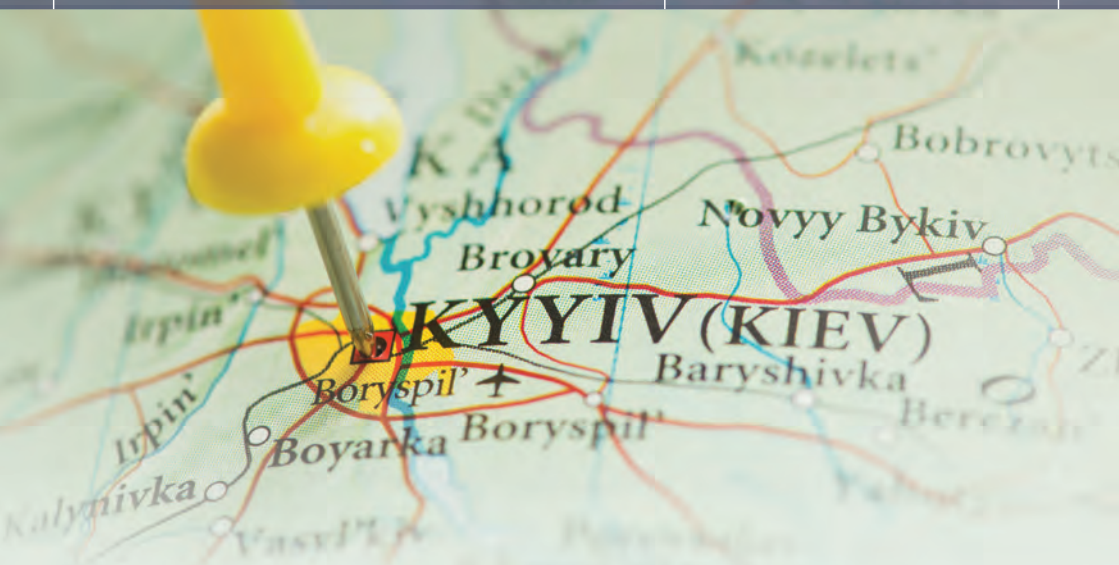


life as a medical missionary in Ukraine

Jim Peipon describes his ministry.



Jim Peipon is a medical missionary, and president and medical director of Ukraine Medical Outreach, Inc.



What is a medical missionary? I have asked this question many times to people interested in what God has called me to do in Ukraine. The most common reply is someone who goes to some rural, seemingly God forsaken part of the world to care for people who have limited access to medical care, limited resources and limited knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. When called to serve in Ukraine in 1998, the initial goal was to help start a clinic, which eventually would become a Christian hospital and a beacon of hope. Then someone asked me, 'What is a Christian hospital?'

After pondering this question and making several short term mission trips to Ukraine, I defined a Christian hospital as a place where patients receive true hope. Not only would physical needs be met, but each physical need would point to a greater spiritual need that could only be met by receiving Jesus, by faith,

as Lord and Saviour. By receiving healing for their souls, ultimately physical healing would be achieved despite our frequent failure to do so through medicine.

It did not take long after arriving in Ukraine to realise that another hospital was not what was needed. The ones they had required modernisation, yes, but what was really needed was the transforming grace of Christ in the patients, doctors, nurses and administrators. If this could be done in hospitals all over Ukraine, they would become Christian not only in name, but in deed as well.

I began to view medical professionals as an unreached people group. I could spend my time caring for patients or developing relationships within the medical community, modelling and teaching what it means to care for the whole person – body and soul. I prayed the medical system would become more competent, compassionate and Christ-like.

a challenging culture

Ukraine Medical Outreach began in 2001. I sold our comfortable home and the paediatric practice I had begun 20 years previously and moved to Kiev from a small American town of 20,000 to a European capital of five million. Our three children were 18, 18 and 16 years old at the time. What seemed like a drastic change was mitigated by knowing this was the call of God upon all of our lives.

