

Annual Report to Mission Partners

2020

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Bratislava, Slovakia



SUMMARY

2020 has certainly been one for the record books. It's likely that none of us will forget. Many, of course, will wish they could.

For us, the year has brought so much more to be thankful for than to regret. Even the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic have brought many blessings. We are also continually mindful of those who have had beyond-difficult, even tragic, circumstances. And while we continue to be thankful and humbled in our blessings, we are ever prayerful for those who have had and continue to have deep needs and loss. We are convinced, more than ever, that our Father in Heaven is good, and continues to use His hands and feet (us) here on the earth to bring love, hope, and peace to others – now more than ever!

2019 was a year of shifting roles, locations, relationships, languages, and cultures. Of course each of us were affected and adjusted to these shifts in different ways. For Gary, they created stress, but tended to energize and challenge. For Joy there was stress as well, but these shifts had a greater impact on her peace and emotions. Her adjustments came along more slowly.

Still adjusting as 2020 began – at the beginning of our 10th month in Slovakia – the Lord continued to help us both in the process and show us ways to help each other. Life in Slovakia was becoming more “normal” and more natural. So when COVID hit and the spring lockdown was initiated, it became an unexpected setback to some of the progress we made in cultural transitions and emotional health over the previous year.



When missionaries arrive and begin to adjust to their country of calling, it is normal to experience isolation and loneliness. This can continue for some time but is most pronounced in the first 2 years of deployment. In a very unique way, through the isolation of the pandemic, the entire world has gotten a very real taste of what missionaries experience through isolation in the normal course of adjusting to life in a different country and culture. When you place the circumstances and

emotional weight of the 2020 pandemic on top of a missionary's normal cultural adjustment circumstances, however, they will experience an even higher level of stress and emotional difficulty. We saw that in the lives of many we serve and support, and we certainly experienced it ourselves.

The Lord was so good to help us make the necessary adjustments – personally, but also through our ministry to missionaries, and as pastors of Bratislava International Fellowship (BIF). Awkward but adequate is how we would describe our early contributions to online services for BIF. Learning as we went, the BIF family gave us a ton of grace and expressed profound thankfulness that the effort – whatever it looked like – was being made to keep our community together.

The Lord spoke to us about the importance of communicating – to the BIF congregation – that the church is still the church. Isolated or free ... in the midst of a pandemic or doing life as usual, Jesus never waters down the Great Commission, nor does He take away His hand of help and words of wisdom in how to join Him in His plans and purposes – always underway. We began a journey through the book of Acts as the year began – a journey that continued through the month of November. And how fitting it is – in the midst of this year’s circumstances – that the church of the first century demonstrates the faithfulness of God in strengthening and growing the church – even in the midst of their difficulties, challenges and persecution.

Even as BIF “emerged” in July and then “returned to restriction” in October, there existed an ever-maturing understanding of what hope and peace and community looked like, regardless of the circumstances in the world around us. And for that we are truly grateful – feeling better prepared ... for what we are not sure ... but better prepared, nonetheless, to always be the church.

Our work within the missionary community in Europe has likewise adjusted. Much of it happened online this year, but the Lord also gave us opportunities to travel and serve in other countries, and to receive and bless missionaries here in Bratislava. There has also been much progress in developing initiatives for care within our Foursquare Missions International community here in Europe. We are thankful to serve with Carina Greer and the FMI USA team as we collectively build a network of care worldwide!

God continues to affirm and bless the call upon our lives to serve here in Europe. We are truly blessed by so many of you who also continue to faithfully affirm that call through your prayers, encouragement, and financial support. Thank you!

DETAILED MINISTRY UPDATE (Looking Back)

JANUARY

We welcomed in the year with friends from Bratislava International Fellowship. Alexis, from Columbia, and his wife Veronika, from Slovakia. A quiet (and cold) evening for our first New Year's Eve in Slovakia, in the company of some of the new family that the Lord has given us here. We came to Slovakia representing but one country, but the Lord has brought the world to us at BIF, and the world has become family! We are grateful and blessed!



We received word last November that the impending closure of the Istropolis – planned for later 2019 or early 2020 – had been postponed for at least a year. Istropolis is the performing arts center where BIF gathers on Sundays. We sensed a promoting from the Lord to go ahead and make the updates now that it was assured we'd be there for at least another year. So, we rolled up our sleeves, with much help from the BIF family, and took several weeks in January to get the work done. The updates made a huge difference, and the response from all those who call BIF home was wonderful!

Our weekly discipleship at BIF took a new rhythm in 2020. We have previously met separately – as men and women – but instead combined to be part of The Truth Project. Having hosted and led this in the United States some years ago, we were blessed to do it again, and about a third of the BIF family joined us. Challenged with the question “Do you really believe, that what you believe, is really real?”, we all re-affirmed our world view as one that is based on biblical truths!



We also traveled to Toscalano Maderno, Italy, to be with our dear friends Renato and Patrizia Amato. They are former missionaries to Bangladesh and are now the national leaders of the Foursquare Church in Italy. Patrizia had undergone surgery and we were sensing that they needed some support and encouragement. They gladly accepted our invitation to come and help, and our time of fellowship,

prayer and worship ministered to all of us! The mission of the evangelical Protestant church in Italy is not easy. Please join us in praying for Renato and Patrizia.

Asked by Jeff Roper, Area Missionary, Gary worked on the development of a quarterly FMI Europe newsletter. Its purpose – to build and strengthen support for missionaries serving in Europe. The audience has largely been the facilitating and sending churches of the missionaries who serve on this continent. Gary works with Jeff to establish content and format goals, and then solicits input from missionaries across Europe. It has been well-received by many!

FEBRUARY

February was a very full month. We sense the Lord knew what was coming and did some pre-filling of our calendar, knowing we were unaware of how things would change so drastically.

Sheldon & Anna Armitage are the former pastors of BIF. Sheldon is a Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada missionary here in Bratislava, and Anna, his wife is from Slovakia. Their responsibilities include work with the ACS church here in Bratislava, but like us, they also do ministry work with missionaries within their denomination across Europe. We love their family and love hanging out with them and their 3 girls – Mia (15), Livia (12), and Stella (8). We are also thankful that Sheldon and Anna trust us to look after the girls from time to time, and were blessed to welcome them to our home for a long weekend while mom and dad got away for a trip to visit friends in Switzerland.



We initiated some marriage mentoring with a couple from BIF who had chosen not to go forward with a divorce announced in the fall. God answered the prayers of many on this one, so we are working to help this young couple establish healthy patterns in their marriage – ones that were never in place from the beginning. God's steadfast love is never ending, and His mercies are new every day! Your prayers are appreciated for this young couple as well. God has done the heavy lifting ... and he's asking us to do what we can to join Him in restoring this marriage!

