

Pastor Don's Mission Trip to Ukraine

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Date: 25 November 2012

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[0:00] It's my privilege, and I've really been looking forward to this, to share a little bit of the trip to Odessa, Ukraine.

And I guess really I feel compelled, first of all, to thank a number of you for supporting that. Without your support, I would not have been able to go.

If you recall kind of the history of how all this came about, I have, of course, had the privilege of going to the Ukraine a number of times before.

My last journey, I think, was somewhere around five years ago. I'm not sure of the timing. And Sherry's going, no, that's not right.

Four or five years ago. It's been a while. And my last trip was to teach at the seminary there in Odessa. And so I have had off and on all throughout, well, since then and throughout my doctoral work, I've had the opportunity to keep in contact with a man.

[1:14] You're going to see his picture here in a little bit. His name is Sasha Abramov. Abramov. And Sasha then was just a professor there, just a teacher, but now is head of their new master's program.

And so I've had this kind of constant contact with him and knew that they were going to start the master's program pretty soon. And lo and behold, of course, got an email not too many weeks before going on this trip that they needed somebody to come to and teach spiritual formation. Because it's master level, they had to have someone with a Ph.D. They didn't have anybody to teach the course and wanted to know if I would come. And I said, well, I don't think I can. It's too quick, too soon.

And, in fact, we had just kind of pooled the money and you had been giving for this trip to China in January. And so I emailed him back and I said, Sasha, there's just no way.

There's no way I can do that. And at the time I thought I needed a visa and I said, Sasha, I don't think I can even get a visa in time. Well, as it turned out, no visa is required in Ukraine anymore.

[2:32] That is for those coming from the United States and some other select countries. And so that obstacle had been removed. And God blessed through giving of some of you out there.

So the money was not an issue. The only issue was to have the time to prepare to teach a course that I'd never taught. Although, in hindsight, after I started to work on it, I realized that as a pastor, I teach spiritual formation all the time, just from the pulpit.

And so I could draw on a number of things that I've taught right here in this pulpit, as well as some things that I have studied before in the past.

And so, anyway, I got all that together. And I was so pleased to be able to go. And I might say just a little bit before I start in the real presentation and show you some pictures that the worst part of it is the travel.

Now, some of you have traveled overseas. And you know about what that's like. And about eight-hour difference between here and not about exactly eight-hour difference between here and Odessa, Ukraine.

[3:43] And so I traveled from Oklahoma City to Chicago and then a 10, almost 11-hour trip over to Istanbul. And that was interesting, though I just could see a glimpse of it from the window and didn't get to see any of Istanbul while waiting in the airport for the connection from there to Odessa.

But at least I can say I've been to Istanbul. Anybody here been to Istanbul? All right. Knew there'd be at least one. Tom, he's been... How many countries, Tom? I'm sorry I gave you the opportunity to do that.

You know where Tony's from, okay? Okay, that's why you said it. Okay. So the travel's no fun. And the travel back was probably worse.

And at the close of my presentation tonight, I'm going to show you a little bit about the travel home and remembering that it was just days, a few days, well, more than a few days, but not too many days before Thanksgiving.

So a lot of travelers are in that time. And so I'll show you that a little bit later. I want to begin tonight with the seminary and show you a few pictures from the seminary and just some of the buildings there.

[5:06] The Odessa Theological Seminary, though Baptist is not in the name, it is a Baptist seminary. It was started really an offshoot of the theological seminary in Moscow, Russia, as a matter of fact.

And a seminary was started in Kiev, Ukraine, and from there to Odessa.

So the seminary itself is part of the Baptist Union. Now, that's not Southern Baptist. In fact, the seminary is not Southern Baptist, although Southern Baptists have contributed a great deal over the years, not only in finances, but also in the way of teachers and other kinds of support.

And so the seminary, as you see, saw the buildings there, quite interesting. And I would say to you that a lot has changed since I was there last.

And the seminary seems to be flourishing, and I think they have an enrollment of around 200. This master's program that they've just started, they have 15 students in their first master's program, and I was privileged to be able to teach this very second module in that new program, and was excited about that.

