

REFLECTIONS JUNE 2016—SEPTEMBER 2016

Dear friends and family,

It's Friday afternoon as I begin writing this newsletter. I just saw Mason off. He's going with the Zheltyakov's and some other teens from our church to attend a church celebration and seminar in Tomsk over the weekend. The Zheltyakov's son, Zahar, is here with us doing homework and practicing the piano and violin. We'll help his grandmother watch over him this weekend while his parents serve the LORD in this special way. Later today, the Lezhnin's (Arkasha and Natasha, our long-time partners in the teens ministry, the camp, and in church leadership here in Barnaul) will arrive for the weekend. They are on their way from Rubtsovsk back to their newly established ministry in Omsk. Sonia, as always, is keeping everything going in such a way that things happen on time and everyone stays fed and happy. So, in the short time I have before guests arrive and preparations for serving the LORD and His church this weekend begin, I get to spend some time with you. I'm thankful. I've been looking forward to this time with you for several weeks already.

Several of you commented positively on our June newsletter. Many said it was particularly informative, helping you all have a more clear understanding of what we are doing over here and how far the ministry is reaching outside of Barnaul. That feedback was very encouraging. One comment stood out from the rest: *"I look forward to the next newsletters to hear the rest of the story from all the things you reported this time."* So now, the "rest of the story"...



Rainbow Camp, Sharypovo, Russia—This was a short trip in **June** with two of our church teens, Mason and Misha. We went to serve as workers in the camp for “at risk” kids that sisters from Novosibirsk, Tomsk, and Biysk have been working with for several years. I learned that the church in Tomsk works with these kids throughout the year and in cooperation with believers who live in the immediate area. That's good stuff! We were warmly received when we arrived in the middle of the night and I was already starting to learn the kid's names by 8:00 a.m. when I joined them in a morning round of UNO before breakfast. Mason and Misha joined the others their age for the training and service part of the program. I helped by teaching and playing games with the younger children ... and constructing a stone path to the outhouse, sink, and summer shower. The boys didn't exactly enjoy the process of gathering the stones from the nearby roadway, but it was a useful project for this new facility. I found it interesting to be back “in the trenches” working directly with the children. As director in our *Footprints* camp, I am one step removed from that, letting the Russians do the teaching. So, I am grateful for the experience and believe



there were some significant moments. For example, I had the opportunity to boldly and firmly stand up on behalf of the girls when some of the boys were, shall we say, having too much “fun” at one younger girl’s expense. The abusive “play” lessened over the course of the next couple of days after that confrontation with the boys. I even overheard an older boy encourage a younger one to stop pestering a girl. The older boy understood my lesson: God meant for us to use our muscles to provide for and protect the girls, not to dominate them. Although these kids come from broken and dysfunctional families, I think they have a sense of what family should be. They just need to be shown a better way. I want to thank everyone who prayed for this event. Not only did we have a safe and purposeful time, but: 1) Mason and Misha want to return next summer, 2) those running the camp event want us to return, and 3) we never saw the first louse or tick ... hooray!

Here is a link to an online video of the Rainbow camp produced by the camp's director, Nastiya Shishkina: [slide-show](https://cloud.mail.ru/public/5ruG/5EVsQnsPp) (<https://cloud.mail.ru/public/5ruG/5EVsQnsPp>).

And more pictures are available

[here](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1046884782071855&id=100002510305548) (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1046884782071855&id=100002510305548) and [here](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1046888828738117&id=100002510305548) (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1046888828738117&id=100002510305548).

Footprints in the Sand, JULY 2016—Most of you probably remember the “urgent” emails I sent at the end of June. Here’s a brief recap:

29JUN: In 30 seconds, one incoming phone call from the director of the factory that owns the camp facility where we were planning to do camp changed all our plans by canceling our agreement. A terrible camping accident in the far western part of the country was putting all facilities under heavy scrutiny and many were being shut down. The director didn’t need those headaches, so he canceled our agreement just 4 days before we were to arrive. I requested your partnership in praying for the “impossible” - a facility to be available, affordable, adequate, attainable, and agreeable ... in the next 4 days ... during peak camping season.

02JUL: 50 hours and many of your 30-second prayers later, we received word that we were accepted to — and I quote my original message — “a large, clean, professionally operated municipally governed campground that is capable of housing all of our 84 people (and more), has multiple classroom spaces, a separate space for craft time, a large theater-style stage and auditorium, a large soccer field with climbing frames on the side, another two smaller fields for other group activities, and indoor sports hall, a beautiful view of the river and city of Biysk, a travel distance of 50 kilometers less than we would have had at the planned location, and get this ... almost no mosquitos!” (Well, there were some mosquitos, but not as many as we’ve endured in other locations.)



