

Snapshot: Training Christian teachers in the former USSR

Our two guest speakers, the interpreter and I were about to meet the group of 42 Christian teachers from Russia, Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine, who would be participating in session three of our four-part training program on Christian approaches to education held at Vineyard Private School just outside of the capital city of Kyiv.

Entering the school foyer, we were greeted warmly by the participants who were already receiving their room assignments and course materials from Nataliya and Ivan, my ACSI co-workers. Though smiling broadly, the faces of the teachers betrayed weariness from traveling overnight in crowded, stuffy 3rd class train compartments--and on Slavic Christmas night (January 7th), no less. Even so, they seemed as genuinely eager as we about this special time together. Still small in number, the Christian schools of the former Soviet Union are widely scattered across eleven time zones, so training events like this are not only opportunities for them to step back from their busy schedules to reflect on what it really means to teach Christianly; they are also times of cherished fellowship with like-minded colleagues. It's not often that teachers with so much in common, yet separated by such great distances, are able to share their ministry and personal experiences--both the joys and the burdens--in the context of a joint learning experience. Having organized many such events over the past 20+ years, I knew that this time of sharing would be no less important than the lectures and presentations. We were well-supplied with tea and cookies, aware that the fellowship would certainly spill over from class and break times and continue into the night in the dormitory rooms and auditorium. This informal interaction that crosses both national and denominational boundaries is a big part of the spiritual and professional development occurring among teachers in this region. Their wide diversity seldom interferes with the spirit of unity, cooperation and friendship that naturally develops among them as fellow colleagues in Christ. While I've come to expect this as part of God's not-so-hidden agenda, I try never to take it for granted. We simply focus on our jointly-held goals and activities and let God do the joining together part!

Entirely confident that our two speakers were well prepared to motivate this group of teachers to think more deeply about the whole educational process from a Christian perspective, I could focus on the opening session--making the teachers feel welcome and clarifying expectations.

"While you may not leave here with ready-made lesson plans integrated with Christian principles and practical methods during our time together," I explained after the opening prayer, "you will hear some crucially important new perspectives on teaching that will help you answer such questions as: 'What makes my school and classroom Christian? What will help my students integrate their faith with their learning in ways that are relevant to their lives outside the school and church, both now and in the future? Is there a Christian way to teach and evaluate my students' academic achievements and personal growth?'"

Dr. John Shortt, veteran EurECA/ACSI teacher trainer and Professorial Fellow in Christian Education at Liverpool Hope University, provided the big picture about teaching Christianly as he outlined six important ways that God's Word relates to education. His series of lectures called "The Bible and Education," has become a cornerstone of our training program. So much so that in 2012 we published the Russian version of his book, *Bible-shaped teaching* which grew out of this series of lectures. (Our Latvian version is in process and in other regions it is being translated into other languages)



Dr. John Shortt

“You and I are living and teaching in the context of Acts 29,” John pointed out with a twinkle in his eye, watching the puzzled expressions of the teachers on hearing the number 29. “God’s story of redemption and building His Kingdom didn’t stop with chapter 28 of the Book of Acts. It continues at this very moment and we are all part of the still unfolding story—God’s big, true story!” Though I had already heard John’s thoughts on this, their implications impressed me as never before. These very 21st century teachers are both playing roles in and helping to write new chapters of God’s continuing story of His relationship with mankind and we and our team of speakers have the privilege of assisting them! In the world of education they are co-authors with the Holy Spirit in the yet-to-be-completed real-life drama of history using God’s Word--the basic “manuscript”--as their guide for these subsequent “chapters” that we are all living in. Striving to develop the basic story line faithfully, they as participants in the story struggle to react appropriately to the unexpected twists and turns of the other actors—the children, parents, colleagues and leaders of their schools and churches here in the former USSR.

“I’m here for the second time,” commented Svetlana, a school director from Ukraine. “This way of understanding a biblical worldview as “God’s big story” and the need for us as teachers to fulfill our roles in it made a big impression on me some ten years ago and ever since then, I’ve tried to apply it in my teaching. Hearing it all again has been inspiring and truly helpful. I do want to be part of *His-story!*” Svetlana is one of five teachers who were repeating this particular session of our four-part program; some at the request of their directors, but some of their own accord and at their own expense. Most, however, were first-timers, both male and female teachers with an average of seven years’ experience. Nine were directors or assistant school directors with many more years of teaching experience and a few were just a year or two out of pedagogical institute. Quite a mixed group!