When I first arrived in Ukraine there were only four MRI scanners in the whole country. Now it is relatively easy to access such technology. I knew I did not have the financial resources to provide modern technology, so I began to study and learn how their medical system worked. One of the biggest challenges for patients is finding doctors who are trustworthy. Because of the corruption at all levels of life, patients do not know whether doctors earned their degree or bought it. Patients do not know the real cost of their care, they only know that they have to pay more in order to receive good care. I am quick to add there are many good medical professionals in Ukraine, but it is difficult to survive without receiving additional payments from patients or being employed at three or four clinics. This means practising with integrity can be challenging for Christian medics.

building relationships

Relationships became the key to unlocking the hearts of people, whether medical professionals or patients. The American pastor and counsellor Paul Tripp wrote:

Personal ministry is not about always knowing what to say. It is not about fixing everything in sight that is broken. Personal ministry is about connecting people with Christ so that they are

able to think as he would have them think, desire what he says is best, and do what he calls them to do even if their circumstances never get 'fixed'. It involves exposing hurt, lost, and confused people to God's glory, so that they give up their pursuit of their own glory and live for his.¹

In order to build relationships within the medical community, we have used the Ukrainians' enthusiasm for learning about new treatments and developing critical thinking skills by organizing educational conferences where they are exposed to a biblical worldview of medicine.

As a paediatrician, these conferences are often aimed at improving the care of children with disabilities. The attitude in Ukraine was that only children with practical value to society were worth investing in and caring for. We teach that all were made in the image of God, therefore having inherent value received from their creator.

Another avenue of approach is teaching medical English. English is currently the language of the world. By discussing journal articles, Ukrainian doctors learn new information while improving their English, which is necessary to stay up to date and to be part of medical conferences around the world. Often the discussion turns to ethical issues and spiritual topics. These are great opportunities to get to know my Ukrainian colleagues in a less formal way.

While I teach English at the inpatient centre for paediatric HIV/AIDS in Kiev, my wife Marianna builds relationships with the children and their relatives while playing games and giving what I call 'hug therapy'. One day a *babushka* (a local term for a grandmother) came up to me said, 'I know what your wife does, but what do you do?' I told her I help doctors to become more

competent and share with them the importance of faith in medicine. Her response was 'If we have doctors, why do we need God?' What a great question! I in turn asked her, 'Where do you think the knowledge and ability to care for your granddaughter comes from?' She was not impressed. Then I asked, 'When doctors have done all they can do what hope can they give to their patients?' As the tears began to stream down her face, she said, 'I understand'.

From these relationships grow opportunities to share the gospel. We then use the Saline programme² to teach and encourage Ukrainian medics to share their faith with their patients with sensitivity, respect and permission. We have worked with the CMA Ukraine (the Ukrainian equivalent of CMF) in training its members to make the Saline Process their own.

An unanticipated ministry of Ukraine Medical Outreach is our work with medical students. It seems God has brought the world to Ukraine to study. There are 10,000 foreign medical students representing 77 countries, mainly Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and 100,000 Ukrainian students. We have encouraged the development of Christian Fellowships at the 17 medical institutes in Ukraine. Each year two conferences are held to encourage growth both professionally and spiritually. In the spring the conference is for Ukrainian nationals, with the main languages being Ukrainian and Russian. In the autumn, the conference is for those foreign students studying in Ukraine. The main language is English. We have enjoyed welcoming students from England at both of these conferences.

opportunities in uncertain times

Sadly, Ukraine has been in the news a lot over the past year. The political turmoil has created

great uncertainty. The people of Ukraine are peaceful and hospitable. They desire an end to corruption in their lives and a better economic opportunity for their children. Ukrainians seek justice and respect. The issues involved are complicated, having their roots deep in history, politics, economics, religion and cultural tradition. But with every challenge there is an opportunity. What man means for evil, God uses for good. The prayer is that God would change hearts and minds, indeed our souls. Only then will peace come. It is written, 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6) and 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:32). May the truth of the gospel indeed set people free.

Despite the challenges, the uncertainties, the financial insecurity we have faced as missionaries our lives have been full and blessed. It is a calling God has placed upon our lives to represent him in a land not our own. We now enjoy friendships from all over the world. The key word is calling. There is much work to be done everywhere. Whether you are called to go or called to stay, God is calling you to use your talents and resources for his glory. Missionaries are not super spiritual, super people or super Christians. They are just obedient to God's call upon their lives. Whatever call God places on your life, 'may you work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters' (Colossians 3:23). ■

REFERENCES

1. Tripp PD. *Instruments in the redeemer's hands: People in need of change helping people in need of change*. Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002:184
2. Find out more about Saline: www.jhsglobal.org and read the Saline Process article in the Spring 2014 issue of *Triple Helix*: cmf.li/SalineProcess