

On February 6-12 Jim Ranck from AgriService Moldova, Don Brackbill from Calvary Church Lancaster, Les Yoder and Angela Zimmerman from AgConnect Ministries held seminars for farmers throughout Moldova. There were over 200 farmers who attended the 6 days of seminars, and with the help of several organizations in Moldova, the quality of attendees and the level of interest was very high.

Monday's seminar in Cahul focused on Improving Soil Health with No-Till Farming and Cover Crops was attended by 30+ of the very best growers in that region. Their farms ranged from 500-3,000 hectares(1,250-7,500 acres). There were a lot of very good questions and discussions from this group, and they understood the concepts and reasons for choosing this way of farming. By the end of the 4 hour meeting, a number of them were thinking of ways that they could adapt parts of this system on their farms, even if they were not able to fully implement this concept because of a lack of resources.

This seminar was organized by the Governor of the Cahul Region. He is a Believer who had heard me speak a couple of years ago, and saw these educational seminars as a way to improve agriculture in his region. The seminar was received well enough for them to invite us back for future seminars, and a number of them invited me to visit their farms. After the seminar, we met with the Governor, and he expressed his thanks, and said how impressed people were with the level of professionalism and degree of technical knowledge that was shared. Farmers don't have access to these kinds of educational opportunities, and the fact that we are doing this as a way to share God's love without any personal financial gain, freely sharing our knowledge and experiences, has opened doors that others don't have access to.

There was a lady from the Center of Business Development there, who came up and talked to me afterwards. She wanted to know if we would be interested in partnering with them to explore more specific ways to develop and improve various agriculture enterprises. Less than an hour later the Director of the Center called me, and we made arrangements to start communicating on ways to develop some kind of an educational program. We made tentative plans to meet when I am back in Moldova in May.

On Tuesday we were in the village of Colibasi, in the very south of Moldova, at the Baptist Church. We have been doing seminars in that village for a number of years, and have become very good friends with the pastor and a number of the people in the village. Angela Zimmerman has been spending a lot of time in the past year working intensively with some of the greenhouse/vegetable growers there.

Angela talked about Greenhouse Production, and Don shared about Organic Vegetable production using the Community Supported Agriculture model to market their products. Don's low-cost, practical way of growing vegetables was well received as many of the growers could relate to how he does things on his farm. He also talked with Bee Keepers in the afternoon session, and while his primary purpose of keeping bees is not honey production, but vegetable pollination, he was able to communicate with those people and we were able to understand many of the issues and problems they face. This will allow us to find some answers and resources to help them.

One of the things he shared was his experience with the BeeKeepers Association in Lancaster County, and promoted the idea of them starting their own beekeeper's group, that would meet occasionally to share experiences. This is an idea we had started in their minds last summer,

among the Believers who are greenhouse growers. The idea of sharing information about successes and failures is a new idea, as their past culture was not kind to people who were willing to share information, but rather that was used against them by jealous people who wanted to benefit from the success of others. But because this is primarily a group of Believers, we are encouraging them to develop a trust among themselves, as a way to help each other. The pastor in Colibas and the deacon in Vadul lui Isac are the most prominent beekeepers in the region, and with the many other church leaders who are involved in honey production, started to discuss the idea of starting such a group. This was a large breakthrough for this community, where there the culture is one of secrecy and mistrust.

On Wednesday morning we drove to Dancu, a village that sits on the border of Moldova and Romania. The pastor, Dimitru, who started a church in Dancu, saw the need to do something with the land that was owned by the people in the village. In 2002 he started an agriculture association that is run by their Charitable Association. There are over 220 members, representing over 700 acres. The association farms the land as one farm, having the equipment and labor to plant and harvest the crops. Each member gets a share of the crops according to the amount of land that they own. The association also has a dairy herd, where they produce cheese from their cows and from any milk that the villagers are able to supply. We have been working with Dancu Tabita for about 10 years, and started the No-Till/Cover Crop project with them 7 years ago. They have learned to implement this system quite well, and a number of farmers in their region are coming to observe their results. We have also been working quite intensively to help them improve their dairy operation, with the goal of making it a model farm that others can come to learn better methods, and to improve their own production and ability to support the many charitable programs the church has in the community.

