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Thank you!

One of the sweet surprises of service with Mission Network is the discovery of friends I've never met. I received an overwhelming number of cards for Christmas and my birthday, for which I thank you very much. Not only that, but you've been very generous with me in other ways. Because of your gifts toward my support as of 1 March I am receiving a salary instead of a stipend and expenses. This is a blessing, indeed, and very encouraging. Your support confirms God's leading in a special way and I'm grateful.

Lenten Weather

By the time you read this we will be well into the Easter season; as I write it is definitely still Lent. There were snow flurries last week, but I also notice that it's still light outside at the end of the day when I stand on the frozen ruts at the end of the road to flag down bus No. 31. Since childhood I've thought of cold, light, late-winter evenings as "Lenten weather." Spring has certainly been taking its time after a long and difficult winter, but by now the pond behind Odessa Seminary is free of ice and as I type I can hear the water birds making a racket.

Master's Program—First Session

In February we held our first "study module" for the Master's program that Odessa Seminary started last fall in cooperation with International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague, Czech Republic. You may remember that the joint project is intended to extend the resources of both schools: Odessa provides the handy location and the students, while IBTS provides an accredited program that allows busy, part-time students to stay closer to home and do at least some of their written work in Russian.

Sasha Abramov—the course leader whom I assist—and I were a little nervous about it all. IBTS sent Dr. David Brown to present a course on preaching—would he be satisfied with our arrangements? On the other hand, our students are experienced pastors with their own high standards—would they be satisfied with Dr. Brown? More to the point, if the first module flopped... would everybody blame us?

In the end it went well. Ten students gathered, including a new student from Astrakhan (Russia) and one from Belarus who couldn't get a visa last fall to attend orientation in Prague.

The hero of the session was our Armenian friend, Ashot, who had to come early and stay late because there's only one flight a week between Yerevan and Odessa. Russian and English are second and third languages for Ashot; he may struggle a little for self-expression, but he manages to get his ideas across. On Sunday he braved the icy roads to reach a village about two hours from Odessa where he had heard Armenians lived. It turned out that some of them had been praying that God would send them an Armenian-speaking preacher!

After this session we feel that communication between Odessa and Prague has improved; everybody understands the program better; the students are more confident listening to lectures in English; and in general a friendly, supportive group identity is forming. Whew!

My Life as an Advisor

Since last fall I've been serving as advisor to four students who are writing what are known as "diploma papers" in preparation for graduation. Although I've had to work with some of them long-distance, we've gotten rather well acquainted. Sometimes I feel a little bit like a midwife helping them to "give birth" to their research!

Three of them have written on topics that combine education and social work. One of the most interesting things I've observed over the last ten years or so is the way that evangelical Christians have moved into different kinds of social service ministries—activity that would have been illegal in Soviet times. Now, at last, students like these are beginning to combine scholarly research with their ministry experience and are coming up with some pretty useful recommendations for church-based social service work.

The Blessing of Convenience

For many years the three members of my friend Katya's family have lived in one room with a kitchen and bath. Through much careful planning and saving, they've gradually been redecorating their tight quarters and decided it was time to get rid of their large *shkaf*, which we might call a chiffarobe or wardrobe—the kind you could climb into and find yourself in Narnia. I was ecstatic when Katya offered it to me because I needed a *shkaf* badly; for months my clothes had been hanging in my apartment corridor for all the world to see.

But transporting a large piece of furniture isn't so easy. I needed help. The *shkaf* would have to be knocked down and moved to my apartment in pieces. My friend Zhenya was willing to lend his van and do the driving, but the dismantling and reassembling of an old Soviet-style cabinet is no trifling matter. The only person for a job like that is shy Vladimir Iakovich Tsybal, one of a vanishing breed of resourceful handymen. "I'm better with metal," he warned me. "Once we took one of those things apart and we never did get it back together. Finally we just built a different one out of the pieces, but I'll give it a try."

He did a beautiful job. One day he took apart the cabinet and several weeks later he came to fit all the pieces back together. Max, one of the seminary students, held things in place while Vladimir Iakovich hammered.

It's made all the difference to my living arrangements: suddenly I have storage space! My whole second room is usable now—so much more spacious than Katya's family's apartment!

Christ is Risen!

Next week we'll hear that glad greeting everywhere. Let it be a real joy to you: Christ is alive!

With peace,

Mary Raber

