

Romania missions report

March 2022

Albert, Lavinia, Bogdan & Lara Cook

A little background to our partnership of service in the current crisis in neighboring Ukraine

In January, following the example and encouragement of one of our Romanian Christian sisters who now lives in Korea, our congregation in Bucharest had a period of 3 weeks of prayer and fasting, asking the Lord to bring us fully into "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" in 2022. We had no idea it would be so critical for the current disaster unfolding in our neighboring Ukraine. That 3 week period of spiritual preparation has been a critical factor in what we have experienced together in the past four weeks, since the war began in Ukraine.

Just after the war began

On February 27, we met our first guests from Ukraine, Steele and Lena Istre. Steele is American, Lena is Ukrainian. They married just over a year ago and Lena was pregnant! They intended to stay in Bucharest until they receive Lena's visa to the US. A congressman has helped them to get the visa expedited, so were hoping to leave before that baby girl arrives. Her due date is March 28. More on that later...



Lena and Steele Istre



Mihai Bravu congregation, Bucharest, March 27, 2022

The grace of God is multiplying among Romanians and Ukrainians

On Saturday, February 26, I wrote on our church Whatsapp group asking the congregation to prepare spiritually for refugees to come our way and that, already, I had received offers from our American brothers and sisters to send money to help serve these families fleeing before Putin's invasion. In reply, one brother in our congregation, Costin, said: "(My wife and I) were thinking that the church should take up a special collection this Sunday, for the Ukrainians, and God to guide us how to use the money, how to send it to them..."

On average, the congregation contributes around 700 lei (\$165) per week. But, this past Sunday, their contribution was 3384 lei! (\$787)

The greatest victory of faith here is not the amount contributed, but the fact that this contribution was initiated by this Romanian brother. In years past, some voices would raise an objection, saying, "Oh, it's OK, we don't need to give. The Americans will give for this or that need." But this time, after hearing of the compassion of our American brothers and sisters, they recognized that the Spirit of grace and joy and benevolent generosity is in their hearts as well. And, so, they were determined to be the first to give.

I had determined in my heart to receive in foreign donations up to 9x what our brothers and sisters give and, when that amount is about to be spent, to wait for the brothers and sisters here to step up to the plate again. I think maybe the 10% is an indication of what our congregation can handle physically and spiritually for God's glory. When we overdo it, it usually doesn't turn out so well. I have since seen the grace of God multiplying in the church in Bucharest and other European churches, so that I've stopped keeping account. The principle of partnership between American and mission churches in Europe is very evident and brings us great joy.

Here's a prayer we're praying with those who are sending financial sacrifices to help Ukrainian refugees.

Father, bless our gift of faith for your glory in strengthening the Body of Christ among Ukrainians and Romanians. Guard them from temptation and deliver them from the evil one who will do all he can to get them to put their trust in material things and in human resources to solve their problems. Give these Christians and their leaders wisdom as they serve young mothers and children to serve them in their needs, to help protect them until they can be reunited with their husbands and extended families. In the name of Christ Jesus.

March 4

Lavinia and her brother offered their (deceased) parents' apartment for the use of those fleeing the war. Adrian Stoica, a brother from the Mihai Bravu church, and I went to one border town, Isaccea, Romania, and picked up 8 people – the Soto family with four children (missionaries in Mikolaiv, Ukraine), and a young lady and her grandmother. Bro. Dragos Vintila from Cluj picked up 5 others at a different border town, Sighetu, Romania: Valentina (18) - she's Lena Istre's sister, Svetlana and her son Vlad, Alla and her 1.5 year daughter, Masha.



Adrian and Albert at Isaccea border crossing



The Soto family



Yana & her grandma



In Lavinia's parents' apartment

Before leaving Isaccea, we took them all to a restaurant. We intended to treat them all, but the restaurant manager beat us to it: "Are you coming from Ukraine?" -- "They are," I

replied, pointing to the group. -- "They will eat for free," she said. "Whatever they want to eat."

Upon arriving in Bucharest, we took the Sotos to the apartment where a Romanian Christian family had brought them a hot meal, food and snacks for a day or so, and a stroller for baby Peregrin. (Peregrin, in Romanian means "pilgrim"). Since the Sotos left Romania two weeks ago, the Ukrainian group that arrived with Valentina (Lena's sister) is now staying in Lavinia's parents' apartment as long as they need it.