[6:32] This is a picture of the chapel, and this is a new addition from the last time I was there. And I had the privilege of preaching in the chapel. You recognize that guy, don't you?

On Friday of that week, almost the end of my journey, I got a chance to preach to the student body, and that was very exciting for me.

See my translator there. Alexander is his name. But about one, excuse me, four out of five men are named Alexander. Alexander. Actually, the name they prefer to go by is Sasha.

So Sasha and Alexander are the same, for some reason. And I even asked my translator about this connection between Sasha and Alexander, and he couldn't even tell me.

Some old origin to that. And so this is Sasha, or Alexander, who was translating for me that day.

Last time I was there, Alexander was head of the library there at the seminary, and now he is, I think, an instructor on creative research, whatever that means.

[7:47] There were some other features of the chapel, and I apologize. I had hoped that I could show you a little video. This group that's singing right here was a group, or part of a group, that had traveled just a few weeks before to a place in Ukraine that was the birthplace for Baptists in Ukraine.

And I went to the very first Baptist church that was ever established there in Ukraine some hundred years ago, 150, I think, pretty close to it.

And so they were sharing about it and singing about it. But I had some trouble. I need somebody who's well-versed on how computers work.

I can't seem to get the video part of the work. Maybe I'll share that with you some other time. There were some other items to the chapel. A little service that were just really heartwarming.

This is the cafeteria. You know, every seminary has got to have a cafeteria. Every school does. And the food, well, not like the food we eat here, all right, with some exceptions.

[9:01] In the morning, usually eggs. That's not too bad, fried eggs, and maybe a little sausage-looking thing that I wasn't really sure what it was. It tasted okay, and so I ate that.

And then at lunchtime, which in Ukraine is the big meal of the day, and always a bowl of borscht and all kinds of different kinds of borscht. I liked it because it had potatoes in it and sometimes cabbage.

Not too keen on the cabbage, but it wasn't too bad. And then a plate, usually with rice and some meat and maybe buckwheat and diced beets and, you know, things like that.

All right. So enough about the cafeteria. I just thought I ought to show it to you anyway. And here is where I slept, all right?

I want to show you that too, all right? Now, these are not twin-sized beds, so don't think that the picture, you know, it's distorted in some way. These are really tiny, little narrow, little hard little beds.

[10:05] But I was glad to have it, and so the seminary provided that, and I didn't have a picture of the little kitchenette that they have. And so they kind of took care of me that week, and I

appreciated that.

Here is a picture of my class. Now, the only really good picture I got of the whole group, because I was kind of busy most of the time, was when this fellow you see standing there, Sergei Sinekov, he was the very first president of Odessa Theological Seminary, now retired, sort of retired, but he works with an accreditation agency, and he had come to address the students there and wanted to encourage them to write articles for his journal, seminary journal, and also to just kind of encourage them.

And so that was quite interesting. Sergei has his Ph.D. from a seminary here in the United States and speaks English very, very well.

Just to give you a few pictures of some of the students. I didn't get a lot of individual pictures. Here's Sergei. That's another Sergei, who was a student there, one of mine.

And here are a couple of guys, Peter and Valerie. And I've selected this picture because this looks just like a classroom today here in America.

[11:42] I mean, here these guys are, young, laptops. A lot of them had iPhones and, you know, just a different thing. And I just have to share with you, the first time I went, again, not more than five years ago, it was a totally different thing.

And most of the students, if not all the students, were poor. A lot of them were from farms and villages, quite a ways from Odessa, some of them even from other countries.

But this time around, just a little bit different. It looked more like a Western, you know, our seminaries here and schools here.

There were a couple of really interesting fellows. Peter there spoke pretty good English. In fact, he really didn't need a translator. Here's Sasha. There's another Sasha. I had five Sashas in my class, by the way.

You do the percentages. Five out of 15 were Sasha. Interesting. And this fellow right next to him, Vladimir. We would say Vladimir, but they pronounce it Vladimir.

[12:55] Vladimir. And I had, I think, three of those in the class, Vladimir's. And Igor, I picked these because of the names. No, not really.

I wanted to show you that I had quite a wide range of ages, from very young, young men to some more my age. I'm not sure if Igor is my age or maybe a little bit older.

