



Army Officer

to

Kingdom Leader

“You can feel the Ukrainian roads,” says Valeriy Alimov as our car bumps along the roughly paved surface. “They were made for tanks.” As a former member of the Ukrainian military, this is something Alimov knows a lot about. He was an active officer for five years, and just three years away from retirement and pension when he chose to resign his post in order to take up a new one. His new mission and purpose in many respects are similar to his old, yet they have gained monumental and eternal scope.

by: Leah Moore

He now directs the church planting ministry of the Christian Hope Church in Kiev and works closely beside its lead pastor, Valeriy Rezhetskiy. It is their vision, along with numerous other churches in the country, to see at least one witnessing fellowship planted in every village and town in Ukraine by the year 2015. At present there are roughly 28,000 residential points in the nation. Only 8,000 of them have evangelical churches. The mission to which Rezhetskiy, Alimov and other Ukrainian leaders feel called is definite. And in Valeriy Alimov they have a leader with the vision and discipline to lead them.

Ukraine is a country of deep wounds. There are monuments to the millions who have died senseless deaths at the hands of its scientists and leaders, the very ones who were meant to be their protectors. The Chernobyl museum walls are covered with countless pictures of the faces of those who died. There are so many of them that one can barely grasp their meaning; it is intensely sobering. A monument to the seven million who died during the government-induced famines of 1932-33 has been erected outside the gilded Orthodox Church. The sun nearly blinds you as it glints off golden domes, reminding you that God is vast and distant and you may not come too near Him. In a country where 80 to 90% of the men are alcoholics, the spiritual emptiness is

palpable and heartbreaking. Divorce rates are high, and many are addicted to drugs. “The Ukrainian people are not happy and they use alcohol and drugs to escape,” says Szvetlana, our translator, more matter-of-factly than one would expect. For her it isn’t surprising or mindboggling, it is simply the reality of the land and its people—a land where the roads were built for tanks, the churches were built to intimidate and the rulers were positioned to dominate.

The wall is down, freedom has come, but the Ukrainian people are still held captive by the pain of their past and the pain of their spiritual depravity. The value and importance of Christian Hope Church, Valeriy Alimov and his ministry team becomes sharply clear and evident in this light. He leads an army of church planters who are purposefully attempting to saturate this land with the truth and freedom of the Gospel of Christ.

On the wall of one of the central churches in the region is a map Alimov has drawn which diagrams the spiritual activity of many of the villages. He speaks of it in terms of strategic points and proposals for spreading the church and the Gospel throughout the area. He views his mission very clearly and purposefully. His diagram can almost be viewed as a battle plan, and peppered throughout Alimov’s speech are military words. One that occurs the most is ‘strategic.’ “This town is a strong

strategic point for us,” he says on our way to one of the villages. They are specifically going to villages that have a strong transportation system and establishing key central churches there. Establishing fellowships along roadways and near train stations allows Christian Hope to more easily reach the entire area by sending outreach teams to surrounding villages. Their approach to church planting always takes the offensive, and one of the first steps lies in purposefulness toward their mission. They preach the necessity of reproduction, or planting, of the church, and their next step is to equip their church planters with the tools they will need to be able to do this. In fact, it is this combination of purposefulness and practicality which most marks their work.

There are several schools and courses available for the ‘equipping of the saints.’ The church also has a pastors’ school and a church planter training program open to all denominations. The hallmark of these schools is their practical relevance towards church planting, specifically within the villages. Alimov points out that the cultural difference between the cities and the

villages is vast. One cannot go in with a city culture mentality and hope to understand or be understood by the people of the village. Cultural insensitivity can greatly hinder the birth and growth of a new fellowship.

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When Alimov was starting out as a young church planter he went to a village and spoke to the people about trusting in God. Although he had never been involved in agricultural work, he said to them, “Don’t worry

about anything, whatever God blesses will grow. Just dig a hole, put a potato in it, leave it and pray. In the autumn, you will come and find many nice potatoes.” The villagers stared at him wide eyed and disbelieving. They knew about planting and harvesting, and never had they seen anything grow when left to itself. Their farming had taught them that nothing grows without hard work and attention.

Many times leaders who went to these villages were from large cities, and brought their city culture to the villages. As a result the churches were not growing or multiplying. “Successful church planters must understand how to live and work in that culture,” says Alimov. Thus the church

planting school in Kiev teaches potential planters to be viable members of the communities they are joining. This means training them to farm the land and live as their neighbors live. In addition to this, they are taught the cultural attitudes of a village. The implications of such sensitivity are far-reaching. It enables the church planter to financially sustain the church, and creates common ground from which to minister.

As we visit the different village churches, they all proudly present their pictures to us, showing the life of their fellowship. Alimov's face is captured again and again among them, praying, worshiping and loving the people God has put under his leadership. We make our way to the car, but he spends a last few minutes with each of the young pastors before we leave, his arm around their shoulders as he shares a few last words with them. He is encouraging them, rallying his ministry team like one would soldiers, which is another powerful and effective strategy of this church plant ministry. They work diligently to create relational efficiency within their ministry. They understand that the soldiers on the front lines need support and covering. They speak often of praying and fasting with the missionaries who are heading out to these unchurched villages. Before they embark on any 'plan' they pray and wait on the Lord to give them a strong

vision and calling. This is what creates the quiet certainty in one young missionary that God will build his church. "God said to me, move there and I will add the people who will be saved. I believe God will give me what I need when I need it; I work with that and God is faithful."

