you.

Vitaly Bilyak

## January

Each trip to Donbas is unique. This latest trip was unique in a special way. Something special that we haven't done on past trips happened on this trip.

We had planned to go to Bakhmut, the hottest frontline city, to serve people in special trouble and need. This time we had to go a little farther than usual. Our target group on this trip was to be people living across the Bakhmutka River, which is even closer to the front. When I was already on the road, between Ternopil and the Dnieper, I received a call from pastor



Alexander, with whom we constantly work here in the Donbas region. He said we could not proceed according to plan. It wasn't that they wouldn't let us in, but they strongly advised us against going to the other side of Bakhmut, closer to the fighting. Warnings came from a variety of sources. Our vehicle would have to cross a pontoon ferry, since the bridge was broken. This pontoon crossing either operates or doesn't operate, depending on the situation on the front. If the orcs press the attack and approach the crossing, it is shot at and dangerous to use. If our troops are advancing, you can go along the crossing. It wasn't safe during these days.

Alexander proposed Plan B.

This was something we'd had in mind as a backup plan, but as it turned out, the Lord had it as the primary plan for us.

Just before reaching Bakhmut there is another city, Konstantinovka. It's 15-20 kilometers from Bakhmut. This is the first relatively peaceful city as you travel away from the front line. Relatively peaceful, because there are more civilians here than in Bakhmut, but there are a lot of military people here, too. Of every 10 vehicles on the road, 8 will be military.

It is amazing and blessed that there is a living church in this city. There is a pastor name Evgeny and a unique church serving just short of the front line. Before the war, 80,000 people lived here. Now many have gone to the west of Ukraine, to Europe, and even farther. But there is a separate category of refugees who do not travel from the front line farther than 20-30 kilometers. Staying nearby makes them feel like they are at home. Therefore, many of them stopped in Konstantinovka.

In terms of territory, this city is very extensive due to mines and huge industrial zones. Public transport does not run here, and if it does happen to work, it is very unreliable. On a trip from one region to another, you can lose half a day. The church solved this problem in the following way—they now meet in 3 independent locations. In every location there are responsible people. These are groups of 20 to 50 people. In one location, Sunday services are held twice, because more people desire to attend than the building can accommodate. And the hall is full for both services. So basically, the church has 4 big groups. The houses in which they gather are not the classic church buildings we imagine. These are ordinary, modest residential buildings, which their owners offered to be used for meetings. In two of the 3 houses, the owners have left the city but still allow the church to meet there, a kind of house-group church.

We had our first meeting in the suburbs. The small room, which turned out to be the kitchen, was packed with people. In the middle stood a table with sandwiches and cups for tea. After a 4-hour journey, we had the opportunity to drink tea with people and eat a sandwich. At each location, we held mini-worship services. They shared testimonies, read the Word of God, and sang a Christmas carol.

During the last meeting, while I was preaching, there was an incoming round of artillery. An explosion boomed somewhere not far from us. The women twitched. Everyone murmured and whispered. Then everyone switched back to me, as if nothing had happened.

When people left the house, they approached my vehicle (trailer) and received aid. This time, the aid packages consisted of a 12.5-kilogram food basket, several candles, and a fresh loaf of bread.

In letters and in personal meetings, I have asked you to pray that the people we serve become disciples of Jesus Christ. Because in places like Bakhmut, it's hard to understand how God works in the lives of the people we preach to and serve after we leave. But here in Konstantinovka, we have seen how discipleship flourishes. These people, in addition to Sunday meetings, also meet during the week.



After serving with this church, on the same day we were still able to minister to the military. Serving the military lasted for 2 days. On the first day, we met with one of the believing young brothers, who is about 20 years old. I know his adoptive parents and him personally. It so happened that he is a trusted person of the commander of a large unit. So, on the 1st day, we met with him and his colleagues at a remote location, where they have logistical support. Here we gave them an electric generator, warm socks, thermal underwear, tactical gloves, some clothes, warm sweaters, food, 7 boxes of dry rations, and 12 high-quality tourniquets ... The commander suggested we visit the soldiers at their resting locations. The scheme is simple: 1 part of the soldiers is in combat positions on the front line; the 2nd half of the soldiers is resting. They change after 1 day.