There was a fellow sitting right next to him. His name is Dimitri. He was even older than Igor. And by the way, they don't pronounce it Igor. It's Igor. Igor. In fact, they told me that if I really wanted to pronounce it right, I couldn't.

It wasn't possible for me to do that, American. And indeed, when they speak it, it sounds different. And I can't mimic that. Closest I can get to is Igor.

Igor. Here was just a half of the group together for a class project that I had given to them.

[13:56] And just gives you an idea of some of the students. Here is another Sasha. And I took this picture because of the young lady sitting next to him. And when Sherry and I, and Matthew, by the way, went, I think maybe on our second trip, Regina here was one of our translators.

Now, she since married Sasha, who's a student there at the seminary. But I have to tell you something about Regina. When we got there on that particular trip, we loaded up in the cars to go out to the village where we were going to do mission work, these little bitty Russian cars.

And Regina was in the back seat next to one of our team members. I was in the front seat. And we, of course, had a Ukrainian driver. I think his name was Olig, something like that.

And suddenly I heard Regina. Regina was talking to the Ukrainian driver. I mean, they were just going back and forth in Russian.

And I was just, you know, just appalled at how they'd converse with one another. And then she turned and started to talk to one of our team members. And she spoke in fluent, fluent English.

[15:14] Albeit it sounded a little southern, like southern English. And I said to her, I said, Regina, where did you learn to speak such good English?

And she said, in Mississippi. I said, Mississippi? Yeah, I was born in Mississippi. Her father works there at the seminary.

He's one of the professors and does a lot of other things. And they moved to Ukraine when she was young. And she just learned Russian very fluently. Still had her Mississippi kind of English.

And I felt really stupid. But anyway, this is their little girl. And for the life of me, I cannot remember her name. I think it's Alicia or something like that.

Cute little thing. I took that picture at their house because Sasha, who's head of the master's program, and I'll show you his picture in a minute, had arranged kind of a get-together, kind of a fellowship for the class.

[16:17] Because they're brand new, this is a new thing at the seminary, new master's program. These are all new students. Many of them, some of them had come up through the bachelor program.

Some of them were from other places, had come from other schools. And because it was brand new and it was very important that it work, that they stick with the program, he had this fellowship to just talk to them and let them talk to him.

In fact, I think there's just another picture of the guy sitting around. And here's Sasha, the man in kind of the checkered shirt all the way to your left.

But that's Sasha Abramov. He's the head of the master's program, my translator most of the week. Was our translator on our last mission trip.

And that's where I met Sasha a number of years ago. And so Sasha just was talking to the students and asking for their feedback and wanted them to learn to have fellowship with one another and to seek encouragement and strength from one another.

[17:28] And I thought a very wise thing for him to do. Here's the whole group. Not all the students were there that night, but we did take a group picture with those who were there.

And there's Sasha. Sasha Abramov and his wife Luba took this picture, as a matter of fact, on Saturday morning early before I was to get on the plane and come home.

And so I took this in their home. They invited me over. She invited me over for a little breakfast before he took me to the airport. And you'll never guess what we had.

We had banana splits for breakfast. See, I told you you'd never guess. Never guess. Banana splits. But with Ukrainian ice cream, it's just so, so good.

It's so good. And bananas, of course. And homemade caramel topping. Makes you just want one, you know. And I said, Luba, I've never had a banana split for breakfast, but this was just wonderful.

[18:34] And the strange thing was, the very night before, Jonathan had emailed me and asked me if I'd had any of the famous ice cream in Ukraine that he had heard about from his mother. And I said, no, I've not had any ice cream.

Well, the very next morning, I have a banana split. And it was so good. And Alexander, well, I used to call him Alex. He prefers Sasha. His name is Alexander or Sasha.

Again, that weird dynamic. But Sasha is a very, very special man. And we really need to pray for him. Sasha is not Ukrainian.

He is Russian. And his citizenship is in Russia. And so he deals quite often with the problem of, you know, being able to stay in Ukraine and teach.

And every once in a while, he'll have to travel back to Russia and renew some papers or visa or work visa, whatever it is. But it's a constant struggle. And but not only that, my heart is just really burdened for Sasha.