About 50 people attended the seminars on BeeKeeping, Greenhouse/Vegetable Production, Dairy Production, and No-Till/Cover Crops. After 5 hours of presentations, we ate a quick lunch before visiting the dairy, seeing the progress on the new Cheese Making Facility, and seeing the expanding dairy herd. They are currently milking 31 cows, and hope to have the barn's 40 stalls full of milking animals soon after the cheese facility is finished. Production has been improving, and the calves being raised in the new Calf Barn are doing very well.

We didn't stay for the Wednesday evening service, as the day started with freezing rain, and by the end of the seminars had turned to heavy snow. It took us over 2 hours to make the 1 1/4 hour trip back to Chisinau, the capital, where we are staying. We made it safely, as there were not many vehicles on the road.

On Thursday morning we traveled 3 hours north to the city of Balti, where Invest Credit and Kingdom Paradigm had organized a seminar with dairy farmers. We had worked with Invest Credit many times in the past, and last November we had a seminar for dairy producers with the combined efforts of World Team, Invest Credit, Operation Mobilizations Business For Transformation division, and Kingdom Paradigm. Some of the same producers attended this seminar, with about 2/3 of the 25 people attending for the first time. There were people who were just thinking about starting a dairy operation to people who had up to 100 milking animals.

After a few people vented their frustrations on the economic and political environment in Moldova, and the perception that the reason that farmers in the US are so productive and profitable is because they pump their animals full of antibiotics and hormones, use GMO crops, and are heavily subsidized by the government. We spent some time explaining that perception

is false, and that very few farmers receive any subsidies, and that most of the subsidies are in the form of crop insurance, which only covers the bare minimums, we were able to move forward with the presentations.

We covered Basic Animal Care, Forage Production, and Calf and Heifer Raising, with a bit of time showing various building designs that maximize natural sunlight and ventilation to raise healthy animals. The seminar lasted for almost 4 hours, and by the end of the presentations, the most argumentative producers were realizing how much attention to detail is paid by our successful farmers, and that there are many things they could address with very little investment that could help them become more productive with the resources they already have. And as they were leaving, some of the larger producers begged me to visit their farms in the future to spend some time with them, helping them with ideas how to improve their operations.

It has been very interesting to see the change in people's attitudes when we conduct these seminars. In almost each one of them, at the very start, many people express that, "We already know how to farm properly", or "We can't do that in Moldova", or "All we lack is the money to do things right". As the day goes on, you can see them changing from skeptical to interested to starting to think of ways that they can change their current practices with little investment. And we get many who have attended in previous years come and share how they were able to take one or two ideas and try them, and how much they benefitted from what they learned. The other rewarding aspect, is that many pastors and mission groups are seeing this as a way to reach out to unbelievers in their communities. They are realizing that providing something like these training opportunities changes people's perception of the church or ministry as someone who is just trying to get people into their church, to people who truly want to help people on a practical level, and improve their daily lives.

Friday and Saturday's seminars were in villages where we had the first seminars last November with Calvary Church. Friday's seminar was in the village of Hirbovat, where the mayor had expressed appreciation for what we did last fall, and invited us to hold more meetings for the farmers in the region. Sergio, the man who is working with World Team as a Church Planter, organized the seminars, with the mayors help. I don't think any of the people in attendance were believers, and a number of the people had also attended the Dairy Development seminars we held in November.

Don's first presentation was on BeeKeeping, and the number of hives represented ranged from 6 hives to 120 hives. There is something about beekeepers that is different from other farmers. All during the seminar, the room was buzzing, as they commented and talked among themselves all during the presentation. They ask a lot of questions, like in the other seminars, but the amount of side conversations are much greater than in any of the other presentations. I am guessing that they are starting to take on the characteristics of the animals they keep.