We had the opportunity to spend time with those at rest. To do this, we arrived in another front-line city of Toretsk, where we held services at 3 different locations with military personnel. We had the opportunity to see the conditions in which the servicemen live. At the first location, the meeting was on the street, the others were indoors, more precisely in basements. Perhaps someday I will be able to write what kind of premises these were. As I said above, the first meeting was outdoors. We went behind the premises to keep a low profile from those driving and walking past. Around the corner of the building, I saw a huge bomb crater with a diameter of about 10 meters under the very wall, and in the wall, there was a hole several square meters in diameter and a huge crack rising towards the roof. On another day, an incoming barrage had struck. No one died, but some were wounded. The day before, we saw traces of a barrage at another base, where we left aid. Crooked metal beams lay 50 meters from the nearest room.

Pastor Alexander had brought along an accordion, and at every meeting we could sing a song with the soldiers. We had words printed on slips of paper that were handed out, and we sang together. At each meeting, we read the Word of God, shared testimonies, and the Gospel. And we prayed very sincerely for these soldiers. We also brought treats to each location. Chocolate, juices, condensed milk, peanuts, and sunflower seeds. At one of the meetings, we met with the commander of this unit. Looks like we're looking forward to a fruitful collaboration with this group of brave men. Now they need water tanks to enable the soldiers to wash themselves. Today I already bought these tanks and sent them to them by courier delivery. Hygiene is vital. I feel that on my future trips I will need to plan one more day to visit these guys. They do not have a chaplain, although one is provided for by the state. Pray for the opportunity to minister to these soldiers.

In a week I plan my next trip to the front line. Please pray for God's guidance and protection.

Your brother in the Lord,  
Vitaly Bilyak

## **February**

I greet you, dear brothers and sisters, associates of the BIEM mission. Thank you very much for your support of ministry in Ukraine. What we can do here is our mutual work and ministry.

My latest trip to Bakhmut was again special, like the previous ones.

It so happened that the exact day that we were in Bakhmut fell on a kind of abnormal “anniversary” – January 24, 2023, which was 11 months of the war in Ukraine.

This trip is unique in that this time Sergey Koop traveled with me. He is my son-in-law, missionary, and founder of the church in Ternopil. Together with my daughter Karina, they are working on planting a new church in one of the large micro districts of our city.

On the way to the front, we saw many columns of the Armed Forces of Ukraine moving to the east. There are a lot of private vehicles in the columns.

It was a very eventful trip. One of my relatives asked to me to meet with his friend, Pavel, serving at Bakhmut zero (the frontline is the battlefield). Their unit needed medical supplies. The guys are sick. I needed antipyretic medicine, meds for colds, for sore throats... We met at the entrance to Konstantinovka. As it turned out, we are familiar with him; we once met in Zhytomyr. We handed over the medicines, warm clothes, thermal underwear, socks ...

This trip is unique in that Bakhmut, which we still managed to drive into, is a city that is becoming more and more surrounded by enemy troops. So much so that the usual road on which we drove before has become dangerous. In the evening of the day before the trip, when we stopped in the city of Dnepr, we began to receive warnings about the usual route to Bakhmut. Various people who prayed for us sent us messages that we should not use the normal route, because there was information it was being shot up by enemies. There were battles near this road, and all cars on it were in danger. Therefore, this time we drove through the fields over a very bad road. It's possible I may not be able to visit Bakhmut in the near future. I am not a military strategist, but it is clear from open sources that this city is being surrounded, and perhaps our troops will leave this city to level the front line and prevent surrounded areas. In these predictions, I would like to be wrong.

It was an interesting trip in that plans changed several times. At first we planned to visit Bakhmut, but from the experience of the previous trip, it became clear from the news that Bakhmut was becoming too dangerous. So we began planning a trip to Kurakhovo, another front-line city, and villages nearby. Then some brothers gave us 200 sleeping bags, which were badly needed in Bakhmut. We decided after the distribution of food in the Kurakhovo region the next day to make a very short trip to Bakhmut to distribute only sleeping bags, but a female volunteer who knows the situation in Bakhmut well contacted us and asked us to visit this fortress city again with food packages. That's why we went there again.