With John setting the tone right from the start, however, the age and experience gap was narrowed significantly. He masterfully engaged our large and diverse group not only with his thoughtful and deeply spiritual perspectives on teaching, but with his apt illustrations, animated gestures, understated humor and, of course, that Irish farm boy charm that is his trademark. Who can resist a thought-provoking story told by an accepting soul with kind eyes and a toothy grin, especially when he’s an authoritative professor to begin with?!

“I want to give you some new ways of thinking about and doing some very familiar things in your classrooms,” began our second teacher trainer, Irina Sokolova, a Christian educational psychologist and instructor at a Belarusian institute for continuing education of teachers. Although Irina is also one of our veteran trainers, her lectures on formative assessment and teaching creative and gifted children were not only new additions to our program, they were new topics to most of our teachers, as neither were offered

at the secular universities that these teachers had attended. I had been looking forward to hearing what Irina had to say about these things, and I wasn't disappointed.

Although content-full, Irina's lectures were in no way tiring to listen to thanks to her personal transparency, playful sarcasm, and especially her numerous and poignant examples of "how not to do it" taken from her years of instructing and supervising teachers and school psychologists, as well as from her time as director of a center for children with severe learning disabilities. Irina not only articulated and demonstrated sound principles and practices of modern teaching; she naturally and seamlessly integrated elements of her Christian worldview at every step. It wasn't always this way. After coming to Christ, she realized that she had to completely re-evaluate her approach to education. Graduating from our training program nearly ten years ago and subsequently participating in a variety of other training events with John Shortt, Camille Bishop, John Hay and other guest speakers from North America, I have been delighted to see how she has been adjusting her approach to education and how she now trains others.

Irina was emphasizing to our course participants the importance of proper motivations of the teacher's heart in the assessment process, for example--the need for respect, empathy and care for children made in God's image by setting learning goals that are truly fair, clarifying expectations and the criteria for students' success and using times of evaluation and testing as additional times of learning and affirmation. "Teaching is not about dumping huge amounts of knowledge and trying to trip students up on exams," Irina warned. In her view teaching is about equipping, coming along side and enabling students to reach their full potential under God—through a teacher's motivation, co-discovery, inspiration, building confidence, celebrating a diversity of gifts and abilities. "We must not squelch creativity and innovation by forcing children into the same universal mold as was often done in Soviet days. But as much as we need to embrace the individual differences among learners, we must also continue to provide a common base of knowledge, skills and values that connect them to each other and society. This will provide the foundation on which they can then build in individual ways. In this way both the person and society can flourish."



Irina Sokolova during her lecture

Though exhausted at the end of this very full program, we were all feeling satisfied by the feast that the Lord had provided through John and Irina. "Why do all the interesting things in life go by so quickly?" asked one of the teachers on the last day. During the final moments of the program when the participants had

the opportunity to bless John and Irina with their comments, I hadn't anticipated such an emotional outpouring of gratitude from these normally reserved people. "You have no idea what you have done for us," one teacher said with her eyes filling and face reddening. "What you have shared with us is very important and practical, but I also feel that I have been in demonstration lessons on how to teach effectively. Just watching how you teach has been so instructive in itself."



Perhaps even more rewarding than the participants' final comments was hearing of the ripple effect of this time of training. Just several days later, one of the directors, several of whose teachers had attended the course, wrote the following in an e-mail message:

I want to thank you for the January program. My teachers came back so encouraged and with a huge desire to change and improve the entire learning process in our school. I am constantly hearing comments in the teachers' lounge (my office is so close I hear everything that goes on there). On every break somebody is talking about something that they learned. Thank the Lord and all those involved in organizing these courses. We are looking forward to the March program on developing biblically integrated lessons. Anticipating the cost of travel and the school's current financial difficulties (usually the school pays for participation in the courses), the teachers have already starting to set aside funds to pay for travel and study. Thank you for the high level of motivation, organization, and the level of teaching, of course. May the Lord bless your entire team and its continued development. (Tatiana Chumakova, Gloria Private School, Donetsk, Ukraine)

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