What a delight to spend some time with Tim and Kristina O'Toole in Galway, FMI Missionaries to Ireland. Kindred souls in many ways, we became fast friends and the Lord give us a deep love for the call they have to this beautiful country and beautiful people. The Irish are some of the most welcoming people we have every met – complete strangers treated us like family as we explored different pieces of this nation. But Tim and Kristina shared with us the deep needs that the outer beauty hides – depression, despair, substance abuse, and suicide. Pray for Tim and Kristina and their kids, Elijah and Madison – that as they bring the love and light of Christ to Galway, it penetrates and delivers hope to others!

We had the privilege of hosting a dynamic group of missionary leaders here in Bratislava. Jeff and Debbie Roper, FMI Area Missionaries for Europe, invited us and 6 other missionaries to form a ministry team focused on serving and supporting all FMI missionaries here through initiatives designed to encourage, empower, and equip.



This ground-level planning meeting was instrumental in establishing objectives and goals, and in knitting the hearts together of all who are on the team to serve others. FMI Europe already has a strong culture of support and care – missionaries who understand that it's not "somebody else's" responsibility to care for missionaries, it's everybody's responsibility. As a result, care and support initiatives are not just welcomed, but embraced as being part of what every missionary should do! Wow! Love this culture!

Our meetings were held at a small hotel that is a 5-minute walk from our flat. The close proximity was ideal for us in setting up and managing logistics, and we were able to easily host everyone for dinner at our place one night. Food and fellowship are an unbeatable combination for knitting hearts and objectives together!

This was also the meeting where we formalized the FMI Europe Care Team, and began to discuss ways of being more purposeful with our care for missionaries. Our goal is for care to have a continual "presence" in the lives of our missionaries, not simply to respond when there is a crisis, or to reach out when we think if it. The beginnings of FMI Europe's Care Clusters were in this meeting in February. More on that later.

We also hosted FMI Missionaries Tim and Dhana Wimberly for a few days in February. You may remember one of our references last year to the “answered prayer for missionaries to Romania”? Tim and Dhana were the answer and a blessing to those in Romania who are working to help strengthen and expand what God is doing there! As the Lord puts them on your heart, please pray for Tim and Dhana’s work in Romania.

MARCH

To say that this was a transition month for us would be huge understatement.

March started out great! We hosted FMI Missionaries Ken & Linda Stapleton for a week of rest and recharge at our home in Bratislava. Ken and Linda are FMI Europe missionary veterans, having served in Liberec, Czech Republic, for over 20 years! They are treasures for us. From the time they met us (prior to our deployment), they championed the vision that God gave us – deploying missionaries to serve and support other missionaries. We had a delightful time together and the seeds of ministry together, later in the year, were planted as well.



Bratislava International Fellowship joined the City Church Bratislava and City Church Pezinok congregations for the City Church Vision Sunday. With Jeremiah 17:7-8 as the word that the Lord given to our congregations, we case the vision of both strengthening and growing the church in 2020. Trusting in the Lord ... putting our confidence in Him. Just like a tree planted by the water ... spreading its roots by the stream ... it’s leaves always green. Little did we know how those verses, including verse 8 (never failing to bear, even in heat and drought) would speak to our flocks in the months of isolation to come. God is good!

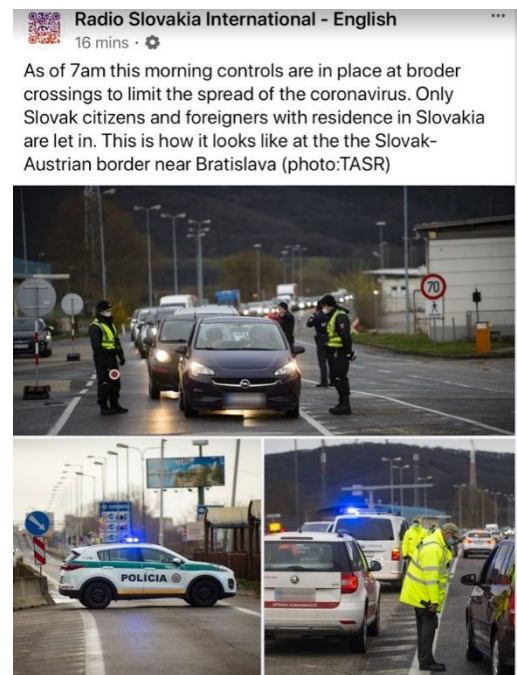


We departed for Krakow, Poland, on Wednesday the 11th, and returned from Krakow, Poland, late on Thursday the 12th. No, our trip to spend time with the Mielonen Family, FMI missionaries to Poland, was not designed that way. But late in the afternoon of the 12th, we got word that Slovakia was about to initiate a nationwide lockdown and require state-facility quarantine for anyone returning on or after the 13th. Joy had been keeping her eye on the news, knowing that the situation in our country of residence was very fluid ... unstable.

Needless to say, we hurriedly re-gathered and re-packed our things, and headed to the nearest border crossing as darkness was falling. And the time with the Mielonens? Short and sweet with a quick goodbye. But with a shared commitment to get back together as soon as circumstances would allow. As the Lord leads you, please pray for Travis & Alexis, and their kids Emma, Elaina, and Eli.

Little did we know what the landscape ahead would turn out to look like. No, not the landscape along the drive back to Slovakia (we actually saw very little of it as it was already getting dark), but the landscape of our life ahead in a country that was preparing to initiate one of the swiftest and strictest virus lockdowns in all of Europe. We know now, of course. But nothing could have prepared us for all that was to come.

The balance of March was spent trying to understand our new living circumstances and adjust to doing church online. Little did we know that 1 year after arriving on the amazing continent, and in this beautiful country, we would be faced with a life that nobody could have (or would have) predicted. Quickly getting back up to speed on Adobe Premier Elements, Gary became the chief video editor and Online Sunday Service producer. And as many at Bratislava International Fellowship would attest, this modest weekly connection (along with many other connection tools) kept the BIF family together ... kept hope alive ... and kept the church knitted together to keep being the church.



APRIL

The Slovak lockdown was swift and strict. Masks ... all stores (save for groceries, pharmacies, and gas stations) closed ... borders with Hungary, Austria, Czech Republic, and Poland closed. If you hadn't made it back before the lockdown started, you were required to quarantine for 14 days in a Slovak government facility in the east of the country. Fortunately, our swift return from Poland prevented us from experiencing this!

Our only reference to the word "Zoom" prior to this, was the little white Mazda 3 that Joy used to drive in Washington and California. It was one of her favorites. Zoom Zoom! (and boy did she, LOL!). But wow ... did the 21st century reference to this word become real to us in a hurry. We started Zooming through every part of life!