This is already my 3rd trip to Bakhmut and my 8th to the front line. This heroic city sounded different today. Before, in the city we heard explosions; there could be a series of explosions. This time the sounds of continuous battle sounded. In addition to constant incoming and outgoing explosions, gunfire (shots in bursts) was heard, most likely machine guns. The locals said this was already the 3rd such noisy day.





In addition to 138 food parcels weighing 12.5 kg, we brought 150 loaves of bread, more than 1,300 candles, several hundred lanterns, dozens of blankets, and pillows. And we handed out more than 130 sleeping bags.

We had a unique opportunity to preach the Gospel to these people. Before giving aid, each of us had the opportunity to speak God's Word to these people and pray

for them. There were personal conversations and prayers. The Lord was with us and gave us the Word for these people.

This trip was special because we had the opportunity to make targeted deliveries of aid. This made it possible to see the life of people living in war conditions, to be in their broken yards, in the corridors of high-rise buildings, to hear stories of conflicts for firewood, because firewood is in short supply in Bakhmut.

For the first time during the war, for the first time out of all 8 trips to the front line, I went down to the cellars where people live. We saw people living without sunlight. There are areas where people do not come out of the basements even during the day. When they saw us off, these women just went out to the exit, but did not step through the door. And they have a reason – literally the day before they buried their friend, who died in the courtyard of an apartment building, not far from this basement.

Next, together with pastor Alexander, we visited the village of Ivanovskoye (a village near Bakhmut; the neighboring village of Klishchievka already has orcs) to pick up at least some of the valuable things from the church building, where the church gathered before this war. It was a completely new and modern house of prayer with walls pierced through with fragments, with part of the windows without glass. The yard was littered with pieces of wood, tiles, slate, glass. There I took a fragment of ammunition as a trophy from the war. I want to bring it to church this Sunday, to let people in Western Ukraine hold a piece of war to motivate them to pray for victory. Before Alexander drove into the yard, we moved these debris apart so as not to damage the wheels. While we were carrying folding tables, flour, diapers, collecting gasoline for a chainsaw, ammunition whistled over our heads from the basement. It was the most emotional





moment. Reality and chances of arrival here increased with every whistle and explosion. And we were not in the most dangerous area. On the road, from time to time a car with the military flew by, an infantry fighting vehicle (BMP) rumbled on its tracks. Then a car on a torn wheel rushed towards the city at full speed. When we returned to Bakhmut, all the way we saw the remains of that wheel that flew apart on the go.

We were back in the city. Although the war continued to sound here - after the village it seemed completely and not scary here. At such moments, you begin to understand people who have come from one part of Bakhmut to the other side of the city, and it is already easier for them.

I don't know if there will still be an opportunity to come here, but I would so much like to come to the liberated peaceful Ukrainian Bakhmut.

The next already "not anniversary" day had the opportunity to visit our soldiers-defenders. These are mostly older men, there are younger ones in between. Most of them have been fighting since the first months, so fatigue is already present. We wanted to thank them, cheer them up, pray with them, for them and for their families. We wanted to remind them that the Church is with them. Yes, and of course we gave them help. A generator, sleeping bags, lots of flashlights, batteries, power banks, juices, chocolate, coffee, tea, seeds, and snacks... We had three meetings with different groups of military personnel. Each meeting included an introduction, speeches with a wish from the Word of God and, of course, prayers.

This is already our second trip to the guys fighting for our victory. It seems that we are already getting closer, more open. We pray for the opportunity to bring the truths of God's word to our heroes.

I know that you are praying for us – we feel it. Thank you for being with us.

With best wishes and blessings,  
your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Vitaly Bilyak

## **March**

Dear brothers and sisters of the BIEM mission, I greet you! Here is more news about our ministry in Ukraine.

This letter was dictated along the way from the war zone to Ternopil.

From time to time, I ask myself the question, why do I go to the front line, why are these trips so important to me? These are quite expensive and costly trips, so I want to understand and be convinced that these efforts and resources are spent correctly and justifiably.

This is already my ninth trip to the east. As I wrote in previous letters and stories, each such trip is unique. There were trips when it was very noisy, dynamic (bomb-free), when it was necessary to quickly distribute aid, have a time to preach the Gospel and then evacuate quickly because of the proximity of shelling and explosions. This trip was different. In my own way, I like such trips when everything is calmer. When nothing explodes in the next street.