[19:36] And I want your heart to be burdened a little bit, too. Sasha traveled to the United States not too long ago, just a year or so ago, a couple of years ago.

But he had been offered an opportunity to get his doctorate of ministry at, well, what was the seminary?

Hardin Simmons in Abilene. Abilene. You know, I just have a terrible memory.

Well, it didn't work out. And at the same time, he'd been offered a very, very good job as a teacher at Southwestern to work with Russian speaking students there.

And all that fell apart. And he was so discouraged and still discouraged today. And I would need to pray for him, that he would be content to stay where he is.

[20:33] He's so needed there. And if you could have been with me to see the dynamic between Sasha and the other students and how much they love him and respect him and honor him.

And he just has a way about him, a very, very, very unique kind of spirit about him. I encourage him about that. And yet, at the same time, knowing that maybe God would open a door for him to advance his education.

And that would probably have to be here in the United States somewhere. And so if you remember it, and every time you remember it, think of Sasha and pray for him.

Vasily was another one of my translators. And Vasily, I've also known from a previous trip, mission trip, and also my last time to teach. And Vasily is just a special, special man. I think you've noticed they all dress quite casually at the seminary. But that shouldn't be any strange thing to us. We dress pretty casually here, except for this guy up here. [21 : 36] But Vasily is quite up there in the leadership of the seminary. And his primary job is public relations.

He's a relations guy, not only with Ukraine and Russia and that part of the world, but also in the United States as well. And so Vasily was my translator in a number of my classes. So that's the seminary. And, you know, I could have maybe shown many more pictures of the seminary and talked about what's going on there. But that was only half of the purpose for me to go. I certainly enjoyed teaching. It's part of my passion to have the opportunity to help pastors, international pastors, in their training. And wherever God might allow me to do that. And so I thoroughly enjoyed that. And I'm so grateful for the opportunity to go and teach these young men. [22 : 45] And to kind of, sort of, interact with them. Though without a translator, I was just dead in the water. You know, that's really the kiss of death for a pastor.

Because he wants to go out there and shake hands and visit with people. And I couldn't do it without a translator. And so you feel just kind of stupid. In fact, I need to tell you a little story about when I arrived there in Ukraine.

I arrived there on a Friday evening. And the IMB missionary, and I'll show you his picture here in a minute, picked me up at the airport.

He and Sasha. And I shared with him how I, you know, really wanted to visit some of the churches in the area that we had worked with before.

And maybe explore some other opportunities. And so we made plans to do that on the Saturday morning. But in the meantime, he, that is Lubin, the IMB missionary, wanted me to have a good meal at his house.

[23 : 52] And so he took me to his house to have a meal. And we ate together. And then he and his wife left me there with their little son, Jan.

That's his name. He speaks English. So Jan was there in the house. And two of his Russian-speaking friends. And then this guy. And the whole idea was that while he and Rhonda were at this little kind of get-together at the church, I could sit down at his computer and email my wife.

Let her know that I was here. And she didn't know, you know. And so I sat down to the computer. And I started to type out an email. And the power went out.

And all the power went out. And including the Internet, of course. And so there I am in his house. All is dark. Just his son Jan and his two buddies.

And they're just jabbering Russian back and forth. And I, you know, and I asked Jan, I said, does this happen very often here where the power goes out? He said, well, not very often. And then he went back with his buddies.

[24 : 59] And they had fun. And what am I going to do? Just sit here. And then to make it worse, apparently there was a youth get-together at the church about that same time. Power went off there as well.

Not for as long, but went off. And so they all came over to the house. And so the house is full of these students. All of them speak Russian. None of them speak English.

And they're just going on and on. And I'm just kind of sitting in a corner, you know, in the dark. And I don't have any idea what's going on. And that lasted for two hours. Until finally it dawned on me that maybe Jan had a cell phone.

And he did. And so I said, call your dad. Tell him to come and pick me up and take me home. Or take me back to the seminary. And so he did. And, you know, just being around people who don't speak your language, you don't speak theirs, is a very, very uncomfortable situation.

Let me talk about missions. Because, really, this is the connection with you. Though, I want you to be connected to the seminary in your prayers.