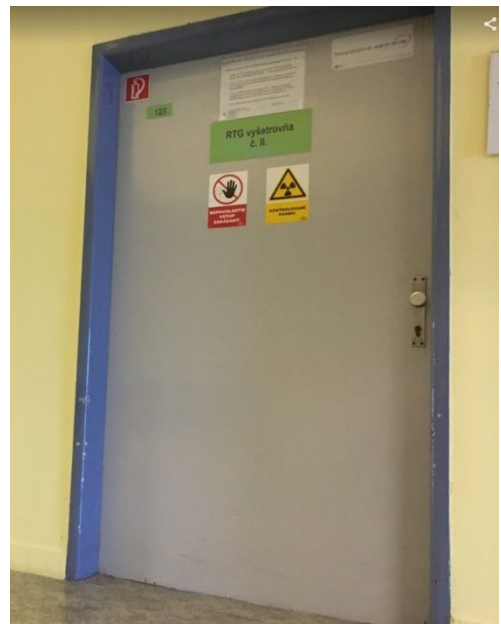
Weekly City Church staff meetings, weekly worship with our FMI missionary family here in Europe, two or three connections per week with people from BIF or FMI, prayer meetings, team meetings ... zoom, zoom, zoom! But how incredible is the technology that was available, and how beautifully it met the need to stay connected while we all figured out how to do life apart.

April also brought (on Palm Sunday) the birth of our fourth grandchild, Josephine Mercy Roley, born in Berlin, Germany. So close and yet so far. Wanting to be there to help our daughter and son-in-law, we could only encourage from a distance as border controls and quarantine measures prevented us from going anywhere. Our first face-to-face meeting with Jo Jo would have to wait!

MAY

Joy's recurring shoulder pain finally reached the point where she was motivated to brave a trip to her doctor. We believe the issues originate in years of pushing heavy sheets and towels into shelves above her head as the "soft side associate" at Bed Bath and Beyond in California. But understand that Joy didn't even like doctor visits in the US, so you know the shoulder was really hurting to brave a Slovak one! With a referral for an X-ray from her GP, we were set for the next chapter in this adventure.

We ventured out the door for a short walk to the hospital (we live withing walking distance of the University hospital here in the Kramare section of Bratislava). With few language skills for medicine, but a determination to find the right department and get the prescribed X-ray, we walked in like we knew what we were doing. OK ... so they saw right through that, but God is still good! Sometimes fumbling your way into uncomfortable situations produces unexpected but welcome grace, and mercy, and compassion. The hospitals and clinics are not much to look at, but our experience is that they administer great care. Unbelievably, we were in and out – with the X-ray – in 20 minutes. Not sure that would have even been possible in the USA while speaking the same language! There is more to share on the shoulder, but clearly the Lord was looking after every need – even the ones that involved X-rays!



We kept our weekly discipleship rhythm at Bratislava International Fellowship. After the success of the Truth Project, we shifted into a different gear and lead 10 people from BIF through Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. The timing could not have been better. With the circumstances of isolation and anxiety around us, but new technology available to connect us, we gathered in

an online format and together grew in our understanding of the importance, in our Christian walk, of both emotional health and contemplative spirituality.

The BIF family was blessed and changed! Transformed through new rhythms of life including twice-daily devotions and a weekly sabbath. With plans to offer Emotionally Healthy Relationships as well, many at BIF are anxious for what this time of learning and discipleship will do for their professional relationships, friendships, and marriages!

We completed the detailed planning (first phase) of a more formal care structure within FMI Europe. The new “Care Cluster” concept is gaining great acceptance among those we serve with on the FMI Europe Ministry Team (those Jeff and Debbie Roper have asked to lead initiatives to serve and support other missionaries), and we are finalizing a plan on how to group each FMI Europe missionary and missionary family into a cluster. We have identified candidate “cluster leaders” – those missionaries who will purposefully, regularly, and faithfully connect with each of the missionaries in their cluster. More to come on this in the fall!

JUNE



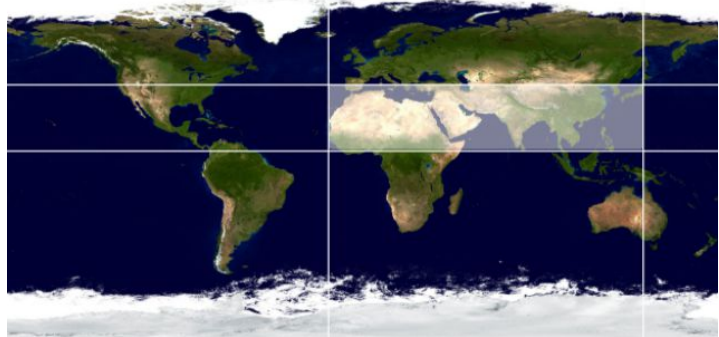
The desperately needed easing of restrictions came. Not completely certain of whether there would be border controls, we saw our window of opportunity and drove to Berlin to meet our granddaughter Josephine – now 2 months old. It turned out the border controls were non-existent, and all quarantine restrictions were even lifted for our return! Travel favor both ways!

Such a great reunion with our kids and grandkids (Jo Jo’s sisters Amelia – 4, and Harvest - 2). The two older girls mostly hung out with Nana and Grampa, while mom and dad got some needed time to focus on Jo and themselves. It was hard to leave again, knowing the uncertainty of the pandemic. But our family tanks were full!



Missionary mobilization in Slovakia is growing, thanks in large part to a small group of former missionaries and local pastors, who are building a network of training and support for those that are called to go. With an eye toward establishing a healthy missionary care element early on, these individuals and the organization they have established (SMS – Simply Mobilizing Slovakia) have asked us, this month, to be part of this pioneering work. We were excited to help, and it has been both an honor and a privilege to join.

The first step, this month was to join an advisory team looking at ways to establish a care network for missionaries who deploy from Slovakia. We love that this is an element which they deem critical in the foundational building of this sending organization. Joy and I have also “adopted” a young couple (M & S) and their son (N), who are in the process of preparing to deploy to a closed country. We are working with them, personally, to insure they have all of their missionary care bases covered. Please join us in praying for M & S, and N, as the Lord equips them to take the gospel to this strategic, and largely unreached, nation.



JULY

We knew it wouldn't take long to once again reach full speed. Now that the borders were re-opened, we jumped right into opportunities that the Lord was inviting us into – some that had been put on hold, and some that had just recently presented themselves.



We also pulled off the reunion that we and the Mielonen family committed to when we dashed from Krakow so quickly back in March. This time, they joined us here in Bratislava, and we spent 4 days walking, touring, chilling, talking, and simply have fun, fellowship, and food! They are a joy to hang with, and it was such a pleasure to finally get our time together. So thankful they are only a short 4-hour drive away!

We also welcomed Anna Marie Mazzone, FMI Missionary to Germany, for a week of rest and relaxation at our home. Anna Marie always has something on her plate, with much of it focused on “the least of these” where she lives – Bielefeld. So, it was a bit of a challenge for her to take her foot off the gas and take advantage of having time to pray, read, eat, and rest. Yes, we had some fun as well, but we were happy to give her the space and time she needed to re-charge her batteries! Prayers are appreciated for Anna Marie as well. Her workload and the nature of her ministry require extra intercession for her safety, and for her spiritual and emotional health. Street ministry reaches those, like the good Samaritan did, whom so many neglect or don't even see.

