

Ukrainian student conference

Liz McClenaghan and Ben Saunders report on a novel alternative for a bank holiday weekend

On the 29 April 2011, while the whole world stood still to watch the Royal wedding, two CMF students were on their way to a new adventure in Ukraine.

Ben Saunders and Liz McClenaghan attended the third Ukrainian Medical Youth Conference. They were involved in encouraging the leadership of the Christian Medical Association of Ukraine (CMAU) and getting to know the local students, as well as seeing how medical ministries are growing in Ukraine. Two of the organisers, Alexandr and Vitalina had attended the International Student Preconference in February 2011 which gave them essential skills in leadership and evangelism.

LIZ: Earlier this year I had the privilege of organising the International Student Preconference (ISP) as part of my internship for CMF. While running that I got to know Alex and Vitalina, so when they invited me to attend their national conference I jumped at the chance.

To be honest before I went I barely knew anything about Ukraine, let alone anything about the Christians there or how the gospel is spreading, but when we arrived I was amazed at how God had used the ISP over the years - Rostyslav attended it a number of years ago and now is heading the medical student ministries there.

The ministry among medical students in Ukraine has been growing exponentially over the last few years - from just 15 christian students in 2008 to 350 now. It is set to

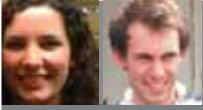
Ukraine (for those who don't know!) is located just north of the Black Sea, bordering Russia to the north-east, Belarus to the north, and several eastern European countries to the west. The capital is Kyiv, and the population is about 46 million, slightly less than that of England, but in a land area more than four times the size. Ukraine may appear rather more in the news in 2012 as it hosts the European Football Championship finals along with neighbouring Poland.

continue as the team of people involved grows in number and in love for the Lord.

BEN: The students at the conference were mainly from Ukraine, but there was also a large international contingent, from countries as diverse as Ghana, Nigeria, Syria and India. We listened to lectures from both Ukrainian healthcare workers and expatriate medical missionaries, on a range of subjects.

The conference was titled 'Biblical principles for preventative medicine'. While CMF conferences in the UK have Christian topics with a medical perspective, this conference had mainly medical topics with a Christian perspective.





Liz McClenaghan is a medical student in Brighton, currently intercalating in Bioethics and Medical Law and working as CMF office intern in London. **Ben Saunders** is a medical student in Cardiff, currently intercalating in International Health in Bristol.



BEN: Of the seminars I went to, particular highlights were a guide to spiritual history taking as part of holistic medical care from a Christian perspective, and a lecture from a US missionary on her ministry with HIV victims about beating stigma and Christ-centred counselling.

Due to the medical focus of the conference, about 10% of the attendees were not yet believers resulting in amazing gospel sharing opportunities.

LIZ: We had many valuable conversations with a wide range of people from all over the world and were able to share our faith with non-believers. I particularly enjoyed being able to encourage new Christians by reading the Bible with them over dinner.

The CMF office worked with some American missionaries to get some of the CMF literature

translated into Ukrainian (no walk in the park!) 400 copies of Bernard Palmer's *Cure for Life* arrived with just three days to spare and each person attending was given a DVD with all the copies of *CMF Files* available in Russian and English. This is a massive blessing for the recipients as previously these resources have not been available in the Ukrainian language, and their message has not been easily accessible until now.

LIZ: I was impressed at the wide network of American missionaries in Ukraine, many of whom have been there for over a decade and are faithfully preaching the Word of God in their everyday lives. It was great to see how ordinary people are making an impact for the gospel in a place away from home. I am considering working abroad in the future and this has been a great inspiration to see how God leads ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Ukraine is an ex-Soviet state and independence from the USSR was established 1991. 20 years later the country is obviously still recovering. A major issue within Ukraine is the massive influence of corruption within medicine and the government, meaning that a high proportion of people who study medicine



will not go on to practise it. The ability to buy a medical degree without passing exams has led to a general mistrust of doctors, leading to poor health of the general public. Life expectancy is 68, tuberculosis rate per 100,000 population is 113.7 (compared with UK 11.9) and 1.6% of the population aged 15-49 is living with HIV (compared with UK 0.2%).¹

BEN: Ukrainian medical students work in a deeply corrupt medical system where being an active Christian who stands up for their faith is both counter-cultural and detrimental to their progress up the career ladder. It was certainly a contrast to the comparatively easy ride we have in the UK.

To combat the poor health and corrupt medical system many Christian doctors who are members of CMAU are seeking to meet the medical needs of communities.

LIZ: I chatted to a woman called Lena over dinner who was working at a refuge for women and their children, many of whom are HIV positive. I was really amazed about how the refuge cares for the women where society and the health service have failed. Along with this nearly every CMAU student group is involved in some kind of medical outreach service at weekends. I was actually a little bit gutted that I've organised my elective already!

CMF is in gospel partnership with Christian medics in many countries around the world and gives opportunities to their student members to get involved in running summer teams, camps and conferences in a wide range of cultures.

LIZ: This weekend was an excellent experience for me. Not only was I deeply challenged, encouraged and inspired, I also felt honoured to be able to be part of the work God is doing in Ukraine.

BEN: This trip was a great motivation for me - to stand up for Jesus as a student here in the UK, and in whatever setting he leads me to in the future. I hope to maintain my links with Ukraine and possibly visit again in the future.

The work is not over. On 29-30 October 2011 there will be a Christian medical conference for international students studying in Ukraine. The main language spoken there will be English and it is hoped there will be 350-400 people in attendance, both believers and non-believers.

The organisers have asked for prayers for the preparation of this conference and also that some people from English speaking countries will be able to get involved. They want students to go over to be an encouraging presence, particularly if anyone is able to prepare and give a talk on a topic to do with Christianity or medicine, even better would be Christian medicine. If that could be you please get in touch (students@cmf.org.uk) - you won't regret it!

REFERENCES

1. MGD Monitor, tracking the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the UN. www.mdgmonitor.org