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Dear Friends and Family:

Happy New Year

This started out six weeks ago as an Advent letter, but I'm sure you know how these things go... Let this serve as a belated greeting for Christmas and the New Year. I sincerely wish you God's blessing as we go on in 2010.

Teaching

At the moment I'm outside of Ukraine. In a few weeks, while I am attending the annual research colloquium at International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, I will be applying for a new year-long Ukrainian visa. In the meantime my thoughts are full of teaching plans. Beginning in February I will be teaching Baptist/Anabaptist history in Odessa, a course that I will repeat in Donetsk in April with a group of blind students. I'm looking forward to that as a new experience; my selection of reading material is already being recorded for their use.

During the fall semester I taught five intensive courses—two in Odessa and three in Donetsk. Fifteen years ago intensive courses were the norm because most of the qualified teachers came from far away, usually the U.S. or Germany, and couldn't stay very long.

Nowadays there are more national instructors, but intensive courses are still necessary to accommodate the many part-time students. I respect the part-timers' determination. Most of them attend classes for two weeks at a time, eight hours a day, three times a year, sometimes for as long as five years. Of course, it's hard to keep up the commitment. In October I worked with eight preachers on their teaching skills; two years ago their group numbered twenty!

At the end of a course, the students pack up all their homework assignments, intending to bring them back to the next session several months later. This fall I created a disaster for myself; now my most exasperating problem is keeping track of all the work I've assigned with different due dates to dozens of students spread out across the entire country!

My first appearance as a real, live academic!

Donetsk Christian University has been holding regular gatherings for instructors to present their own research. In November I was their guest lecturer. You may remember that I am writing a doctoral dissertation on charitable practices and social service ministry among Russian evangelicals in the early twentieth century. For the lecture I chose a side issue, but one that I thought would interest my listeners: "Baptists and Money." The

Russian church periodicals of that period have a lot to say on the topic!

It was the first time I have presented my own work anywhere besides to my fellow doctoral students, and it turned out to be more fun than I expected. Members of the audience—students and faculty of DCU—asked a surprising number of questions, some of which I could answer!

Limitations—and grace

It's easy to be thankful for some things: thousands of miles traveled during the past year without mishap; old and new friends all over the world; the pleasure and challenge of teaching; the curious details of daily life; and insights gained from study.

Other gifts are less obvious. Over the past year I've become more aware than ever of situations I can't mend. I'm close to several people involved in serious unresolved conflicts. Many people I know in Ukraine are frighteningly deep in debt. Others are ill. I don't see any reason to expect that the Ukrainian political situation will improve, in spite of the noisy presidential campaign going on in preparation for elections on 17 January.

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. On U.S. Thanksgiving Day I stopped in to visit my friend Larisa where she works at a tiny Christian publishing house. Since she's a good person to pray with, I told her about how helpless I was feeling and wept a little bit. While we were talking, another friend, Vova, came in. When he saw that I was crying, he offered to recite a poem he had written about tears. Of course, I told him to go ahead.

Mysteriously, Vova's poem comforted me. Or rather, not exactly the poem itself, but the way Vova and Larisa showed me their love and acceptance. What is it about this place? In so many ways, life in Ukraine is a shambles. On the other hand, for me at least, this is the land where, when I expect it least and need it most, a man walks in and unaffectedly begins to recite poetry.

As for feeling overwhelmed, I don't know anything else to do but continue to lift up all kinds of situations to God: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 27:13-14). The shadows close in when I begin to think I have to solve things on my own and that there's something wrong with me if I can't.

Epiphany

The good news is that this is the season of the church year—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany—that reminds us we are right to hope in God. Our expectation is well placed. Even if we're reduced to tears sometimes, that doesn't mean God has let us down. On the contrary—Christ is risen, indeed! We celebrate Jesus' life in our fallen world: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (John 1:9). Walk in the light!

Thank you so much for your loving support.

With peace,

Mary Raber