The day Svetlana, Valentina, Alla and baby Masha (seated at table) moved into the apartment

March 7

The Lord blessed the congregation in Bucharest with unity in mind and heart as we met after worship to discuss plans for working with the refugees. We decided to renovate the bathrooms at the church building in order to have hot water and showers ready in case there is a need for transit housing of refugees.



Meeting with the Mihai Bravu Church members, Bucharest, planning for refugee ministry

After all these years, this unity is why the Resurrection of Christ brought and kept me here... Sigh... I've learned over the years that I'm not here simply to solve humanitarian disasters, but my job description does include disaster relief work when, and if, this builds Christians (Romanians and, now, Ukrainians) more as the Body of Christ.

The weekly contribution in Bucharest averages \$165. Last Sunday, the congregation gave \$800 for the Ukrainian refugee work. This week the contribution was \$450... still over 2x more than usual! Beyond this, Romanian Christians are buying food, baby items, strollers, clothes, baby bath tub, pack-and-plays, etc, paying for transportation out of their own pockets and. They're volunteering their time to clean apartments and to help refugees get settled into or traverse this foreign land.



Lizi Doija, cleaning



Steele Istre, cleaning



Lena Istre (and baby girl) from Donetsk... getting apartment ready for those arriving in Bucharest tomorrow

Mar 8-13

We received two visitors from Thessaloniki, Greece - Jackson and Esther - who offered to come and teach us about ministering among refugees.



Esther & Jackson House



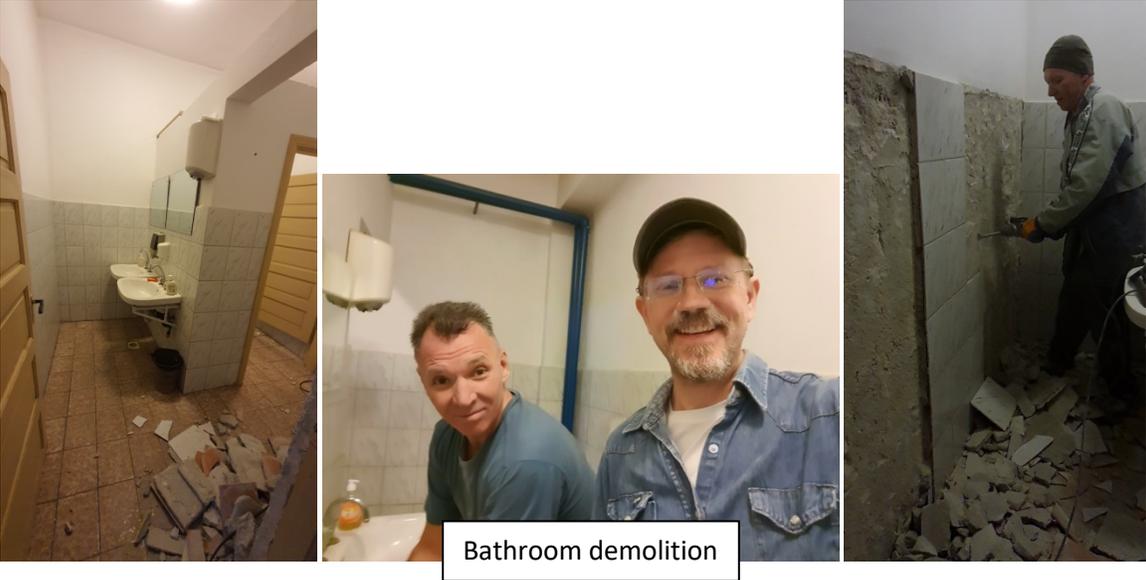
Jackson, Maryna & David, Albert

The Houses' visit was a an unexpected blessing that gave an idea of how refugee situations evolve in waves and in resources. Generally speaking, those who flee in second and third waves have less resources available in a period of time when global interest in their plight has worn down.

But for now, the grace of God has been multiplying among us. Because we've been so busy I've stopped taking a detailed account. Here are some highlights.

We've found a solution for renovating the church bathrooms! when available short-term housing for refugees will be scarce we will be ready to house them. Our congregation had

decided to spend some of the money sent from the US for refugee ministry to renovate the bathrooms, to have hot water and one shower each. After this decision, Albert got an estimate from a constructor, around \$6000 for labor, plus materials. BUT, God is multiplying the gifts of his people! That same week, the church in Marseilles, France, offered to send a team to work for 5 days, to renovate our church bathrooms. The French group will arrive on March 27. Then, the church in Geneva, Switzerland, offered to take up a collection and send it to Marseilles to help with their renovation expenses! Today, Albert and one of the brothers in Bucharest began removing 500 sq. ft. of floor and wall tile to be ready for the Marseilles team.