So, to continue...

These trips have already formed their own tradition, their own schedule. Departure from home from Sunday to Monday at 3 am. Until 5:00 am is still the curfew time, but the police do not stop on the highways, so the main task is to drive unnoticed onto the highway so as not to get stopped by the police. After 10-12 hours of travel I am in the Dnieper. This is the time to buy



150 loaves of bread and, if the weather is good, to wash the car and trailer. Check into a hotel for the night, go to bed early to leave early for the road to the east.

Tuesday is usually a day for civil service. From the Dnieper River to the front is 4 hours, so we leave at 6:00 in the morning to have enough time to serve the people. It is advisable to head back towards the Dnieper no later than 3:00 pm. Another 4 hours' drive, and in the evening you need to buy food for the military to minister to them the next day. Usually, we make the purchase in a large wholesale hypermarket.

Dinner comes after the purchase. As a rule, this is the only meal of the day. I agree – this is not the healthiest lifestyle, having 1 meal per day, but this is not always the case. Wednesday is the day to serve the military, then again 4 hours on the road towards the front. The only thing is that you don't have to leave so early. A few hours of communication with the military, then transfer of assistance, and then another 4 hours' drive back to the Dnieper. Dinner, rest, and in the morning, Thursday, the road home to Ternopil. Again, 10-12 hours on the road, and I'm at home. Usually it is 2,500 – 2,800 kilometers. After three trips to the east, you need to change the oil in the car engine, not to mention the doing constant maintenance of the car.

However, there is all this effort, the consumption of resources, the wear and tear of the car, the use of time for those special meetings with people that take place there near the front line... As you already know, in this ministry I work with pastor Alexander, who used to be a pastor in Bakhmut. He knows the needs; people call him on the phone asking for help. This time we planned to visit one of the villages near the town of Kurakhovo. There is such a pattern. Various volunteer organizations and churches more often and more actively help in cities, but villages are often left without attention.

I like to preach and serve in the villages, especially if it's a quiet day without shelling. Such trips on calm days provide an opportunity to tell the Gospel in greater detail. On such occasions we have a sermon of not 3-5 minutes, but 15, sometimes even 20 minutes, to present the Gospel.

This time we were in the village of Andriivka. There are many people here. About 1200 people live in the village. That's a lot for a village. Many are refugees who fled the war, but do not want to go further. Some have already fled from the war 2 times: in 2014 and in 2022.

When we drive up in two cars, a large crowd of people immediately gathers near the village council, in the center of the village. Before opening a trailer with aid or the car trunk with bread, we talk with the people and get acquainted. We say that we represent not the state and not some kind of charitable foundation, but Christians from Baptist churches. We explain that the help we bring is help thanks to Christians in America. This clarification is important, because a

lot of Russian propaganda in the east claims that America wants evil for Ukraine and Russia. And then, of course, preaching the Gospel. This time, when we finished preaching the Gospel, we invited the people to take a New Testament. I haven't seen such a fast distribution of New Testaments in a long time. A few minutes later, the box containing 98 New Testaments was empty.



The woman organizer had lists of those who needed urgent help. There were many more people in need than we could accommodate. This time I brought 122 food packages and 200 hygiene bags. We also had bread, candles, blankets, and vitamins with us.

Wednesday was a good meeting with the military. I gave them various items. Almost every time I meet with the military, there is some special need that you and I can serve. I have already brought them 2 generators, bought containers, barrels for water to equip the shower ... This time they asked for help to purchase antennas for walkie-talkies. The unit with which we became friends was abandoned, moved to the hottest point of the war – Bakhmut. Some of the positions they defend are in the lowlands. Their radios do not work there, or they work poorly. Communication is what saves lives in war. Some soldiers were injured when they climbed to a height to transmit some kind of radio message... So, I bought 8 antennas for them, in the amount of \$430.

Since almost the entire composition of the unit is now in combat positions, my meeting was with a small number of servicemen. With some there was only time to just say hello and exchange a few sentences. With others it turned out to be a good conversation, a prayer...

Friends, thank you for supporting Ukraine, for praying for us, for your donations and support, thank you very much.

With best wishes and blessings,  
your brother in Christ,  
Vitaly Bilyak from Ternopil