

Warm hearts in winter's cold

Reflections on a January visit to Ukraine

by Robert Bugbee

I was up and out the door early New Year's Day, flying from Winnipeg to Toronto to meet Seminarian Oleg Schewtschenko. After a delay at Canada's busiest airport, we boarded another plane for Europe to begin the first official foreign visit I've made since taking office as President of Lutheran Church–Canada (LCC) in September.

Our destination was Frankfurt, and then Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. One ocean and eight time zones later we arrived in the early afternoon the day following our departure from Canada.

We were there—our luggage wasn't! It hadn't made the last transfer in Frankfurt. This deflating start turned out to be a blessing. Bishop Viktor Gräfenstein had driven nearly 500 km from Odessa to Kiev to meet us. He was exhausted from a heavy Christmas schedule and his long road trips throughout the country. So we decided to find a hotel near the airport, delay our plans to leave Kiev, and fetch our suitcases the next day. My reunion with Dr. Gräfenstein was cut short when we reached our room, because within minutes the good bishop was fast asleep.

Preaching along the way

We headed south toward Odessa on Saturday. It wasn't just a travel day, however! After several hours of driving we had the first preaching appointment in the little town of Ochiryetnye, where a mission station started a few years ago has grown into a fledgling congregation. Our Lutheran brothers and sisters moved their service to Saturday at 4 p.m. to meet the Canadian guests. A small stone house in the village serves as their church, half of it renovated into a chapel room, the other half providing cooking, heating and storage facilities. The wood fire couldn't stay ahead of the -15C temperature outside. Worshippers and pastors alike sat in overcoats on backless benches to sing, pray and listen to the Word of God.

The scene in Ochiryetnye was repeated many times. The congregation displays an amazing concentration span, listening to at least two sermons in each service.

My messages always took double the usual time, since I paused frequently while Oleg repeats in Russian what I say. When the service ended, people scurried as men moved the benches around and set up makeshift tables. Supper was served in the little chapel. Hearty Ukrainian breads, sausages, soup, chicken, endless varieties of cabbage, pickles and various sweets round out the meal. Much as I love coffee, this is a land of tea drinkers, and they served it in large cups, fortifying us against the frigid air. Before driving to Odessa, we took the needed walk to an outhouse behind the chapel in the cold, dark evening. It reminded me of visits to great-grandma's decades ago, where the "facilities" were pretty much the same design!

Visiting old friends

Odessa, the "pearl of the Black Sea," is a large and cosmopolitan city of more than a million residents. The parsonage of Pastor Alexander Yurchenko, his wife, Olga, and their children is in a suburb, Usatovo. This was our lodging over the next four days. Pastor Yurchenko is a home missionary for the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Ukraine (SELCU). He focuses on planting new congregations like the one he currently nurtures in Nova Kakhovka, 300 km to the east. On Sunday we drove into central Odessa, where a congregation meets in a second-floor apartment. The service ran more than two-and-a-half hours, included three preachers and the Lord's Supper, for which communicants knelt on the



President Robert Bugbee and foreign mission student Oleg Schewtschenko



seminary classes, student rooms, an apartment for visiting professors from Canada, SELCU's offices, a computer lab to provide job training for handicapped unemployed people, and a basement depot for storing and distributing humanitarian aid.

Organizers moved SELCU's convention, normally held in early December, to January so I could participate in all the sessions. It convened in the new church at Nikolayev, a city of more than 500,000 about 90 minutes' drive east of Odessa. Bishop Gräfenstein had introduced a formal convention "agenda" for

hard, uncushioned floor. In Odessa there was piano accompaniment. In other places there may be a small, electric organ, or no instruments at all. But the singing is rich and loud. It's apparent that many worshipers know the words by heart.

It was a glad reunion day for me. I came to know this congregation in 1997, when Holy Cross in Kitchener, Ontario, sent its pastor for short-term summer mission work here. A few names and even more faces come alive again in my memory. They seemed especially overjoyed to see Oleg Schewtschenko, who has spent recent years in Germany and Canada and is preparing to return to serve in this synod sometime in 2010.

Tours and meetings

In addition to visits and services, Bishop Gräfenstein was quite busy that week, together with a mission team of young adults from Germany, preparing gift packages for orphaned children. Early January is Christmas in Ukraine, which still tends to follow the Eastern Orthodox calendar. To fill 2000 bags the team sets up an assembly line in the unheated, unfinished seminary building in Usatovo. While in the area, Pastor Yurchenko, who heads up the construction team gave me a full tour. One day this building will be the pulse of SELCU, housing



Bishop Viktor Gräfenstein chaired the SELCU convention.

the first time, based on his experiences attending Lutheran Church-Canada's convention last June in Winnipeg. Delegates have some way to go to learn parliamentary procedure, and there are no "resolutions committees" as they bring all concerns directly to the entire Synod. Nikolayev church is cold in January. With ongoing natural gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine, my hosts

explained that the gas flow is not fully turned off, but reduced. As a result, they cannot heat to the usual comfort levels. Fortunately, the meeting room we used for the Synod was enclosed. Between the body heat of participants and an adjoining kitchen where convention meals were being prepared, we stayed plenty warm during the sessions, at least in that space.

Another Christmas

I celebrated Ukrainian Christmas prior to the convention, preaching on Christmas Eve (January 6) in the village of Kagarlyk, on Christmas morning in Nikolayev, and Christmas afternoon at Oktyabrskoye, a Nikolayev suburb. Decades ago the socialist leaders had started secularizing Christmas trees, calling them “New Year’s trees,” although the decorations are similar. Now our new Lutheran partner congregations have taken them back and set up “Christmas trees” in each place of worship.

