

# TRIP TO MARIUPOL 2003

August 18, 2003

Dear brethren,

Greetings from Clarksville, Indiana! I hope this letter finds each of you doing well and prospering in our Lord's work. This is a report of my trip to Mariupol, Ukraine from July 9-29.

Before I begin, I first want to thank each of you for your financial and spiritual support of this endeavor. The financial aspect of this trip will be detailed at the end. Through this report I wish to do three things: 1) introduce you to the people and city of Mariupol so you can better understand life in that place; 2) tell you about the church and our work in Mariupol; 3) give you some personal thoughts about our trip.

## CITY OF MARIUPOL

The city of Mariupol is home to a half-million people. As you can imagine, things are quite different there than what we are accustomed to here in the States. The pollution from the four plants in town (two steel plants, one heavy machine plant, and one rubber plant) and from auto emissions is bad. The average worker makes about 700 Grivna, (which is equivalent to \$140 USD) per month. I tell you this so you can appreciate what life is like in Mariupol and the Ukraine in general. Things are much harder in that part of the world than here. Of course, keep in mind the country has only been in existence for just over a decade. We're told the situation has gotten better over the last few years, but life remains difficult.

## THE CHURCH IN MARIUPOL & OUR WORK

As you know I traveled to Mariupol with Matt Allen (Brownsburg, IN) and Tim Henderson (Severn, MD). We arrived in Mariupol on July 11th and labored with the brethren there until we left on July 28th. We knew going into this trip that our main goal was going to be in more of an encouragement capacity than evangelistic. For those that don't know or remember, this congregation is not even a year old. As is the case sometimes here in the States, discouragement can be a problem for fledgling congregations. So, we decided to primarily focus upon encouragement and edification, but obviously were open to and looking for opportunities to extend the borders of the Lord's kingdom. Before I go any further, allow me to introduce to you the congregation of the Lord's people in Mariupol, Ukraine:

- Alexandra – She is the one who got the whole thing started last year. You may remember her from my previous letter asking for support for this trip. Alexandra was taught via her daughter in Argentina over the period of three years. When she was baptized last year, she introduced her friends and family to the gospel. Some of which obeyed. You will not find a more dedicated servant of the Lord than Alexandra. As of this writing, she is doing most of the teaching due to lack of any male leadership.

- Evgenia – She is a friend of Alexandra's and one of the first converts to the gospel in Mariupol. She too has a wonderful heart and is diligent about her studies and desire to do what is right.

- Olga – Olga is in a tough situation. Her father and mother are both members of the congregation, but have not attended services in quite some time. Her father had a falling out with the brethren last year and has never returned. He has made attending services, and life in general, difficult for his daughters and wife to attend. In spite of this, though, Olga attends the services when she doesn't have to work.

- Valentine – He is the only active male in the congregation. His eyesight is not good and he does not have much of a desire to take an active leadership role. He is a good man and diligently listened to all we had to say. We encouraged him to take on a more active role, but he must be the one to make the decision.

- Galena – She is Valentine's wife. Each of our studies were held in their flat. She is a happy woman whose desire to serve the Lord is evident.

- There are others but these are all that attended our studies. We tried to set up meetings with those who have fallen away, but for one reason or another, we were unable to do so.

Upon our arrival in Mariupol, we met with Alexandra who filled us in on what had been going on within the congregation since the last teachers were there in early April. She gave us a list of topics on which she felt the church needed some teaching. We were happy and thankful for her input. We met with the church for the first time on Sunday July 13th. After the brethren welcomed us with a feast of Ukrainian food we opened our Bibles and had our first worship service. We continued to meet with the brethren on a daily basis, with the exception of a one-day break. The attendance, considering the time of year, was good. Summer is the time when most people are out working in their gardens to provide food for the winter months. Plus, there were some other factors that kept some members from attending regularly if at all. Even though all the Christians were unable to attend every service, we averaged around 8-10 people per study, with visitors on occasion.