The start was rough, but the camp team was tough enough—my dear Sonia, especially. This campground is usually operated throughout the school year. The facility is shut down for the summer and the bulk of the staff is on leave, most of them going home to work in their own family gardens. By inviting us, the administration had to recall everyone and even reinstall water meters and negotiate contracts with the city’s water heating plant. They had to staff and restock the kitchen. That was the first main hurdle. We had 83 people arriving on Sunday afternoon and the decision to accept us was made late on Friday afternoon. So, they couldn’t feed us until lunch time on Monday. Sonia figured out and arranged the solutions for each meal and with the team’s help, fed everyone the first 3 missing meals. She also had only Saturday to accomplish those arrangements. Then we had drinking water issues. Then we had shower issues (actually a lack of showers was the issue) while the facility director negotiated for hot water from the city facility. Throughout the rest of the 2 weeks of camp, Sonia continued to serve as the liaison between our team and the director of the facility and her main workers. It’s a really hard place to be because all the complaints from both sides land on the person in this position.



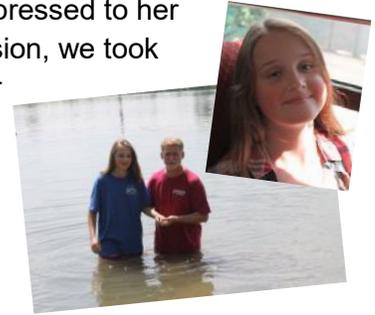
You can imagine the first impressions and reactions of the facility staff. They were on summer vacation taking care of their own gardens and food needs. Then they were called back to work unexpectedly in order to take care of us. Sonia overheard several negative comments ... at the beginning. By the end, though, the comments were different: “I heard you were giving Bibles to the kitchen staff. Can I have one, too?” “My relative is a believer, but there is something different about all of you.” And of Sonia, the director’s assistant said, “I’m going to miss you!”

The children, of course, new about the “camp is off—camp is on again” saga. In one of their first evening skits they told the story from their point of view, including a scene where prayers for a new campground were lifted to God. I can say with confidence your prayers and our God made a difference in these kids’ lives. Our younger campers, of course, enjoyed all that was offered. They felt God’s love and learned about His way. It is, however, among the older teens that the results are most evident. To be specific, I mean the results of this camp and all the other years of camp and teens group interaction that we’ve had with these oldest teens.

Use these links to find online more pictures of our camp activities:

- [Highlights](https://www.facebook.com/ajax/photos/sets/tags_fetch.php?set=a.1239886596024595.1073741855.100000097983786&fbid=1239886639357924) (https://www.facebook.com/ajax/photos/sets/tags_fetch.php?set=a.1239886596024595.1073741855.100000097983786&fbid=1239886639357924)
- [Water Games](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154382168818904.1073742099.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154382168818904.1073742099.562173903&type=3)
- [Footprints Olympics](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154378762153904.1073742096.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154378762153904.1073742096.562173903&type=3)
- [Trainees in Action](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154318583948904.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154318583948904.562173903&type=3)
- [Evening Skit](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154318564348904.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154318564348904.562173903&type=3)
- [Precampers, a.k.a "Rainbow"](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154363925543904.1073742092.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154363925543904.1073742092.562173903&type=3)
- [Group 2](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154338782403904.562173903&type=3) (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154338782403904.562173903&type=3)
- [Active Classes](https://www.facebook.com/stas.sushkov/posts/10154297938038904) (https://www.facebook.com/stas.sushkov/posts/10154297938038904)
- [Kiddie Pool Kickball](https://www.facebook.com/tonya.zhelyakova/videos/1407423649271556) (https://www.facebook.com/tonya.zhelyakova/videos/1407423649271556)

The first week of the older teens program was designed to help them understand and feel Jesus' personal invitation, "Come, follow me". At the end of the week, Vika expressed to her personal mentor her desire to be baptized. After more personal discussion, we took her and the rest of the teens to the nearby river and gained a new sister there. Vika has continued meeting with her mentor and has started attending our teens group regularly, coming alone across town to join us every Sunday morning. She's one of those participating in the church event in Tomsk this weekend, too. Her life is changing because she's now put Jesus in charge.



During the week after camp ended, I met with Elusha and his friend, Katya. Elusha is one of our teens and one of Mason's cousins. I've had many personal studies with him over the past year. Elusha and Katya have been reading and talking about beliefs for many months. Being agnostic, Katya presented Elusha with many questions. Being a believer, Elusha presented her with answers, but also came away with questions of his own. During a long conversation with both of



them, I learned that Katya had come to believe through some of the materials I suggested she and Elusha should read. She told me she wanted to commit her life to Jesus. Her mother has hindered that, having had a bad experience with a protestant church in the past. Join us in prayer that God will either help her mother accept Katya's decision—and/or keep Katya safe until she's 18 and free to act on her own. A few days after meeting with Elusha and Katya, I met with Elusha alone and he expressed his own desire to be baptized. As you can see in these pictures to the right, we gained him as a new brother in Christ the following Sunday ... and his parents expressed their thanks to everyone who has let God use them to bring their son to His LORD. (They were thanking you, for you have helped us be here and do this.)