The seeds of ministry that were planted with Ken and Linda Stapleton in March, began to sprout this month as well. They needed help with a Young Life English camp in Turnov, Czech Republic, and we were excited to say yes and join them when they asked. What a week as we joined in the craziness of Young Life, but also taught English to a delightful bunch of teenagers. Watch out Czech, there are many smart young men and women who are literally going to change a nation with the love of Jesus!



Bratislava International Fellowship was able to return to face-to-face gatherings, although some restrictions (face masks, hand sanitizer, etc.) were still in place. And BIF did not miss a beat with our usual – or even greater than usual – attendance. The BIF congregation was hungry for live worship and genuine face-to-face fellowship, and we were glad to welcome them back!

We returned to our Summer Event Sunday format in July and August for the second straight summer. Abbreviated services every other Sunday, followed by extended fellowship gatherings at a park, lake, or someone's house. These were such welcome fellowship opportunities after a long spring of isolation. Food, fun, and fellowship ... a truly blessed formula for the gathering of the church!

AUGUST

Summer is time for holidays – but not when you've been dormant for so long. So once again, through relationship and ministry seeds sown earlier in the year, we joined Young Life Czech for their English Camp in Prague. We didn't think we could have more fun than we had in Turnov, but we did! We love the youth of Czech and the Young Life leaders in that nation that are bringing the love of Christ into their lives. Czech has a bright future!





It was so fun to welcome the Edwards family back to Bratislava. Matt, Abby, and their girls Kylie, Madeline, and Audrey, were ready to travel – to get some needed rest, but also to get in some needed fun. We explored new adventures in Bratislava, including a large cat rescue park outside the city, and a morning of Secret City Trails – a scavenger hunt of sorts where you self-tour the city looking for visual clues. We all learned something new – even Joy and Gary – the residents in the group! Matt and Abby and their girls are missionaries to Linz, Austria. Their ministry focus is largely children and youth. Please join us in praying for them as they reach reaching the Austrian youth, but also as they work and develop relationship with an Iranian congregation sharing the same church space!

The young family we mentioned earlier (M & S & N), who are preparing to deploy to a closed nation? We took three days and traveled to eastern Slovakia in August to meet with and pray for them. They are well – anxious to go and excited for what God is calling them into. But they are also focused on what the Lord has for them right where they are at. The “preparing and waiting for deployment” season can be one of the most challenging for a missionary – raising support, allowing God to equip, praying. But they are happy and healthy and staying close to Him. What a privilege to stand with them!

August also brought us our fifth grandchild, another girl – Lua Grace Kingyens. We had been anticipating and looking forward to this for months and had planned to be there when Lua was born. But travel challenges between Europe and the USA as they are, our original flights were cancelled, and we had to re-book for September. We were not going to be deterred, however, from helping out our kids and meeting this sweet princess. So, we re-doubled our planning efforts, and lined up the love and care of the faithful family at Bratislava International Fellowship to look after things in our absence.



SEPTEMBER

By God's grace and goodness, the plane tickets we secured to get to the Northwest in September cost us much less than our tickets which got cancelled. In fact, I dare say we could not have travelled across the US for much less than we travelled from Vienna to Seattle and back! God is good.

The privilege of holding both a US passport and an EU resident card is not lost on us. Both pieces were required to make this trip necessary in the middle of a pandemic. We are thankful to God, and to all who have assisted us in getting these! And the travel itself? Maybe our easiest trip back and forth yet! Few people in airports, short lines, planes half (or less) full. Small but welcome blessings given current world conditions!



As hard and as tempting as it was, we refrained from contacting most everyone we know in the area. Wanting our focus to be entirely on our kids and grandkids, we spent 2+ weeks soaking up family time and helping out in any way that we could. Such a joy to wake to the happy greetings of our grandson Callum each morning. FaceTime and Zoom are good, but will never substitute for being fully present with family when we can.

BIF was well cared for in our absence. The Lord has given us numerous capable and faithful leaders. And this year He has brought more! Only away for three Sundays, but our hearts still missed our BIF family. The rhythm of the church never skipped a bit - a great "trial run" for when we furlough for a longer time in 2021. The BIF team will be ready – and we are blessed to be part of what the Lord is doing in and through them!

And yes, we had to quarantine on our return. Up to 10 days, but you can be tested for COVID on day 5, and released if the test is negative. We did (test) and we were (negative), so 6 days at home in our attempt to re-adjust our body clocks back to Central European Time was actually welcome. And what an outpouring of kindness with groceries in the fridge when we returned, dropped off pastries and chocolates, and much love and kindness from friends and BIF family here in Bratislava!



OCTOBER

This month we have seen the return of tighter restrictions. Slovakia was the “shining star” for COVID defense in the spring, but they have fallen victim, like many countries, to becoming lax in their awareness of and protection from the virus. The number of infected people has soared – 1,500+ total cases in June ... now 75,000+ total cases in October. Neighboring countries (Czech Republic, in particular) are worse.

But the government has learned that a complete lockdown (as they did in the spring) is also very damaging to the economy and to people in other ways. So, they are trying to strike a balance between prevention, protection, and public life.

Joy has gotten some relief in the shoulder department! Having gotten some cortisone shots, but also an MRI, the doctors have been able to determine that there is no ligament or joint damage – only severe inflammation. She will continue cortisone treatment with additional “rehabilitation” therapy (physical therapy, laser therapy, etc. – whatever the rehabilitation doctor recommends) while we pray for a swift reduction in the swelling and a return to full (and painless) motion of her shoulder.

BIF has gone back online, but with greater involvement from others in the BIF family. The BIF worship team is bringing our own worship to the BIF Sunday Online Service, and we have had new people step up to responsibility for video recording and editing. BIF is collectively improving our serve as we continue to hear



God’s call to strengthen and grow the church. Ready and willing to serve others as God empowers us to be the church ... and to reach others with the good news of the Gospel!

We had the privilege of presenting the new Care Cluster structure to the FMI Europe family. Six clusters – each led by a FMI Europe missionary family to connect regularly and faithfully with the other missionaries in the cluster. Even a cluster for FMI emissaries to Europe, led by George and Nancy Cline, emissaries themselves. The concept and approach were welcomed by all, and our cluster leaders initiated reaching out to others in October. We lead a cluster ourselves – the cluster that contains all the other cluster leaders! Nobody is excluded... all are cared for ... God’s heart and design.