[26 : 10] And maybe other opportunities that God might open the door for. And would love to go back and teach there again if God wants me to. But I want us to be connected more so with opportunities for missions, for ministry.

It was my desire from the very beginning. In fact, way back. Not this past October, but the October before. A year ago. In the course of sharing our kind of our strategy for missions. Ukraine was one of those. And my thought was that if God would allow me to teach, I could take a group with me to do missions. And so this is my thought and my vision.

And so my desire was to, if at all possible, to explore some of those opportunities in Ukraine. And thankfully, the IMB missionary, Lubin.

And you see Lubin right there in the red jacket, Lubin Mliakov. He and his wife Rhonda are the IMB missionaries in Odessa or for the Odessa Oblast.

[27 : 23] That's what they call it. It's kind of like our county, though they're a lot bigger than counties. The Oblast. And Lubin is Bulgarian, as a matter of fact.

But United States citizen. Lived in the United States for many, many years. And did his seminary work, I believe, at Southwestern.

He was Southwestern. And so he and his wife Rhonda are stationed, so to speak, there in Odessa. And he was the one that picked me up at the airport. And so I asked Lubin, as I mentioned a moment ago, if he could take me to some of the places where we had served before, done some mission work before.

And he said he'd be glad to do that and also to take me to some other places and to meet some other pastors and church leaders. So that I could just get maybe an overall idea of some of the possibilities.

And so this is what I want to lay before you. The man on the extreme left there, his name is Alexei, Alexei Kosen.

[28 : 37] And he's the pastor of Krasny Okne. That means Beautiful Springs, by the way. Now, we didn't get to go to Krasny Okne. He's the pastor there. And yet he is also kind of the leader of several works.

That's kind of how they do it there. They'll have a pastor who's kind of the pastor of a church. But he's also the leader of a pastoral team that ministers in a number of churches.

And so Pastor Alexei was the man to talk to. And so there are opportunities in his church for teams to come and do whatever they may need us to do.

So there's one possibility, Krasny Okne. The man there right next to Lubin, Igor Yurklinko. All right. And how about the name of his town, his church? Krasny Okne. Krasny Okne. All right. They say it much faster than that. And it just kind of rolls out, you know.

[29 : 44] But where these guys are standing, and where I'm standing, because I'm the one taking the picture, is at Krasny Okne. I'm not going to try to say that again.

And so there's a very, very big opportunity there. And not only at the church, do work there at the church, but they have a house that they have acquired there, or bought there in that town.

And they're turning it into an orphanage. And so there are opportunities there. The fellow in the middle, or not the middle, the guy with, you know, no hair, his name is Sergei, and he was a new believer from this next church I'm going to show you, Sheriavo.

And Sheriavo is where Sherry and I and Matthew and our team, we did mission work there, a couple of trips, Sheriavo.

And you see this kind of typical looking building, church building, in fact, very typical of the homes there in some of these small villages. And as a matter of fact, this church in Sheriavo was purchased by, or the funds were made available by the Mississippi Baptist Convention a number of years ago during their partnership with Ukraine.

[31 : 08] Sheriavo is a church that is in tremendous need, tremendous. It was never a very big church, but they have dwindled down to about four members, four members.

The church building itself, and though you may not be able to tell this, well, you might just at first glance say, well, I can see it, the church is in a really poor state of disrepair.

But the work there is also where the need is. I got to connect again with a man, Peter, Peter that we worked with those two trips.

Peter is not the pastor. He is a farmer, and he is a deacon in the church. And Alexei, the pastor I showed you the picture of a moment ago, he and his ministry team go there once a month and perform the Lord's Supper.

That's what they do in Ukraine. They have the Lord's Supper once a month. And so he came and did that, or does come and do that, and he's taken this church under his wing and is wanting to help

them to get back on their feet and to go forward in ministry.

[32 : 26] And so Sheriavo is a very, very, very good opportunity for us to possibly connect and send a mission team there to do whatever they need us to do.

We can do vacation Bible schools there, other kinds of ministries. There's a lot of construction ministry that needs to be done. They're wanting to rebuild a wall that stands, barely stands right there beside the street.