Since we were in Mariupol for three Sundays, each of us had an opportunity to speak on a Sunday. During the week we tried to rotate teaching occasions when lessons would allow so that we would all have equal opportunity to teach. The topics we discussed while there included lessons on: evangelism, Catholicism (Russian Orthodox Church) vs New Testament Church, commitment, pure living, selective benevolence, attendance, end times issues, and the grace of God. We also used Johnny Edwards' material "Home Bible Study" (which has been translated into Russian) for four of our study periods. Each lesson was well received by the brethren.

## CONTACTS

During the course of our studies, we had opportunity to meet and study with other individuals. Emma, one of Alexandra's friends, has been meeting with the Christians on a regular basis. She, however, had some issues with the deity of Christ and so for about an hour and a half one night, we studied with her. She was of the opinion that Jesus and God the Father are one and the same. We showed her passages such as Genesis 1:26; John 1:1; 14:16-17 that speak clearly of Jesus' deity and that the Father and the Son are two different beings, yet one in purpose. After some thought and continued study she admitted, "You're right!" We then turned her attention to her baptism. Alexandra told us earlier that Emma was baptized in the Baptist church about five years ago. We tried to explain to her the importance of baptism and the role it plays in the salvation process. We showed her from Scripture one must be baptized in order to be saved (Mark 16:16; I Pet. 3:21). She, however, was adamant she was baptized for the right reasons and not because of typical

Baptist doctrine. We nudged her as much as we could, but we decided to drop it so we didn't do more harm than good. It's a decision she has to make and we pray she makes the right one.

We also had occasion, during our regular studies, to meet other friends (Anatoly, Sveta) or family members (Marina, Luidmilla) of the Christians in Mariupol. Some had obeyed the gospel last year, others knew little concerning the Bible. In each case, we tried to encourage them to seek out a relationship with the Lord.

#### PERSONAL THOUGHTS

I'd like to share with you some personal thoughts of our trip to Mariupol.

First, the Christians in Mariupol are a very dedicated group. There is a core group of about four or five members that are sincerely striving to do what is right. Alexandra is doing her best to keep things together, but she longs for the day when a man will be able to take over the teaching. As I mentioned above, the congregation is made up of mostly women.

Second, the congregation faces many of the same problems we do. The brethren in Mariupol have become discouraged over the lack of attendance of some members and the lack of desire for Christians to live the right kind of life. When we explained to them that we face many of the same troubles, it seemed to lift their spirits. I know that sounds weird, but hearing that other churches struggle with the same issues was, in a sense, comforting for them.

Third, the work in Mariupol is worthy of time and money. All of you know, this was my first overseas trip. Initially, I was unsure of how well things were going to go due to the language barrier, teaching with a translator, being away from family, etc. However, after spending time with the brethren, I'm confident we were able to do much good. The thankfulness in their voices and in their eyes was very telling. I cannot think of a better way to spend three weeks of one's time than helping to ground a group of willing and able Christians. Since we've been back I've been asked if I'd go back again if given the opportunity and of course the answer is yes.

Fourth, Mariupol is a place of much potential. Although the Curtain has been down for over a decade now, there still remains a high Soviet influence. Due to the communist leadership it once had, many people have yet to hear the gospel of our Savior. There are, in my opinion, many opportunities to spread the gospel in the city. Especially, when you consider this is the ONLY faithful church in the entire country!

Fifth, more workers are needed. While much good is done by those who labor with them for a few weeks at a time, they still need more help. The Christians in Mariupol are very appreciative of those who are able to go work with them for any amount of time. They also appreciate of those who make these trips possible through financial and spiritual support. Please, if you have any interest in going to Mariupol, or know of someone else who may be interested, please let me know.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

Brethren, again, I want to thank you for your support of this endeavor. I hope I've been able to convey to you the good that was done because of your support. If you should have any questions concerning the work in Mariupol, please don't hesitate to call on me. You can reach me at the office (812-944-2305) or at home (812-246-4312). I look forward to the next opportunity we have to work together in this special work.

In His Service.

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Alexandra



Bus in Kiev



Central Market



Church members



Wall painting of Cleopatra



Mariupol bowling center



Meridian Hotel



Phones



Police car



Russian Orthodox Church



**Soviet mural**



**Spanish restaurant**



**Three preachers**



Ukrainian Winnie the Pooh



Vera