



# Headlines

## Reformation teaching gaining a foothold in Ukraine

JOHN VAN DYK

Donetsk, Ukraine is home to a Reformed theological seminary, whose students receive instruction and training in the ministry from visiting North American Reformed and Presbyterian ministers. The result of the work so far is tangibly seen in five new Reformed church plants in tough Eastern European soil.

The ministers, many of whom come from United Reformed congregations, spend two weeks in Ukraine, volunteering their time with the permission and funding often provided by their home congregations. While the training began nearly 20 years ago as a wider ecumenical effort, according to URCNA emeritus minister, Rev. Dennis Royall, over the last 10 years the seminary has been under the direction of an organization known as RITE (Reformed International Theological Education) with branches in both the United States

and Canada. The aim of RITE is to bring “biblical and reformed teaching to students from various Christian backgrounds,” with a view to preparing men for the ministry and to equip laypersons for service in teaching and leadership.

Unlike the seminary facilities North Americans enjoy, RITE has had to scramble over the years to provide teaching space for its growing student body. According to Rev. Royall, classes have been taught in a local theatre, in rented apartment space, at a facility that combined a school with a church, and finally, last autumn, RITE was able to purchase a partly finished building to both house its students and to provide them with facilities for instruction.

According to Mrs. Thea Van Dixhoorn, a member of RITE’s board, rent for the classrooms previously utilized more than tripled, forcing the seminary to relocate. With few or no other rental options available, RITE decided to purchase a building

that was only partially constructed. With the help of finances from supporting churches, the building was completed and furnished to house the students who needed housing. Bunk beds were made and showers installed.

Rev. Royall, who has made many trips to Ukraine to teach, explained that for 10 months of every year, ministers from North America come to Donetsk to teach for two weeks, eight hours each day. “These ministers teach various subjects in Theology and Biblical Studies,” he explained. “Our student body is made up mainly of Baptist and Pentecostal men and women. The women study to be effective leaders of women’s groups and children’s Sunday schools in their churches. Most of the men already ‘preach’ in their churches,” he said.

“The churches in Ukraine do not support their ministers so all of the men who study at the seminary must work at some other job. The



*Rev. Dennis Royall leads a class in Ukraine with interpreter close at hand.*

*Bunk beds in the new seminary building purchased by RITE.*

*The building purchased was partially finished when RITE took ownership.*

Donbass region, (where Donetsk/Makeevka lie) is a huge coal mining area and many of the men work in the mines.”

Translators are provided for the teaching ministers.

Rev. Al Bezuyen has taught at the seminary, and plans to go again this Spring.

“I was asked by Rev. Royall to teach in Donetsk at the seminary there, which I have been doing over the past four or five years, teaching the Belgic Confession, Exegesis and Homelitics.

“Each time I go I am amazed to see the growth in the knowledge of ability of the students and the seminary itself,” he told CR. “The Gospel is a hard sell in Donetsk which is still very Russian and communist. But the men labor on. Each year we hear the students becoming more and more sound in their preaching and at present we have four men in churches who have signed on to the three forms of unity and are presently in a loose covenant system together. The need for teaching is great since there are not a lot of commentaries and study helps written in Russian from a reformed perspective.

Since the Reformation never affected Russia and Ukraine, Rev. Bezuyen said that “the teaching of the Reformed Confessions and the reformed approach to seminary training is eye-opening and life-changing as the pastors and students learn to understand the Bible in a deeper way.”

For ministers considering taking up the challenge, Rev. Bezuyen has high praise for what he has experienced. “The students are keen for the most part, the translators top notch, the hospitality is wonderful. It is two weeks of hard and wonderful work and I hope that I may be allowed to teach there until men from Ukraine are ready to take over the task.”

Already the fruits of Reformed teaching and preaching are paying off (each minister from NA is expected to preach in an area church each Sunday they are in Donetsk). Rev. Royall reports that “Reformed churches (are) being born under the leadership of men who have studied with us. Indeed, we now find that after just a couple of years of study with us, our students, with very few exceptions, give up their Arminian errors and whole-heartedly embrace the reformed faith.”

“In the early days of the 15th and 16th centuries the reformation swept eastward from Germany into Hungary and the western part of what is now known as Romania,” Rev. Royall explains. “It seems, however, that the reformation truth never seemed to scale the ‘Transylvanian Alps’ in



northwestern Romania and on into the more eastern nations that made up the former Soviet Union, including the Ukraine. Now, due to the generosity of God’s people and the working of God’s Spirit through the biblically faithful teaching and preaching of reformed and Presbyterian men, the reformation is finally breaking into the nation of Ukraine, praise be to God!”

Church planting is the next step in the process. “There are works now on-going in reformed church planting in Kyiv and Odessa under the auspices of other ministries,” says Rev. Royall, “and now the work being done through the ministry of RITE (U.S.A. and Canada) in the Donetsk region has resulted to date in at least five fledgling reformed church plants.” ♦