And just a tremendous amount of opportunity there in Sheriavo. I do not have a picture of Makaravo, but I would mention Makaravo as well. We were not able to go there.

I wanted to because of the, I guess, the two trips that we made to Sheriavo, we also connected with the church in Makaravo and probably did more ministry there than we did in Sheriavo, at least part of our team.

And Makaravo would be another opportunity for us if we, to connect with. So these are just, these are just some opportunities, not any decision made, but something we need to pray about, whether it's the churches that I showed you a moment ago or Sheriavo or Makaravo or this church in Comenternovsko.

[33 : 51] And that's the last time I'm going to say that, and I'm sure I botched it. In fact, I can almost hear Sasha laughing at me, you know, just my attempt to pronounce it. This church is in a little community, the name of which you see right there.

Feel free to call it whatever you pronounce it any way you want. It's just right outside of Odessa, not very far at all. And it's pastored by the, you would call him, probably we would call him here an administrative director of the seminary, Pastor Vladimir, Vladimir Pomaskov.

And he just is a sweet, sweet man and just loves this little church, very small church. I think on that Sunday morning, and I had the opportunity to preach there that Sunday that I was there and preach in his church.

And we may have had a dozen, maybe a few more than that. And many of those, before church started, he went and picked them up and brought them to church. And so he, you know, also does that as well as pastor and a lot of other things.

And there's a tremendous need in this church and in this small community that primarily, by the way, a Ukrainian-speaking community.

[35 : 11] There are a lot of Ukrainian-speaking. There's a difference between Ukrainian and Russian. And in fact, Sasha, my translator, he could barely translate Ukrainian. And some of our students spoke Ukrainian.

And so he had difficulty with that. But this community right outside of Odessa is very traditional Ukrainian. And just a lovely little village and a lot of opportunity there.

He and his wife had us over for supper that Sunday afternoon and his wife Leah. And it was in an apartment. And Sherry...

Well, I don't know. Sherry, you've never been up in one of the apartments there in Odessa, have you? Have you? Yeah, yeah, that's right. We walked. But there was an elevator, but I think I would have preferred walking up the steps.

Small, little, not much bigger than this. Maybe two of these pulpits. And, you know, kind of a rickety thing. And we're going up, I don't know, seven, eight floors. And all the big high-rise kind of apartment buildings there in Odessa look like they're about ready to fall over.

[36 : 20] I mean, it's just kind of scary. But that's the way it is in that part of the world. In his church, he had a number of children.

And they sang for us. And I was really blessed by that. I also have a video of that, but I can't get it to work. And here's his church. Vladimir's church in that town.

Whatever it is. And it's just really a delightful bunch of people. We had to wait a long time to take this picture. This man in the walker, he just all but refused to have his picture taken.

But we finally, not we, I didn't have anything to do with it, finally coaxed him up there and took his picture with the group. Another possibility would be Second Baptist Church.

And they do have Second Baptist Churches in Odessa, just like we do in a number of American towns. I don't know if there's a third, but First Baptist is the largest church in Odessa, although not real progressive.

[37 : 27] The most progressive, happening kind of church in Odessa is Grace Church. And it's very progressive, very much like a Western church.

But Second Baptist sits right next to the seminary. Sasha, my translator, Sasha Abramov, is a member there. And I had the opportunity to preach at Second Baptist Church that Sunday night. By the way, just to, you know, to let you know that, you know, especially if you kind of think maybe your pastor preaches too long, I preached double long there.

Because I had to use it at translator. But that's not my point. The point is, their services last a lot longer. Do you know they have three sermons every time they get together? Three sermons. Alright?

Three sermons. Maybe we ought to start that tradition here. Okay? You say, you're already preaching three sermons in one, Pastor. What's the deal? The Second Baptist Church, Odessa, as you can see, is a larger church than the other churches that I've shown you here tonight.

[38:35] And yet, there's a great deal of need for ministry there. I was treated by the youth choir. And this is a very typical thing in some of these larger churches. Their youth choirs will sing, excuse me, on Sunday nights.

And they were just incredible. And I'm just going to have to figure this out and show you some of the videos so you could hear them. And I really regret that I can't do that here tonight.