From snow to seaside

After the convention, Oleg and I drove southward with Pastor Rudolf Krause. We entered the Crimean Peninsula, that portion of Ukraine which dangles into the Black Sea. We stopped for another service in Armyansk, toured the new church facility in Krasnoperekopsk, and saw the advance site in Pyrvomaisk where the church plans to build another chapel. We kept driving all that Saturday, up and over the mountains. The snow was deep on the highway. There were anxious moments until we reached the glorious city of Yalta on the Black Sea. This is a resort



Foreign mission student Oleg Schewtschenko translates a Christmas sermon for President Bugbee from English into Russian.

town, on the same latitude as some parts of Italy. It’s where prominent Russians—from Czar Nicholas to Josef Stalin—often spent time in the winter. Pastor Krause’s apartment is tiny, with barely enough room for himself, his wife and young daughter. So he rented an apartment across the hall where the neighbours, following a common practice, vacate their own dwelling for a few days to earn some money by opening it to short-term guests in town (like me and Oleg)! Sunday morning I preached in the Yalta congregation, which rents a schoolroom for services, needing to bring in worship equipment and furnishings before church and taking them out again immediately afterward. In the afternoon we visited the gleaming Livadia Palace, where the “Big Three” — Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill — decided the shape of postwar Europe that led to communist domination of many countries for 45 years afterward.

LCC’s work continues

On Monday we were driven to Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, to board a long distance train north. We had rented a full compartment complete with sleeping benches, linens to make them into a bed, curtains to draw for privacy and make it possible to sleep, and a small table in the middle. Oleg spoke to the steward holed up in a little office at one end of the coach, and in time he brought us tea in the traditional Russian glasses. The trains are comfortable, but far slower than the legendary fast ones in western Europe. Just before midnight we reached Dnepropetrovsk,



The Alpha and Omega Student Society’s television control room

an eastern industrial city, home to a university and more than a million residents.

Dnepropetrovsk was also a city long closed to foreign visitors, since the Soviets built missiles there. It is much brighter now than when I last visited in 1997. Major streets seem well lighted. Huge department stores and supermarkets offer a vast array of goods as long as you can pay for them. This city has also been a big focus of LCC mission efforts. It's where Pastor Roland Syens came from Vancouver in 1993 to be a theological teacher and mentor with the "Alpha and Omega Christian Student Society," an organization which does outreach work, especially among university students. I spoke at Alpha and Omega one evening when we were in town.

One of their outreach efforts is a monthly television program, and I taped a Christmas sermon for later broadcast to the large viewing audience. When Pastor Syens returned to Canada in 2005, native Ukrainian Pastor Alexey Navrotskiy



President Bugbee toured the future seminary/mission centre succeeded him. In addition to the student work, the pastor has planted a confessional Lutheran congregation in the city. They also hosted me for an evening service—complete with the singing, eating and bonding so prominent in the lives of these Christians. They seem in no hurry to return home once they have come together.

While Oleg and I were in Dnepro, LCC's interim mission director, Dr. Ralph Mayan, called us on *Skype*, a computer-based telephone utility, from Vancouver so that he, Alexey and I could have an hour-long mission meeting to discuss plans and budgets for the coming year.

Warm greeting

Another evening after driving to Zariya, a village in Dnepropetrovsk County, I received a formal Ukrainian greeting at the local public school, involving young women in traditional dress presenting me with a loaf of bread topped with a little pile of salt! Our evening plans to conduct a Bible class in a local home there were shaken—but not derailed—when the hydro went out, and the house was set aglow with candles so we could continue.

A long, overnight train ride returned us to Kiev in north central Ukraine, where we had begun two weeks earlier. There was a chance to visit this jewel the Russians call the "mother of cities," and a last opportunity to speak with Alexey about his upcoming visit to Canada this spring. Then I boarded the planes again ... bound for Frankfurt, Toronto, and finally Winnipeg.

Opportunities to help

The coming months will offer God's people in Lutheran Church-Canada a solid chance to connect with mission work in the former Soviet Union. Concordia Lutheran Mission Society (CLMS) is appealing for gifts to the "Ukraine Seminary/Mission Centre" so that this facility



may be dedicated and used at long last, since it's been under construction for six years. Delegates to the SELCU convention in January committed themselves to recruiting one seminary student from each local congregation. They are hoping that theology courses coordinated by Dr. Norman Threinen may resume as soon as possible in the new building. I encourage you to read all about this appeal at www.concordiamissions.org!

In addition, two LCC districts have invited LCC missionary Pastor Alexey Navrotskiy to visit Canada. He will speak during the East District convention in Windsor, May 10-13. Later he is also scheduled to appear in Vancouver at the Alberta-British Columbia District convention, May 22-25.

The deep snow and cold air of Ukraine don't seem like the usual travel destination, at least not in January! But the committed faith and welcoming hearts of our mission partners there are enough to warm any winter. God has opened a door for LCC to play a strong role in rooting the confession of Jesus Christ in this magnificent country. I'm grateful for the time I had to re-awaken our relationship with these partners. I also express my thanks to Seminarian Oleg Schewtschenko for his able work as translator, tour guide, advisor and friend throughout our busy 17 days. The church's thanks go, too, to the faculty of Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catharines for releasing Oleg as their own valuable contribution to this important mission.