We are developing relationships with pastors of English-speaking congregations here in Bratislava. As a group, we are a fairly small number (English-speaking congregations) and we all understand the dynamics of life in Slovakia as we seek to reach the English-speaking community and offer healthy and vibrant gatherings where English-speakers can find Jesus and share their love of Him with us and others. We had the privilege of having lunch with Gerhard and Joan Ventner, pastors of Bratislava Faith Community, a Baptist congregation here. Gerhard and Joan are from South Africa and lead their wonderful congregation of believers in the Ruzinov area of Bratislava. Sadly, Gerhard and Joan announced their planned return to South Africa in 2021, but we committed to gather together again, and to be praying for a healthy transition for them and for their congregation. Please pray for Gerhard and Joan ... for their congregation here in Bratislava, and for the work they are called to back in South Africa.

We jumped on a couple of continuing education opportunities, participating in two online workshops offered by the US missions organization Frontiers. One course focused on singles, and one course focused on Millennials. It was great input and broadened out perspectives on missionary care across all family structures and age groups. Just as there is no one-stop-shop source for missionary care, there are no one-size-fits-all approaches or resources for missionary care. We are thankful to continually be offered tools and resources to offer missionaries and missionary care providers.

NOVEMBER



Leading up to and during the early weeks of November we, like millions of other Americans both in and outside of the United States, prayed and watched as the long-awaited election played out. We certainly didn't miss the political downpour of junk mail and advertisements that are typical of US elections. But we were very thankful to be able to vote. And our state of record made it easy by allowing scanned and email ballots. We are always praying for our home country, and we are thankful for the freedoms we are given as US citizens.

Gary wasn't able to attend, but Joy participated in another continuing education opportunity – an online workshop titled “facing challenges well”. How appropriate in the context of the year 2020. We are often not able to see how well the Lord prepares us for challenges, or helps lead us through and sustain us in our challenges, until we come out on the other side and look back at the work He has done. We are thankful for both “life-learned” and “online-learned” wisdom that the Lord uses to help prepare us for what we will face along the path He has laid out.

That group of amazing Young Life Czech Republic leaders we met in July and August? They reached out to us about Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. It was follow-up to a casual conversation Joy had during lunch at the summer English camp. A conversation she had with Lauren, an American from Pennsylvania



who, with her Czech husband, lead Young Life in Prague. The conversation led to an “ask” this fall ... that we lead them through the same EHS course that we led our BIF family through in the spring. So, from mid-November through early January, we gathered weekly (with time off for Christmas), and let the Lord sow new wisdom and new emotionally healthy rhythms into this incredible group of 9 young leaders.

Our relationship with Young Life Czech is growing. And while we don't believe the Lord is leading us, specifically, to deeper involvement with Young Life, we know he is establishing these relationships for a purpose. The Lord is already stirring a couple of them about how to bring Young Life to Slovakia. Stay tuned!

We began the rhythm of connecting with our own FMI Care Cluster, which consists of the 6 missionary families, each leading their own cluster of 2-3 other families. These are all people we know and have recruited. Nonetheless, it was really a pleasure to “dive in” to purposeful connections simply to chat, laugh, and pray. It is this type of relationship-building – even through Zoom – that creates fertile soil for missionary care. We will have our first FMI Europe Care Clusters Zoom meeting (the whole group) in January, and we are excited to hear everyone's experiences with doing the same.

The government of Slovakia once again relaxed restrictions enough for us to once again meet in person. Restrictions of seat spacing required a “checkerboard” layout, which in Prednaškova Salá Styri (PS4) at Istropolis, allows for 30 chairs. Our first Sunday “back” we had 27 people in attendance! Unfortunately, it was a short-lived joy because of early December circumstances you will read about.

And ... Thanksgiving in Slovakia was lame this year. There ... we said it. With all of the COVID concerns and restrictions, we were not able to gather with friends like we did last year. We didn't even muster the energy to make a half-hearted attempt at a Thanksgiving dinner. We ate pizza instead. Quite the contrast from hosting 10 people from 5 different countries last year! Well ... we can only go up (in 2021) from here!

DECEMBER

We continued to develop relationships with pastors of other English-speaking congregations here in Bratislava. What a joy to spend time with Kyle and Anna Svennungsen from Bratislava International Church. Kyle is a Lutheran pastor who interned in Bratislava back in 2018, and then returned to pastor the English-speaking congregation themselves. They, like BIF, are aligned with a larger Slovak-speaking congregation, and are raising two adorable boys (Odin and Espen) and have one on the way (February)! Pray for Kyle and Anna (Americans from Minnesota and Wisconsin) as they devote their lives, like us, to shepherding expats and other English-speaking believers here in Bratislava. We look forward to getting to know them better!

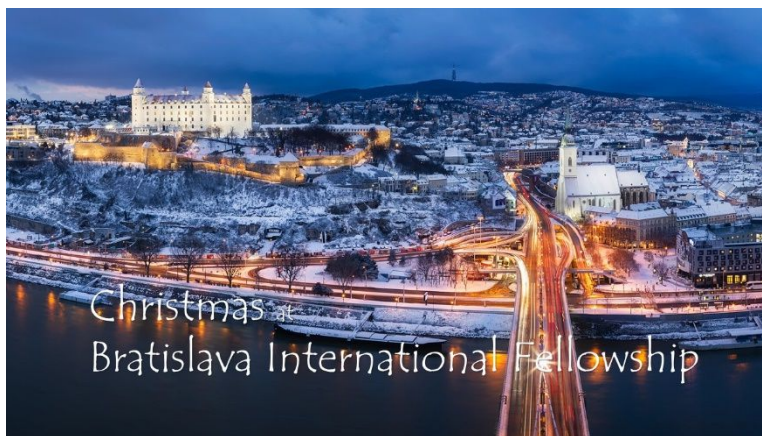
Our missionary friends Roman and Barča (pronounced “Barcha”) Lacho (think of the ch as in Bach) and their 7 kids (including one due in February) followed their hearts (and the Lord's leading) and came from the larger ACS (Slovak) congregation of City Church Bratislava (with senior pastor Pasho Zolnai's blessing) to join our team at Bratislava International Fellowship. This is an answer to prayer for both families – us for additional leadership at BIF, and Roman and Barca who desired to work alongside us as they prepare for their next assignment in the mission field.



Roman and Barca are Slovak and spent 8 years as missionaries to the Lakota tribe in Lower Brule, South Dakota, in the United States. Roman is a regular preacher at BIF, and they are both prayer warriors, confidants, and friends! It's icing on the cake that they are just a 10-minute walk from our flat here in Kramare! Please pray for the Lacho family and the Lord's work that we will join together in at Bratislava International Fellowship!