But, that was a real blessing. And there's opportunity opportunity for us to connect with them and do some work. Here are two of their pastors with me, sandwiched between them.

The younger man, I think you would call their senior pastor. The older gentleman preached that Sunday night and he's one of their pastors and they have two others that I didn't get in the picture. So they had four pastors and they all preach and just really kind of interesting. Those are the mission opportunities.

[39:37] And though I don't have a picture of this young man, but there was a man in my class who works for, what does he work for?

Youth for Christ. Works for that ministry and he approached me at the close of the week. He gave me his card and said if we ever wanted to bring, say, some students, some young people over to work with Youth for Christ there in Odessa that he would very much appreciate that and want us to work with him.

So there's another opportunity as well. Lots of opportunities and I just only explored four or five and there are many, many more than that.

Odessa itself but Ukraine as a whole is fertile ground right now for the gospel. Churches are growing.

Churches are being planted, started, and right now the borders are quite open. As I mentioned a moment ago, no visas required. Quite a difference from the first time I traveled to Ukraine.

[40:52] I felt like I was going back behind the Iron Curtain that first time. that has become more and more relaxed and so it's easy to get into the country.

They want to be very westernized and so they like that relationship. But that won't necessarily continue. I was told that Ukraine has just elected a new president this past year and their new president is pro-Russia.

Now, that may not be a good thing. I mean, in regard to the openness of the borders. It's much more difficult to get into Russia for gospel work, for ministry, than it is Ukraine.

and I'm hoping and praying that this new president and the relationship he has with Russia will not somehow turn the clock back and cause those borders to be more closed to people coming in and doing mission work, evangelism, and so forth.

And so the opportunities for missions is always right now. It's always now. in some of these foreign countries, we don't have any idea what the future holds.

[42:18] So I want to encourage you, encourage us, be much in prayer. I'm hoping, this is my vision, that next year we could take a team to go to either Sheriavo, maybe work for the church in Makaravo or both, maybe some who could do some maintenance kind of work as well as mission work.

Maybe the church there outside of Odessa, Vladimir's church, maybe some of those other opportunities of those churches. I don't know about that yet. But I want you even now to be praying about you going.

You going. Yeah, it's a long way. And if you've never flown out of the country, traveled to other countries and been there, especially countries like Ukraine, then there's major shock, culture shock in store for you.

And you have to sacrifice and do things, sacrifice things and eat things you wouldn't normally eat and so forth. and you just give of yourself so that you can be a part of what God is doing in that country.

And the opportunity is wide open right now. And so I want you to pray about that. You'll hear more about it when I think the decision is made about just where we would do work and when.

[43:58] A lot of it will depend upon Sasha, my connection there. He's connected to all of these other people that I have shown you here tonight and churches that I've talked about.

And so when we kind of find that little niche, that little place, that connection that we need to make, and that I think will happen real soon, then we'll set a date.

and I'll encourage you to sign up for it and to be a part of it. It doesn't make any difference whether you're young or old, older.

Age doesn't have anything to do with it. Our first trip, in fact, all the trips I've taken, the mission trips, we've had senior adults with us. And, you know, they just got along very well, so you don't have to worry about that.

And, it'll be a tremendous experience for you. If you want something that'll get you excited about what we really all ought to be excited about anyway, then just take one of these kind of trips.

[45:06] Some of you have been to Mexico, you understand that dynamic and what God does, not only through you in the way of ministry, but what He does inside of you and in your heart.

It's something you'll never forget. I have never forgotten. those opportunities and experiences in Ukraine. I'll never forget those that took place this last week when I was there.

Tremendous. And to invest yourself there and to make relationships with people there, even people, yes, you cannot communicate with necessarily, but through a translator, you connect with them and you build those kind of relationships.

So I want you to be praying about that right now. In fact, go ahead and make up your mind about it just real soon. When it's time and when we go, I want to go.

You may not know how you're going to do that. It is expensive, but just make up your mind that you're going to be a part of that. Pray for Sasha.

[46:18] Sasha and Luba. Sasha again is Russian. Luba is Ukrainian. And they are really struggling. Seminary doesn't pay very much.

