

REFLECTIONS OCT-DEC 2020

Dear family and friends,

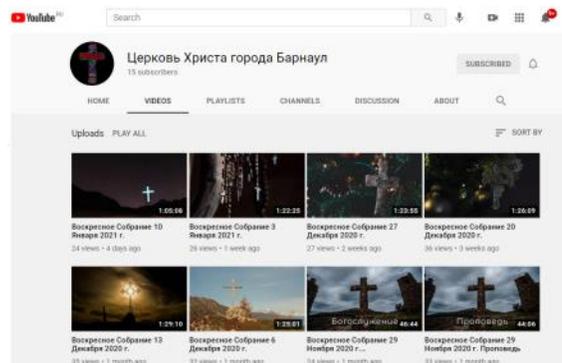
Greetings from Siberia. I just opened the office window slightly for a few minutes. The fresh -17°C (+1°F) air invigorates. Icy snow is piled on the windowsill, but the chirping of the birds, the brightness of the sun, and the blue of the almost cloudless sky is still enticing. Anybody want to build a ❄️SNOWMAN❄️? No? Okay, then. How about we catch up on the ministry news of the last few months instead? Yes? Great!



Recent photo by Mason featuring snowy scene.

So much has happened since our previous report. I want to first give a summary of our activities for those who are oriented to quick reads. For those of you who enjoy more details and are encouraged by “people stories”, there’s more for you after the summary.

- In October and November, we researched, designed, taught, and shared weekly lessons based on the first season of the unique online crowdfunded TV show, The Chosen, which is free for viewing through VidAngel and YouTube. Our lessons were prepared for both in-person class time and online viewing. Families and churches in other Russian cities joined the project. Handouts (in English and Russian) and links to our classes are available upon request.
- We also developed and preached several sermon series.
 - The first series was to promote memorization of key Bible verses. I preached the first several sermons. Then Sonia’s brother preached the rest. These sermons were recorded and posted on the Barnaul church’s YouTube channel for those who stay home during church assemblies due to covid restrictions.
 - The second series I preached was a deep exploration of the implications of John 3:16 to determine the details of God’s Plan of Salvation. These sermons were also recorded and posted online.



- The third series was related to the arrival of our LORD in human form. I designed a plan to contrast the world’s view of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Good News with the Christian’s view. Two Russian brothers and I presented lessons on these topics throughout December and recordings were posted online.

- We wrote or adapted articles about twice a week for the church’s WhatsApp chat to help the local church stay connected and encouraged during this time of restrictions on assemblies.



- Sonia continued her in-person and online bible studies.
- I continued working with the other church leaders to serve the church’s needs. This includes mentoring the youngest brothers as they begin to serve more often in the worship assemblies.

- Sonia regularly visited sisters in the hospital or those struggling with health, grief, and despair.

- We continued to host the youth ministry gatherings on Saturday nights about twice a month. Often, we have overnight guests that join us for worship at the Sunday morning assembly of the church.



- Sonia also continued to host the sister’s small group bible study on Saturday mornings which has expanded to include sisters from other cities joining online.



- Sonia and the sisters also conducted two baby showers and celebrated Christmas in one “super party”. The church now has 2 new arrivals born and adopted by 2 young women who used to be in our children’s classes, camp, and youth ministry a while ago.

- And we helped organize the winter camp event “Footprints in the Snow”. The event was conducted in the same facility we conducted summer camp 2020. The organization effort happened throughout

November and December, but the event itself happened the first week of January. We had 33 participants, mostly 14-25 years old, from as far west as Moscow and as far east as Irkutsk. (That’s like youth coming from California and Connecticut to attend an event in Kentucky. They literally came by plane, train, bus, and car.)



More photos from the winter camp event can be seen at this link: <https://vk.com/away.php?utf=1&to=https%3A%2F%2Fphotos.app.goo.gl%2FXvECacZDWaMAuih8>

So, that's the summary. Now, I'd like to share some people stories.

