

The Body of Christ



"For where two or three are gathered together in my name..."
God has opened the door for us to begin a small fellowship of Ukrainian families in cooperation with a local church in Žilina.

It was late March — less than one month since our evacuation from Ukraine — and God had provided us an apartment. We were finally leaving the horse ranch and moving to Žilina! This was largely possible due to the generous help of an American missionary family: Zac and Kim Shepperson.

Zac is an elder at a local, multi-national church here in Žilina, and shortly after our arrival in the city, he sent me a message. There were new Ukrainian families visiting their church, but options for translation were limited. "Could you imagine leading a Ukrainian church meeting of some kind [at our building]?" Zac wrote. "It could be any time of the week and no cost." Something in my heart surged at the thought of organizing a group of Ukrainian believers. The seeds of a new church perhaps?

My first Sunday at New Beginnings church in Žilina was an unusual one. The service was held at the Shepperson's home as part of an Easter celebration. Translation was difficult as we juggled three languages — Slovak, English, and Ukrainian — in the relatively small space of the Sheppersons' living room.

Peter, the main preacher that day, spoke in Czech (very similar to Slovak) and this was translated into English. I listened to the English and translated it into Ukrainian. Due to our close proximity, Peter had to wait for me to finish my translation before continuing in Czech. Everyone was

patient, and we made it work, but I remember observing how this three-language dance limited the sermon. Normal two-language translation cuts the speaker's time at least by half. Peter probably had 30% of his normal time. How could one hope to communicate with any depth when faced with such a formidable language barrier?

One of the Ukrainian families in attendance that day were the Horyovii's: Mykola (Kolya), his wife Lyuda, and their four children. They had evacuated from the city of Cherkasy in central Ukraine. There was also a second Ukrainian family present. Artem and Oksana had evacuated from a town near Kyiv along with their two children, and they were now living in the Sheppersons' home. I remember Kim recounting how she and Oksana worked together in the kitchen, using Google Translator on their phones to communicate.

Over the next few Sundays, as we resumed our regular meetings at the church building, I would gather the Ukrainians towards the back of the auditorium, translating the service sentence by sentence into their language. During that time, various Ukrainians in the church came and went. Some families returned to Ukraine as the Russians retreated from occupied zones. Other families moved on to different places in Europe.

After a couple of weeks, I proposed an after-church meeting with the Ukrainians who had been attending consistently. I raised the possibility of establishing some kind of regular meeting that would be in Ukrainian. This was received positively, but the only time everyone could commit to was Sunday immediately after the main Slovak service.



Every Friday evening, we gather to share food, fellowship, singing and Bible reading — all in our beloved Ukrainian language. 💙💛

BUT AS WE WERE ALLOWED OF GOD TO BE PUT IN TRUST WITH THE GOSPEL, EVEN SO WE SPEAK; NOT AS PLEASING MEN, BUT GOD, WHICH TRIETH OUR HEARTS. 1 THESSALONIANS 2:4

The following week we had our first meeting which included members of our family, the Horyovii's, and Oksana. We discussed some ideas for going forward, and we tentatively agreed to use *Bible First* as a starting point for content.

The next Sunday we met again, but somehow it seemed strained. The Ukrainians here tend to have incredibly tight schedules, working long hours. After an exhausting week, and having just finished Church Service #1, it seemed daunting to sit back down for Church Service #2. Sometimes what people really need is some family time and a nap!

I sensed that the timing was premature, and so we discontinued our after-church meetings. I focused on translating the Sunday sermons, and we enjoyed fellowship with the Ukrainians in the before/after service times.

Not long after that, a new Ukrainian family came to the church. Serhii Voronyuk and his wife Angelina had been in Russia when the war began, and they evacuated soon thereafter. They began attending New Beginnings regularly, and we slowly became acquainted.

On October 1, the elders of our church began a biannual men's project called Fight Club. One of the assignments in the early weeks of Fight Club was to plan an outing with people outside your family. Serhii and Kolya were also taking part in Fight Club, so I proposed that we do something together. On a Saturday in late October, our three families went to a local park for a Ukrainian barbecue.



Our Ukrainian barbecue with the Horyovii's and Voronyuk's

By this time, the issue of a regular meeting for Ukrainians had resurfaced, and the previous Sunday I had found myself in at least two discussions about getting something started. Now, as our kids played together in the park, we three couples stood around a smokey fire and talked. I again raised the idea of a weekly fellowship meeting — something in a language we all understand, a time to read and teach and share, a time of our own. It would need to be on a day separate from the New Beginnings service.

This time, something was different. We knew each other better now, and we found ourselves sharing a common need: like-minded and like-language fellowship. Life was busy, unstable, even hard at times. But there was consensus

among the families that carving out a time for a weekly fellowship meeting was important.

We discussed various options and finally agreed to gather on Friday evenings from 5-7pm. The next day, Sunday, I spoke with one of the elders at New Beginnings to see if we could still have the use of the building. He assured me that we were welcome, and he showed me a couple of rooms upstairs which we agreed would suit our group well. The very next Friday, we had our first Ukrainian Family Fellowship meeting.

That first week I wasn't sure what to expect. Would people take the time to get out with their kids in the dark to sit around a small room and read the Bible? They came. And it was like a balm for our souls.

Kelsie made sandwiches. Lyuda brought some baked goods. And there was plenty of hot tea. (These are Ukrainians after all!) Serhii had to work that night, but his wife Angelina rode the bus and came with their baby son, Matviy. I brought my guitar, and we sang some songs. *Ukrainian songs*. Rather than preach a message or start back into *Bible First*, I suggested that we read a little each week through some of Paul's epistles: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians for starters. And so we began.

Over the next weeks, we kept meeting. We started a chat group on Telegram to keep in touch during the week. Kolya took a trip to Ukraine with one of their boys, and we all prayed for them, welcoming them back with warm handshakes and listening to their stories. Last Sunday, Serhii preached the main message at New Beginnings, and I translated into English. It was wonderful to hear his testimony and see his heart for Christ.

As I write this report, it's Friday again. Our weekly fellowship meeting begins in a few hours, and I'm excited to be there. I'm not sure I'd call this a new church...yet. As we say so often these days, we can't know the future. But God knows. He has led us to Slovakia and brought our families together. We are gathering in Jesus' name, we are His body, and we know that He is in our midst.

How You Can Pray

- Praise the Lord for a successful trip to Ukraine on December 3–8. It was my first time back in nearly six months. Please pray for my next trip on December 24!
- Pray for Ukraine's energy infrastructure as millions face a long, cold winter with limited access to heat and electricity.
- Pray for our Ukrainian Family Fellowship.
- Pray for health, wisdom and courage for our family.
- Pray for peace and liberty in Ukraine.

To God be the Glory