It doesn't pay their professors very much at all. And so it really is a ministry to them. And so they struggle. So pray for them. Pray for Sasha Abramov.

Pray for these students. I have their emails and I'm going to make their names available to you, maybe in little cards that you can pick up so that maybe everyone could pick up at least one name of one of these students and commit to pray.

Pray for the students. Some of them are pastors. Many of them are already pastors in small churches, some even larger churches. One of the students was from a city not far from Moscow, Russia, and he pastors a very large church there.

But he struggles in ministry. And when I say large, I don't mean by our standards here. This is a large church, a very large church in Ukraine.

[47:29] But pray for those students and pray for Odessa Theological Seminary. And I would say to you specifically to pray that they would stay true to God's Word and not deviate from it.

There is a huge, huge problem with doctrine in international seminaries because they are so starved for money and for support and starved for professors who are qualified to teach that they'll just nearly take anyone.

I mean, they took me. What I mean is they'll take anyone and it doesn't matter if they're Baptists or whatever they are. And so there's quite a mixture of theologies in the seminary and I would ask you to pray that God would bring them to the truth and a commitment to teach the Bible as the truth.

and that God would also deal with some of their doctrinal issues. So pray for the seminary. Have I given you enough to pray for? Pray that you would go.

Pray that you would go. And that God would open a door for us to have just a blessed connection with a little church in Ukraine and pray for these other things as well.

[49:06] Now, I'm done with the presentation. Are there any questions? Oh, I'm going to show you one other thing first. Any questions at all?

Okay. Okay, Wes. Well, the ticket, the flight itself was around \$1,800, \$1,800, \$1,900.

Good portion of that was paid by the seminary, so that was a blessing. That won't be the case when we put together a team to go. And then, you know, depending on our accommodations, all of our mission trips, we stayed in the homes of members of the church.

And that's kind of rough sometimes. Huh? Huh? The shopping sprees?

Oh, yeah, well, that's on your own. Yeah, yeah. Now, my last trip there, on a mission trip, you know, and I'm of that age where I have to visit the restroom in the nighttime, sometimes a couple of times.

[50:35] Anybody relate to that? And we stayed, as a matter of fact, Peter that I showed you a moment ago, we stayed at his house, the men did, and the bathroom is an outhouse in the back.

Now, he did have a seat in his outhouse. Not all of them do. And he had a shower. But I had to walk through the chickens and all the other barnyard kind of animals to get to the restroom every night.

But that's no problem. No big deal. Food is relatively cheap there, primarily because of the disparity between the dollar and their currency, about eight to one.

At least right now it is. And so, food's fairly inexpensive. So, I don't know what a total cost would be. We would have to work that out. When we know and find out where we'll stay.

Okay. The trip home. I wanted to show you just a few pictures coming home. Now, understand that Thanksgiving is coming.

[51:44] And it didn't dawn on me. And as I flew, it was about a 12 and a half hour trip. amazing that it was 10 hours going to Istanbul, 12 and a half hours coming back.

I guess the tailwinds. But when we got to Chicago, of course, you have to go through passport control. And so, when I got off the plane, I was very quick. We all were very quickly ushered down this long hall and we had to get in line to go through passport control.

Let me show you the line. This is a trip home with all the dramatics. I was at the very end of this line. Do you see this thing? Now, it's difficult to get some sense of just how long this hallway was, but I guarantee it was several hundred feet.

I mean, and it curved on around. You can't even see the other end of it. But that's not all. When I got to the end of the front of this line, we turned a corner and here's the line going down the next hallway.

All right? Now, I have about two and a half hours to get the connecting flight from Chicago to Oklahoma City. And I'm looking at the clock and say, there's just no way. And so, we make it through the end of this line and guess what?

[53:00] It turns to the left and there is the line again. Everybody going to passport control. And then, when we finally got to the front of that line, here's passport control and all these, this throng of people trying to get through passport control.

I got, to make the long story short, I got to my connecting flight about 20 minutes before it took off. I had about three hours, two and a half, two forty-five.

But we got through there and as you see, I did make it home. At least I made it home on the schedule. So, these are the kind of things, you know, you have to put away. I thought you might get a kick out of that.