While Ukraine was still a part of the Soviet Union there was an underground church in Kiev, which Valeriy Rezhetskiy attended. In the early 90's, after the fall of communism, he and several other leaders held crusades. As people began coming to the Lord they realized they couldn't just leave these new believers without a church. They spoke with their pastor and with his blessing began Christian Hope Kiev. In the years that followed, they grew quickly and began their first steps toward planting. By 1996, they planted their first daughter church.

Alimov came to know the Lord soon after graduating from the military college at the end of the 80's. He preached to every soldier and officer he could and many of them repented. In the mid-90's he was sent to Kiev and began to work with Christian Hope. He began to have a desire to be used even more by the Lord. He prayed, "I want to serve you Lord, use me the way you want, send me any place you want," then for practicality's sake he added, "but I don't want to go further than Kiev. I like

the church and the pastor.” There was one particular base to which Alimov absolutely didn’t want to go, but that is exactly where God was planning to send him. It was the base in Makarov where he had first been stationed as a new believer. He had prayed for and preached to many of the soldiers and officers there.

He resisted for quite some time and did his best to be stationed at other places, but he was always a day late requesting the other bases. He went in to see his commanding officer. “I am a Christian,” he opened, “and I don’t believe that going to this base is God’s will for me.” This officer was an atheist, and he had had enough of Alimov’s attempts to get out of being sent to the base. He looked Alimov in the eye, and with a finger shaking in his face said, “This *is* the will of God for you;

you must go there. I don’t want to listen to you anymore.” Before Valeriy and his family left, his pastor prayed over them that God would strengthen them and establish a church on the base in Makarov. Alimov thought he was crazy, “I asked him, just pray for me. I don’t want to walk away from the Lord; there is no church there and there will be a lot of pressure.”

Alimov went and through him God did an amazing work at the Makarov base. He encountered much persecution from the other officers: they tried repeatedly to convince him to move to another base, threatened him with a dishonorable discharge, and promised to make things very difficult for him. However, despite their attempts, in 1997, God established a church at the base and after a time the church moved to the nearby village.

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Since that time the Christian Hope Church of Kiev and its daughter and granddaughter churches have continued to multiply. Alimov’s ministry team is making inroads and seeing victories. There are many stories of conversions and miracles. As we leave one of the village churches, Alimov points out that one of the men “is an officer stationed in Chernobyl. He works on the site 15 days and then is out 15 days. He’s very active in the church. He came to the Lord while I was stationed on the base even before we founded the church.” A woman

had come to him and said, “Do something with my husband. He drinks a lot. I heard that you can do hypnosis on people, so can you hypnotize him? I want him to believe in God and I don’t want him to drink anymore.” Valeriy, who was already casually acquainted with the man said, “Okay, but I will not hypnotize him; I’ll pray for him.” He then asked, “If he comes to the church, will you be against it?” She said no. Valeriy began to pray for the man who seemed to be kind and professional in his work but did drink heavily.

At the same time, there was a soldier who came to know the Lord and whose life changed drastically in a short period of time. He was a strong witness to the people around him in spite of the fact that they frequently made fun of him and on occasion beat him up. He was six foot, five inches, “with hands as big as your head,” says Valeriy. The soldier certainly could have defended himself, but he felt that as a believer he shouldn’t harm anyone. He remained patient and humble in the face of such persecution and instead of retaliating shared with them why he believed in Christ. One night the soldier

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was brought to the station where the woman’s husband was working. The other military personnel began to question him and ridicule him. The officer was struck by his answers, but even more so by his face. The officer saw, “a lot of love and light in the soldier’s face.” He ordered the others to leave him alone. He went home that night haunted by the soldier. He went through three glasses of vodka but was unable to get the soldier’s face out of his mind. By two o’clock a.m., though slightly drunk, he went to the soldier’s barracks and woke him up. “Follow me,” the officer ordered. They went to his car, “Get in.” He drove to the woods, stopped the car and turned to face the soldier. “Why are you the way you are?” he asked. The soldier explained that he was a Christian. The officer replied, “I outrank you, but for tonight you will be my priest.” He then poured out his life to the soldier. “Get out of the car and kneel on the ground,” the soldier replied. “You need to repent.” The officer got out, knelt in the woods and repented. He began to attend the church and persecution soon followed. His new Christianity upset his wife; so much so that she told him he needed to start drinking again. But he has continued to serve the Lord and work in the church. His wife still refuses to come, but he prays and fights for his family everyday.

That is a theme we hear over and over again: “I fought for my family...I fight for my wife...” It is fascinating that in the few years and months before the end of communism, God began a powerful movement within the military. These military ministers bring a new objective and look to the spreading of the gospel. Civilians rarely associate the deep desire and prayer for a loved one to be saved as a military-like strategy, though perhaps we should.

They seem to have a strong grasp on the ideas of warfare and are attacking in a very purposeful manner. They are taking hold of the land for Christ. One of the members of our team sums it up quite well: “I’m really enjoying this time of talking with the lieutenants and sergeants of the movement, those of you that are leading the squads and the platoons in this battle. It’s giving me a more thorough picture of God’s victory here in Ukraine.”