Just a week or so later, when we were traveling and made a Skype call back to Barnaul, we found out our home was filled with not only those who were house-sitting for us, but many other friends from the church, too. "Why were they all there so late in the evening?", we wondered. It was because another of our teens, Serge, had been on a road trip with the Zheltyakovs and (much like an Ethiopian long ago) asked, "Can I be baptized now?" We had Skyped into the late night celebration of his birth into Christ!

Please understand that I am not trying to justify our ministry by reporting these 3 baptisms. I am just sharing with you the blessing God has generously granted—to let us witness His work in saving lost souls through the efforts of many of His servants. I am so glad to be one of the servants God has used and I want you to share in that gladness. We don't declare the camp or even the FOUNDATIONS mission a success based on the number of baptisms. A servant's success is fulfilling the will of his master. We've done our part. You've done your part. (Thanks!) And God has done His part—which only He can do. We give to Him all the glory.

I do want to give a special word of thanks to two groups if I may do so without offending anyone else. (It's dangerous to single out special people or groups, but I think you'll understand why I take the risk.) First is the **Church of Christ in Hobart, OK**. You all sent to us Olya, Sonia, and Sasha Coffin. What a blessing and encouragement they were for us. All 3 contributed to the success and atmosphere of the first week. Thank you, ladies, for coming—and thank you, church, for all the ways you've shown your partnership in this ministry! Second is the **Mosaic class at Saturn Road Church of Christ in Garland, TX**. You all sent supplies and sponsored one of our older teen trainees, Yulia. I spoke with Yulia and know that you helped her realize the meaning of Eph 3:20 for she could hardly hope to be able to attend one week of camp, but two weeks was more than she could imagine ... and God provided just that through you. Thank you.

So, the camp was a success. A wonderful team of dedicated workers glorified their LORD and expressed His love and truth to children who deserve to know. Stories continue to come my way about children and teens and workers in other cities who are now much more active in their church groups. Many team members, despite the hardships of this summer's event, are already talking about next summer's event. The parents of the children in Kazakhstan who attended the past 2 summers but who could not attend this summer have asked if we can come to Kazakhstan to do a winter camp for their kids. And a core group of 3 team members here are insisting on meeting monthly starting next week so that we are ready ready ready next summer. All of that is on the agenda for the coming weeks and months.

Our agenda for the coming months—Since this letter has grown quite long, I will just briefly list what we are working on now...

- ScreamFree Leadership and ScreamFree Parenting presentations in Irkutsk (and Chelyabinsk?) in November
- Footprints in the Sand winter camp in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in early January
- "Maturing in Christ" Seminar for Siberian Churches of Christ—An international celebration of 25 years of the church in Barnaul, Russia, at the end of March
- Church leadership, establishing a vision for 2017
- The teens program, with personal mentoring
- And Saturday "mini-seminars" for the sisters

To finish, I want to address the [news](#) you may have heard about a **law passed in July** that "bans" evangelism except in registered church buildings. Yes, an anti-terrorism law was passed in July. It requires phone and internet companies to log and store conversation records for 3 years. And, in very broad terms (unfortunately) it regulates evangelistic activities. Strictly interpreted, since Mason is not yet baptized, I could violate the law if I discuss the Bible with him while walking home from the church assembly ... UNLESS I have been personally permitted (like a fishing license, driver's license, etc.) to represent the religious group or organization. So, technically, this law does not ban or prohibit, it regulates. Unfortunately, at least for these first few months, the local officials are having to figure out how to enforce the law. Who issues the permits is a big question. It might be as simple as the leaders of the religious group give written permission to their individual group members and submit a list of recipients to the government. It might be that church leaders have to submit a list of individuals and some government office issues the permits. As I understand it, the whole concept is a bureaucratic solution that will give the government the surveillance power to monitor (be aware of) religious activity and ultimately obtain evidence when they want to prosecute those who are found actively acting against the

society. I do not believe this is an attempt to stop any religion or the spread of religion. Everyone, including the Russian Orthodox church, has been affected by the general wording of the law.

Officially, our church has been told “continue as you have been doing ... for now”. We are a registered, legal religious organization and the rental agreement for our assembly facility is clearly a transaction accomplished by the church—the legally registered local religious organization. So, our church activities, which definitely include our FOUNDATIONS ministry activities, are not in jeopardy. The church in Omsk, however, is not a registered entity. They and others like them who meet in homes/apartments could definitely be adversely affected if they don’t comply with the bureaucracy. It is these types of “unofficial” groups the law seeks to identify.

My greatest personal concern is the summer camp project. The law and officials are not clear about our permissions in this area. It should be easy enough for the church to officially contract whatever facility we rent. Most of our facility contracts so far have been officially through the church’s legal entity. The difficulty we might face is having permits for all the teachers since many come from places other than Barnaul. I think there will be a bureaucratic solution to that, too. I just hope it is in time for us to jump through all the hoops before next summer. It’s on my To Do list to keep seeking the answer to this issue.

So, there is much to praise God for, much He has prepared us to do, and much to submit to Him in prayer for the near future. We thank you for your partnership, for enabling us to do all this. We give thanks to God for you.

Your fellow servants,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph". The script is cursive and fluid.

Joseph, Sonia, and Mason Rhodes