The next session was on Greenhouse/Vegetable production, and Angela and Don shared about their experiences, with Angela talking about the issues she has observed in the past year here in Moldova, and possible solutions. Don shared what he does on his family farm, and again, the people really connected to his simple, low-cost method of organic vegetable production. He also talked a lot about record keeping, the importance of proper crop rotation, and how he incorporates raising chickens and turkeys in their system(Chicken Tractors, for those who are familiar with the concept).

There was a much smaller group who came for the last session on animal production, but they were people with a high interest in how they could improve. Jim shared his pork operation, and was able to give some specific help on vaccinations, castration, weaning and we helped with some ration formulations using the grains that the farmers had available to them. One of the producers was also doing some dairy farming, and I was able to give him some help with his farm.

At the end of the day, the mayor stopped to thank us for being willing to help his community. I was encouraged when I met him last November, to hear of his desire to improve his village and the surrounding community. Many of the mayors and officials use their position as a way to enrich themselves personally, but this mayor was using the government funding to improve people's life in the village by installing a new water system, starting a trash collection and other sanitary procedures, improving the streets and roads, etc. We believe this is a community that we can invest some time and effort into that will bring better results to a larger group of people than many of the other villages we work in. It is also interesting to see how this non-Christian mayor has embraced the Christian organizations as people who have the desire to improve the daily lives of the people in Moldova.

On Saturday the seminar was held in Maximovca, a Russian speaking village. This is the village where Calvary Church started an agriculture project, helping the leader of the church, Misha, purchase a cow and build a new barn. Misha already had one cow, and was interested in enlarging his operation. He had a very good cow, and wanted another good cow, not just one of the native cows. He was able to find one that suited him, and she gave birth to a bull calf early December. When we visited his farm in November, I was able to see what feeds he had available, and I gave him some feeding recommendations making the best use of what he had to get the maximum yields. With the adjustments to feeding, he was able to raise his production from 17 liters(37 1/2 lbs) to 23 liters(50 1/2 lbs), and his calf is growing very well.

The first seminar was on Improving Soil Health with No-Till Farming and Cover Crops, and again, they understood why their soils have been degrading over the past decades, and started to think about ways that they could start to improve their own soils. This presentation lasted about 3 hours without a break, and again, I only got about 2/3rd of the way through the presentation before we stopped for lunch. A number of the people attending had been at the November seminars, and at that seminar, they had transformed from skeptics to realizing that there is much that they could learn to improve their way of farming. So this time they were a lot more receptive, and had many good questions and discussions. And this topic gains credibility as we share our experiences with implementing this system in Moldova.

After lunch, Jim talked about Raising Pigs and that was another lively discussion, as they realized what kind of production that Jim is realizing because of his close attention to detail. Jim also shared what kind of records he keeps for all of his farming enterprise, and the struggles that US farmers have to be profitable. Again, emphasizing that there are no hormones or antibiotics used, and no government subsidies in his operation, that the success comes from hard work and good management.

We were already past the quitting time for the seminars, but many wanted to hear the presentation on growing corn. I suddenly started to feel sick in my stomach, being nauseated and having a lot of pain. I asked Don to share about his farming operation while I went outside and visited the squatty potty. I came back inside, but was still not feeling well, so I went back

outside. I texted Angela, and asked if she and Jim could do the presentation on corn, as they were both well qualified to speak on the subject. I spent an hour walking around, and visiting the facilities. After doing the majority of the speaking over the past 6 days, I took it as a sign from God that it was time for me to Shut Up!

If you've never had the opportunity to occupy such an enjoyable facility as an outdoor Moldovan toilet, you may not appreciate what it takes to navigate one who's tile floors are covered with snow and ice. And with the generosity of this one as a communal toilet with multiple holes in the floor, it wasn't possible to brace one's feet on the outside walls of the outhouse. This is an experience that everyone should have at least once in their lifetime.