We ran headfirst into COVID for the first time in December. Our faithful, almost-every-weekend percussionist texted me on the first Monday (after our in-person Sunday service the day before) and notified me that he had tested positive that day. He wasn't feeling any symptoms, but was planning travel for work later that week and was required to test. Well, as you can imagine, it threw our congregation into a bit of an isolation detour. We advised all who were in attendance, prayed for protection, and went back online the next weekend as a precaution. The percussionist, his wife, and in fact the rest of us, never got sick and never even showed any symptoms. Thank you, Jesus, for wisdom and protection. We know that the measures we have in place (distanced seating, hand sanitizer, face masks, etc.), and the Lord's amplification of our immune systems, all worked as designed. COVID free! And that precautionary weekend online? It turned into the every-weekend path ... for now. Remaining fluid!

Like all of Europe, Slovakia's case numbers continued to rise, and progressively stricter lockdowns came on the 19th (keeping us online) and again on January 1st, drawing the country back to a very restrictive lifestyle. Not as strict as the initial lockdown in March, but almost so. We are praying for the soon return to health for Slovakia, and in-person gatherings for BIF.



The middle of December was a flurry of recordings ... for Sunday services, and for a very special Christmas service recorded from our flat. Worship, something special for our BIF kids, and the Christmas story were all part of the first-ever online Christmas service for BIF. We were praying that the message of Jesus would

reach many. If our watch numbers are any indication, our prayers were answered with over 130 viewing of "Christmas at Bratislava international Fellowship". Thank you, Jesus, for helping us proclaim the love you bought when you came to earth!

We were thankful that the borders continued to remain open. Five days flew by quickly, but we were able to (legally) drive to/from Berlin to spend Christmas with our kids and grandkids.

But we paid the price with another 9-day quarantine when we returned to finish out our year (and start the new one) here in Bratislava. Online grocery shopping for delivery, brisk walks out onto the terrace of our flat (LOL) ... physical isolation but only a technology-assisted connection (FaceTime, Zoom, texting, etc.) away from friends and family. We are very thankful for wifi.



9-days can go by like watching paint dry ... or can go by quickly. But having been released from quarantine into a hard Slovak lockdown, it's amazing how much you appreciate some simple freedoms – a walk in the neighborhood or a trip to the grocery store or lekáren (pharmacy). Such is the COVID life in Europe! It is how 2020 has ended ... and it is how 2021 will begin. We can only go up from here!

2020 / 2021 ... LOOKING BACK & LOOKING FORWARD

We are so thankful to be where we are in such a time as this. Would the Lord have provided others with a heart to serve and support missionaries in Europe ... other shepherds for Bratislava International Fellowship? Of course – His plans and purposes are never deterred. But knowing all that He has called us into, we consider it such an honor and privilege to be part of those plans and purposes – to serve in the ways He has asked us to.

Never would we have imagined being in a place to help lead others through a year like we have had. It has been awkward ... difficult ... draining. But it has been so encouraging to have the Lord continually by our side ... lending wisdom and direction ... giving hope and joy in the midst of struggle ... and always showing us the path He has laid out for us to follow.

It might be the perspective of some that the Lord's plans for 2020 were somehow altered or deferred. But we would testify otherwise. What better environment to incubate strategies for missionary care than one in which care is needed most? What better atmosphere to show the church how to gain strength and grow than one in which strength and growth is needed most? That is the testimony of FMI Europe as we have all remained fluid and flexible, using technology and the gifts that God has given us to stay the course and treasure that which is most precious – our faith and our relationships with Jesus and others. That is also the testimony of Bratislava International Fellowship as distance and separation has shown itself weak and ineffective at keeping the church from learning, gaining strength, and growing.

It is fair to say that 2020 did not take the route that we had foreseen or imagined. But the Lord was truly alongside us every step of the way. He was aware of every need that we (and all His children) had. He stood ready to pour out extra measures of hope, of peace, of strength, of comfort. And wow ... did we feel it!

Our core team at BIF changed dramatically in 2020. One who stepped down to focus more time on their marriage – a couple who stepped down for the birth of their twins – one or two who felt their season of helping to carry the leadership mantle was coming to a close. In fact, the Lord showed Joy this picture not long after we arrived in Bratislava in 2019. And while Gary didn't really want to hear it, he trusts that Joy hears God's voice and trusts her discernment. Never fearful of when or how this picture would come into focus, we indeed saw the picture that God gave her become the picture at BIF.

But God has the next step laid out before our foot is lifted from the step we are on. And because of that, we have peace and reassurance that His ways are better than ours ... His thoughts are better than ours ... His plans are better than ours. Those former core team members have remained a part of the BIF family as the Lord highlights and calls others to lead in similar, and in many cases, greater ways. Thank you for joining us in praying for our leadership transitions. The Lord will show us the path ... the best path!

And while the Lord was re-molding the leadership at BIF, He was also solidifying the leadership within FMI Europe. As part of the group of missionaries who are leading initiatives to serve and support FMI missionaries continent wide, we also developed a team to focus specifically on missionary care. This FMI Europe Care Team is also expanding – growing through the addition of Care Cluster leaders who will help us insure there are solid relational paths for care to get to missionaries and missionaries to get to care.

Pruning and growing. God is in the business of both ... and we are thankful that we can trust Him in seasons of each!

We are understandably being flexible in our plans for 2021. Almost everything on the calendar is written in pencil. We've all gotten good at that, haven't we? Some things are more firm than others, but in everything we are seeking the leading and direction of the Lord.

We are fairly certain that 2021 will bring us to a new gathering place for Bratislava International Fellowship. The owners of Istropolis have been given the go-ahead to tear down the existing performing arts center and build a new one in its place. The search for a new meeting space has already begun.

We also believe the Lord is still directing us to establish a children's ministry. Leadership changes and circumstances of the pandemic have delayed this, but we still believe that it is an important piece to have in place for our BIF family. And these plans are being taken into consideration as we look for new space – making provisions for this space in our list of requirements.

The Lord is still pointing us toward initiatives which engage the English-speaking culture in Bratislava. Not expecting or waiting for them to come to us, but to reach out to them beyond our Sunday gatherings – in new and different ways. We believe that social media is a small but important aspect of this – particularly here in Slovakia. Not in an effort to “sell” the church, but to show the church as the hopeful and healthy gathering of believers that it is.

We continue to have conversations with several FMI missionaries here in Europe about visits (here or there) and ways that we can help them. Travel plans will likely need to remain fluid for a while, but we are committed to going and receiving whenever the Lord allows. We are thankful for a reliable and comfortable vehicle which serves us well for transportation to much of Europe, and it also takes the “cancelled flights” variable out of the picture.

We will continue to mature the “Care Cluster” structure and ensure that all our missionaries are being well served by them. But we will also work with the FMI USA Care Team in developing care resources that can then be offered and disseminated through these Care Cluster relationships.

We have joined Carina Greer and the FMI USA Care Team as part of an extended FMI worldwide care group who meet regularly online to discuss care resources and to encourage one another in care initiatives on every continent. Many of you remember the vision we shared as we were preparing to go – a vision for others being called by God to care for missionaries in the same way He was calling us. It does not surprise us that we have seen, in just 2 short years, incredible progress in this vision being realized. Wow ... God is good!