Most of the participants of our winter camp have previously been in our summer camp. But not all. You may remember the cook who we impressed last summer? She applied for her son to attend. She admitted she thought he might drop out after a day or two. Instead, she was delighted to see him connecting and getting involved, fully participating in classes, discussion groups, and free time activities. I suspect almost everything he heard about God and Jesus, he was hearing for the first time.



We also had three girls, Kristina, Yuliya, and Anya, with us for the first time, too. Kristina and Yuliya attend a local Baptist church. They have realized through association with our youth group that there can be much more joy in following Jesus than is possible in their church where fault-finding abounds instead of acceptance. They are considering leaving their church to be a part of the church of Christ but are distressed and fearful of the exit process which requires them to stand before their entire congregation and explain their reasons for leaving



Kristina



Yuliya

Anya

and answer questions or listen to accusations of wrongdoing. Sonia and I are trying to help them think through the situation scripturally and find strength in following God's way while being respectful to those God has used to bring them to this point in their spiritual journey. Anya is a friend of theirs and a new believer who seems ready to discuss baptism and all that it means.

We have two other "new" young men who are also becoming a part of our youth group: Simon and Pasha. Simon was with us in the winter camp. He's very well taught and independent. He comes from a troubled household but seems positive and is respectful of others unlike his father who left the church years ago and makes every effort to prevent his sons from participating in our classes and events. I believe this young man put himself at risk to attend the winter camp and deserves your prayers for protection and strength and more opportunity to be with Christians. The other young man, Pasha, didn't join us in the winter camp. He is a former classmate of one of our teens who has been leading in the planning of the weekly youth events on Saturday nights. Pasha has been attending these youth events often.



Me and Simon

If you don't mind, I'll include one more "people story" from early January because it fits here very well. Like most Sunday morning worship assemblies everywhere, different individuals take responsibility for different parts of the worship time in our assemblies. On January 10th, one of our teens spoke and led the congregation in prayer before the LORD's supper. Another teen who was still in town after our camp event, spoke and led the congregation in prayer before the offering was collected. And a third young man, a graduate of our camp and teen's program, shared with the church a spiritual message he had learned recently. Mason, too, is serving regularly. He handles the video and audio recording of our assemblies for posting online so that members who cannot attend due to covid can still "participate" from home. (And Mason set up our online camp application, too.) The number of young men serving that Sunday outnumbered us older guys more than 2 to 1.



So, join me in praising the LORD for all He is doing! The next generation is listening to the LORD and maturing in their faith. There is a future for the LORD's church in this (crazy) world, and it seems the LORD is using our ministry to prepare it. I hope you all find that as encouraging as I do.

Before finishing, I want to express our gratitude to all of you for the financial support you've shown us all through 2020. It wasn't an easy year for anyone, I believe. Yet, you all were faithful and generous to continue enabling us to serve here. Because others receive and handle your gifts, we don't always know who is giving or how much has been given until long after the gift is received. So, even if we don't respond to your gift quickly, please know that it means a lot to us personally. We live daily trusting in God's providence which He accomplishes through you.

Our gratitude is for your support as shown in other ways, also. You've sent us resources, stickers, supplies. You've handled our mail and forwarded our packages. You've printed our newsletters and sent them to others (or forwarded the emails). You've written encouraging emails and sent uplifting messages on cards. You've prayed for us – and we have felt God's direction and blessing because of it. We have felt your love as well. We are truly blessed and grateful ... fully committed to continue serving as best we know how.

Grace and peace to you in the name of our LORD, Jesus Christ. Thank you for your partnership in this ministry.

Joseph

Joseph, Sonia and Mason Rhodes
(with Olga and Kristina)
Volunteer missionaries
Barnaul, Russia



An elder suggested I include this statement for your convenience:

If you would like to be a partner in this ministry financially, send your gift to "Upstate Church of Christ, 1136 Brown Road, Anderson, SC, 29621" with the memo: "Russian Missions".