I was able to come back inside before the end of the presentation, and help with some closing comments. The pastor who was interpreting told me that they stopped the presentations to pray for me. This was a real witness to the many unBelievers who were attending. Again, this is a village that will continue to receive extra attention, particularly with the work that Calvary Church has started that supports the efforts of World Team to impact the community in practical ways. This just highlights the opportunity to find different ways to share the gospel, by helping people in a very tangible way, and building relationships with them.

On Sunday, Angela Zimmerman and I went to Ghena and Alina Russu's church while Michael took Jim Ranck and Don Brackbill to the Art Market. It was the only time that Don had available to do a little sight seeing and souvenir shopping. We ate lunch with Ghena and Alina, and we all went to the International Christian Fellowship in the afternoon. We enjoyed getting to know some of the English speaking people in Moldova, and a number of students from University Divitia Gratie were in attendance. It was a pleasure to be there, as they held the first baptism ever in the church with the baptism of two women. After the service we had supper with Jeff and Robin Owens from World Team, and talked about ways to partner in the future.

Monday morning Jim and Don left for the US, and Michael, Angela and I went to visit Theodor Boton from Agrodor Succes. I met Theodor several years ago, and was impressed with his attitude and his professionalism. He places high value on providing excellent products and services with a fair margin. Agrodor Succes specializes in irrigation equipment, vineyard supplies, grape seedlings and other agriculture seeds. I had introduced him to a German company that supplies some of his needs and he expressed his thanks for helping to develop a strong relationship with them.

Theodor had also introduced me to one of his customers, a man who has been using No-Till/ Cover Crop farming for a number of years. We became good friends, and this man is succeeding where many have failed, because he understands that it takes an entire system rather than just changing some cultural practices. I have been able to give them both some helpful information on how to improve their businesses, particularly in the area of cover crops and forages, and Theodor hopes I am able to spend a couple of days with him this summer to visit some more of his farmers, and to observe some of the field trials he is conducting.

We ate supper with Richard Sanders from World Team. Richard wasn't able to join us Sunday night, and we wanted to finish some of the conversations we had earlier in the week. Richard has been instrumental in helping with this concept of uniting different mission organizations in

helping spread the Gospel using agriculture to improve individual lives and communities, giving pastors and missionaries some tools that they can use to build personal relationships.

I came to Moldova several days before Jim and Don so that Angela and I could visit with a few organizations and businesses to find better resources and develop some projects that we have been discussing for the past 6 months.

We met with Mihai Malancea, the head of University Divitia Gratie in Chisinau. UDG has graduated over 1,400 pastors and missionaries since opening in the 90's, and currently 60% of their students come from Muslim countries. They offer degrees in Business and Social Work for those who wouldn't be allowed to get one of the universities various ministry degrees.

The university also has a farm that had been started to provide food for the students and some income as well. It has not been successful, and Mihai asked AgConnect Ministries if we could help them turn the farm into a model farm, and also develop training programs where we could issue Certificates of Education in various agriculture fields, such as greenhouse, vegetable production, raising chickens, dairy farming, growing field crops, ect. Angela has developed a cropping plan for this growing season, and we have talking about a number of options to make this vision a reality. It will take a lot of time and resources, but there is a growing excitement in this project as it is being shared with others.

We would ask that you continue to pray for the work in Moldova, that we would be able to find the people and the resources to teach and encourage them to implement better agriculture practices that will help them to become more successful, and to make it possible for the good people in Moldova to remain in Moldova.

Pray for clarity of vision and the uniting of the different organizations and individuals who are seeing the value of combining efforts to impact larger areas with greater results.

Pray that we would be sensitive to God's leading and listen to what He is telling us to do. Pray that we would be tireless in our efforts, and that we would have the patience to wait for His timing in all that we do. Pray that we would not become discouraged when things don't happen as fast as we would like, or in the way that we envision.

Above all, pray for the people of Moldova, that they would find Hope and Encouragement for their difficult lives, and that the gospel would continue to be received in their land.

May God richly bless you as you keep this work in your thoughts and prayers.

Leslie D. Yoder  
Founder/Executive Director  
AgConnect Ministries