We are firming up plans for our first furlough – a rhythm we are hoping to maintain every 2 years. Wanting to spend time with family and with each of supporters, we are planning an extended visit to the US with nearly a month each in Southern California and the Northwest. We will also spend some time visiting family and attending the 2021 Foursquare Connection in Texas.

Our hearts are full, and we could not be more thankful to the Lord for all He has done in our first full year on the field. And we could not be more grateful for the faithfulness of all those who are partnering with us to make it possible!

2020 CALENDER & KEY EVENTS

January 1	Welcome in the New Year with members of the BIF family
January 5	Beginning of BIF Series “Empowered to be The Church” – a journey through the book of Acts.
Jan 9 - Apr 16	The Truth Project at BIF – weekly discipleship
January 20	Development and distribution of first FMI Europe quarterly newsletter
January 21 - 26	Trip to Toscolano Maderno, Italy, to encourage and support Foursquare Italy national leaders Renato and Patrizia Amato
Jan 31 - Feb 2	Host Mia, Livia, and Stella Armitage so parents, Sheldon & Anna, visit friends in Switzerland
February 4 - 5	Visit to Ireland and FMI Missionaries Tim & Kristina O’Toole
February 15 - 17	Host FMI Missionaries Wimberlys (Romania) here in Bratislava
February 17 - 20	Host FMI Europe Ministry Team in Bratislava to begin discussions regarding initiatives to encourage, empower, and equip all FMI missionaries across Europe
March 1	Vision Sunday for all City Church congregations, including Bratislava International Fellowship
March 3 - 9	Host FMI Missionaries Ken & Linda Stapleton (Czech Republic) here in Bratislava
March 11 - 12	Visit Mielonen family, FMI Missionaries (Poland) in Krakow
March 13	Start of first Slovak national lockdown due to COVID pandemic
March 15	First Bratislava International Fellowship Online-only (audio) Service
March 22	First Bratislava International Fellowship Online-only (video) Service
April 5	Birth of Gary & Joy’s 4 th grandchild – Josephine Mercy Roley, in Berlin, Germany
April 10 - 12	Bratislava International Fellowship celebrates first Online-only Good Friday and Easter
May 1	First FMI Europe “Happy Hour” Zoom call – gathering of all FMI Europe missionaries online
May 14 - July 2	Emotionally Healthy Spirituality at BIF – weekly discipleship.
May 15	Detailed plan for FMI Europe Care Clusters and Care Guidelines completed

2020 CALENDER & KEY EVENTS (continued)

June 5 - 19	Berlin, Germany, to help our kids and meet Josephine Mercy Roley
June 22	First meeting with Simply Mobilizing Slovakia (SMS) Missionary Care Team
July 5	Bratislava International Fellowship returns to in-person Sunday gatherings at Istropolis after 16 weeks apart
July 6 - 12	Host FMI Missionary Anna Marie Mazzone (Germany) here in Bratislava
July 12 - 17	Young Life English Camp with FMI Missionaries Ken & Linda Stapleton (Liberec, Czech Republic) in Turnov, Czech Republic
July 20 - 24	Host FMI Missionaries Mielonen Family (Poland) here in Bratislava
August 3 - 7	Young Life English Camp with FMI Missionaries Ken & Linda Stapleton (Czech Republic) in Prague, Czech Republic
August 10 - 13	Host FMI Missionaries Edwards Family (Austria) here in Bratislava
August 17 - 19	Trip to eastern Slovakia to meet with, encourage, and pray for Slovak missionaries M & S, and their son N.
August 20	Birth of Gary & Joy's 5 th grandchild, a girl, Lua Grace Kingyens
September 7 - 24	Trip to Tacoma, Washington, to help our kids, and spend time with our grandkids, including our newest granddaughter Lua
September 25 - 30	Quarantine upon return to Slovakia
October 4	BIF returns to online-only Sunday services as Slovak government re-introduces new (tighter) public gathering restrictions
October 12	Presentation of FMI Europe Care Cluster to FMI Europe missionaries
October 14	Gather with Pastor Gerhard & Joan Ventner of Bratislava Faith Community
October 16 & 23	Frontiers Missions Workshops – “Singles Thriving in the Great Commission” and “Millenials and Member Care”
November 13	Joy takes “Facing Challenges Well” online seminar
November 17	Emotionally Healthy Spirituality with Young Life Czech through January 5

2020 CALENDER & KEY EVENTS (continued)

November 18	Gary & Joy start their FMI Europe Care Cluster connections
November 22	BIF goes back to in-person service with a “full house” on the first Sunday
December 1	Meet with Pastor Kyle & Anna Svennungsen of Bratislava International Church
December 6	BIF fights off COVID scare, but goes back online through end of 2020
December 25	BIF produces “Christmas at Bratislava International Fellowship” from Gary & Joy’s flat, and production premieres on YouTube Christmas morning
December 20 - 26	Christmas in Berlin
December 26	9-Day quarantine upon return to Slovakia from Berlin

FINANCIAL UPDATE

There are two elements to our support budget – our Living Expenses and our Ministry Expenses. They are both paid out of our support funds but are identified differently because our living expenses are issued as 1099 income and are therefore subject to USA and Slovakia taxes. Our budget, of course, includes provisions for both types of expenses and all required taxes.

We increased our monthly Living Expenses budget by 3% to \$6,246. This extra money is being set aside to meet additional expenses – largely medical and health care related.

The tithes, offerings, and taxes portion of our budget represents just over 50% of our Living Expenses budget (Tithes & Offerings – 10%+, US Social Security & Medicare – 15.3%, Slovakia Income Taxes – 25%). Simply put, with 50% of our support income set aside for giving and taxes, we require \$2 in support for every \$1 required to live on the field. \$6,246 per month in support required - \$3,213 per month to live on the field.

God is so faithful! He has built a support team that is already providing 100% of our budgeted Living Expenses, and 75% of our budgeted Ministry Expenses. We will continue to raise additional support to get our Ministry Expense income where we believe our expenses will be when we are fully engaged with our ministry outside of Bratislava. We thought we would have an accurate gauge of that in 2020, but restricted travel both reduced our Ministry Expenses and made gauging what our usual month Ministry Expenses would likely be more difficult. We are confident, as He always has, that the Lord will provide what we need to do the work He has called us to!

We are so honored to have many individuals and several churches as Mission Partners, and we are so blessed by your faithful investment!

The faithful support that all our partners are sowing every month is a practical, spiritual, and emotional encouragement in the ministry work we are engaged in every week! Our daily, weekly, and monthly expenses are faithfully being take care of by God, through the faithful investment of each of the individuals, families, and churches who have said “yes”! Thank you!

We not seen any attrition in our support this year, and we have added monthly support as well. And incredible testimony of His provision, and of your faithfulness in the year 2020!