Ula, Mira, Ira and their mothers Veronica and Viera



Newborn Grace Istre

We were privileged to host Veronica and Viera and their three daughters for one night in our home. They left their husbands behind in Ukraine and were headed for Plovdiv, Bulgaria. They don't speak English, so it was quite an adventure.

Steele and Lena Istre, our new friends from near Kiev, were supposed to get Lena's visa on March 16, buy tickets to fly to the US, and fly out the very next day to have their baby in the U.S. God is so good! Their baby came on March 16, two weeks early, the day they were to purchase their plane tickets! Thank the Lord, the baby didn't come a day later, in flight. They have all moved to the Cooks house so that their first days (and possibly weeks) as parents will be easier. We are enjoying having precious baby and new parents in our home.

The Lord's grace in Tirana, Albania

In 1991, while in Bucharest on my first trip, some Albanian refugees came and studied English and the Gospel of Luke with our group. They were hoping to get out of Romania and into the greener pastures of Italy. After studying for some time, a couple of these young dreamers, Angel and Artan, made a commitment to follow Christ. I (Albert) was writing in my journal, reflecting by the pool where these men were baptized, when out of nowhere an older gentleman sat down beside me and struck up a conversation about being a missionary. It was this moment that I heard a call by grace to follow wherever in the world I'd be led: "I'm thinking of returning to Harding and changing my major (from Chemistry to Biblical Languages)", I wrote. A few of the young Albanian men who became Christians, between 1991 and 1993, gave up their dreams, too, and returned to Tirana, Albania, to help start a church.



1991: group of Christians in the subway, Bucharest, Romania
Artan (far left), Angel (third from left), Lavinia (middle in white jacket)

Last week, I received a phone call from brother Bledi saying that the church in Tirana would take up a collection and wishes to send it to a congregation in Romania for helping Ukrainians fleeing their homeland. Indeed, great is the grace of the Lord.

March 14-17

This week, Lavinia and I decided to begin teaching Romanian language lessons to Ukrainians who intend to stay in Romania until they are able to return home. Within a couple of hours, our enrollment list went from three interested persons to twenty. (I find out today from a young lady that she had seen an "advertisement" on a Ukrainian fb page where someone had posted my phone number for free Romanian lessons! 😊) We had our first lessons this week, using an intuitive immersion method (using only Romanian language and interaction, with very little intervention in English and Russian). It was a nice experience for everyone and very promising for the Ukrainian youth who may have to enroll in Romanian schools and universities to continue their education.



One of the Cooks' Romanian language classes

Our children have really been stepping up to help with the youth who are fleeing Ukraine. They invited Valentina to attend a Model United Nations training session that Bogdan leads. The Mihai Bravu youth group in Bucharest is blessed in spite of the tragedies that brought these young people to Romania.



Mihai Bravu youth numbers multiply as well, by the grace of God

Appeal for spiritual warfare

Please join us in the spiritual battle that we are engaging in. Pray continually that the gifts you brothers and sisters have sent from the US, from Europe and from Romania will bring glory to God by strengthening a spiritual worldview of the Body of Christ among the Romanians and Ukrainians here. I ask earnestly for these prayers because, constantly, for 30 years there have been many scandals in our congregation, most of them tied to money. The result has been that money tears the church apart. We have to be very careful and very watchful of how the evil one works among us... when they give, generous western Christians give with great joy, for God's glory. It is very hard to imagine that a gift given for

the glory of God could do anything but bring glory to God. However, we've seen that many times the gifts given in faith for God's glory have not brought him glory. In these cases, generous gifts strengthen a materialistic worldview rather than strengthening the worldview of the Body of Christ among those who receive the gifts.

One evening before bedtime, as I read the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9, I saw you all in his words, overwhelmed at the grace of God which has moved your hearts to share his gift of grace with those in need. Paul was telling Christians in Corinth about how those from Macedonia gave to help Jewish Christians in Israel who were suffering from famine in the 1st century. The grace of God has been multiplied in the hearts of those Macedonian Christians who gave a gift (grace) and it also multiplied in the hearts of those who received their gift, to also give thanks (grace) to God, which brings him so much joy that he continues to pour out his blessings (grace) on his people. It's a beautiful picture of what we're experiencing in these otherwise horrifying circumstances. Praise be to God for his abundant, amazing grace.