Thank you for being part of our team! We could not and would not want to do this without you!

OUR SUPPORT TEAM

Our support team is our family. And as our family, you are always on our hearts and continually in our prayers. And while you are committed to prayer and encouragement of us and what we are doing, our heart and commitment is to pray for and encourage you as well!

Communications is a critical and deeply valued element of our ministry. We continue to invest in monthly communications through printed & Emailed newsletters, through regular connections on social media, and through written correspondence and Zoom/FaceTime calls. We understand the importance of sharing the testimony of what the Lord is doing in and through the work we are called to here in Europe, and we will continue to faithfully tell the story!

There is, of course, a healthy tension between remaining on the field and being faithful to where and what the Lord has called us to, and the need to connect, face-to-face, with all of those who faithfully send, pray for, and encourage us! As mentioned in our plans for 2021, we still expect to furlough on a bi-yearly basis, but will be open to additional trips to the USA as the Lord leads and finances allow. We also hope and pray that our team members will take the time and make the investment to visit and minister to & with us in Europe!

VISION (Looking Forward)

With almost two years under our belt, having hit the ground in late March of 2019, we expect 2021 to continue to be one of maturing rhythms. Rhythms of growing and developing leadership, seeking the Holy Spirit in all things, and deepening our love for discipleship – all within Bratislava International Fellowship.

We also look forward to maturing rhythms of regular connection and care through the FMI Europe Care Team and directly with missionaries here in Europe. Relationships are key, so relationship building and strengthening will be at the core of this maturing process.

We have a few ministry goals and a few personal goals for the coming year.

MINISTRY GOALS

We feel that the heart we expressed last year – to connect, on some level, with every Europe-based FMI Missionary in 2020 – has largely been accomplished. There are a few “stragglers”, but we are confident that the Lord will open those doors.

We also want to deepen our effective support of the FMI Europe Ministry Team led by Jeff & Debbie Roper. We have helped Jeff establish a quarterly FMI Europe newsletter for Foursquare facilitating churches (the sending churches of those serving in Europe). But we also want to continue to seek the Lord in how we can additionally serve and support Jeff and Debbie and the entire team as well.

The Lord has been faithful to answer prayers for growth and new fruit in our worship and teaching ministries. Our worship team has grown by 50%, and the Lord is even now bringing additional people to serve and support through worship ministries. We are praying for additional guitar players, and someone to play piano. And God has already shown He will be faithful to meet our needs in this way! Our goal is to broaden this ministry beyond Sunday morning – scheduling and using worship nights as a blessing for our congregation and an outreach to the community.

Our teaching and preaching team has grown as well. Two individuals in particular – Roman, who has been a “guest” for some time, but who has now joined the BIF family with his wife, Barča, and their children, is well-loved by our congregation and have been welcomed with open arms. And another, a woman, Mazvi, who has been at BIF for about a year, but who the Lord has recently shown (her and us) how she can be used to bless BIF and Bratislava through her teaching/preaching gifts as well. These two, and others, are answers to prayer for us to bring balance to the time we devote to BIF and to FMI Europe. Our goal would be to begin involving these individuals with listening and praying – to jointly hear what the Lords heart is for discipleship, preaching and teaching at BIF.

And we still hear the Lord’s prompting to establish the healthy early seeds of a children’s ministry. Young singles, couples, and families make up the majority of our congregation, and the number of children is growing. The Lord is nudging us to continue in our plans to shepherd our children, and to plan for growth through additional families.

We took the fall season to lend additional structure and depth to our Sunday Service ministry teams. BIF is “improving its serve”. But we know that not far behind are opportunities to re-establish a new core team of leaders to lead shoulder-to-shoulder with us, and to take up the mantle of specific ministry areas including Children’s Ministry, Men’s & Women’s Ministries, Prayer Ministry, Administration, and Worship.

PERSONAL GOALS

Devotions

Joy and I have had separate, but healthy devotional times. This year, we have established some new healthy daily rhythms through our discipleship journey in Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. We would like some of this devotion time to be together.

Sabbath & Exercise

We have begun to practice a sabbath. Not yet weekly, but most of that is setting ourselves up for being able to sabbath through better planning before and after. Our goal is to do it weekly – without interruption. Gary has increased his exercise regimen, primarily through riding his bicycle and playing tennis. But again, establishing a regular rhythm, not yet in place, is the goal. Joy is focused on walking, primarily, until her shoulder is in a place to allow for cycling or playing tennis with Gary.

Language

We are making progress in this one, but it is slow. We believe that Joy would benefit from a tutor, so we are actively seeking someone to help.

MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES WITH OUR PARTNERS

We believe there is a broad landscape of opportunities for our ministry partners to serve with us in Europe. And we take seriously the responsibility of, with our partners, praying and discerning and seeking the heart of the Lord for us serving together! We believe that as our hearts, spirits, and feet are settling here in Slovakia, the Lord will make apparent to all of us, where and when He wants us to serve together. While serving as Missions Pastor at two different churches in the US, Gary spoke often of creating well-worn paths between the US church and its Missions Partners. We could not be more anxious to establish those paths together! Stay tuned!

WHAT WE ARE HEARING

We continue to be reassured and affirmed in His calling to the mission field! We are living and thriving in His call upon our life. And He continues to remind and reassure us of His promises and faithfulness – in His call, in His provision, in His plans, and in His purposes.

We are hearing Him say “Watch and see where I am working, and then join me in that.” It is so easy to come up with great ideas, concepts, and plans. But if that is not where the Lord is already working, we are doing work absent of His momentum and focus. To that end, we want the family at BIF to develop good “listening” skills. Listening to hear the voice of God so we can all agree and be obedient in what He is calling us to as the church.

We believe the Lord has already placed us in the “see where I am already working and join me there” spot with FMI Europe. But we are likewise listening, discerning, and adjusting when the Lord asks.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Thank you for your continued prayer support. We feel the many and faithful prayers of those who converse with God on our behalf!

Health spiritual, emotional, physical (Joy’s shoulder)

Provision ... for living, ministry, and for BIF (for new space and provision for it)

Vision for our ministry of serving and supporting missionaries
for the continued development of the leadership team at BIF

Wisdom for leadership development, teaching, relationship-building

Grace in and with all relationships

Learning culture & language

CONCLUSION

2020 – the year that will not be forgotten! But for us, for many more good reasons than bad ones. It is the year when the Lord showed us, and the church, that a worst-case scenario could not prevail against God’s love and light being poured out on his children. We are thankful for every moment, place, and purpose that He entrusted us with this year. And we can’t wait to see what He has in store next!

Our testimony is one of trusting the Lord and trusting those whom the Lord has put in our lives to support, train, encourage, and equip. Thank you, Lord, and thank you, all, for your trust and for the part you are playing in this amazing story!

God is good!

Gary & Joy

