



Activities of The United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe with/for Refugees from Ukraine and with/for Internally Displaced People in Ukraine



Summary of October 4, 2023

The situation is still the same – but it has changed!

What at first glance seems to be a contradictory statement, on closer examination describes a sad reality. This was reported by **Bishop Christian Alsted**, who is responsible for the UMC in **Ukraine**, at the last online meeting of the Central and Southern European coordinators for the work with refugees from **Ukraine**. And while not only **Jana Křížová**, pastor and coordinator in **Czechia**, said that “we all wait and pray for the end of the war”, the terrible war continues. In this regard, the situation is, unfortunately, still the same. But, contrary to the past, when it had repeatedly been announced that the war will end soon (in summer 2022, before Christmas 2022, at the beginning of 2023), and when people always had hoped that this prediction would be true, the Government does no longer issue such statements. For many, this change has to be understood as a sign that people must prepare for a war that will last for a long time to come. This is terribly stressful for those living closer to the border in the East and the South of **Ukraine**. But it is also anything but easy for those working day and night, trying to help those in need – and being very tired already now. They, too, must prepare for continuing their activities aiming to ease the pain, to comfort the broken, to set signs of love and hope in midst of fear, sorrow, destruction.

Another change for the worse: People that are received in the shelters are much more severely traumatized than before. At an early stage of the war, people fled because they knew what would be coming. Those who arrive now have all experienced many bad things. **Bishop Christian Alsted** emphasized: “The situation is far beyond what a country can handle.” Against this background, it is amazing what the United Methodists in Ukraine are doing. “I have highest respect and even admiration for them”, said **Bishop Alsted**. Particularly in the West of the country they do what they can to be a Church as normal – a Church for the others. They reach out to many Internally Displaced People and have ministries with children and youth – including camps that are organized despite the circumstances. A problem, however, is the fact that the owner of the shelter, which the UMC in Uzhgorod is using, wants the people out. Trying to find an alternative is difficult, and it is very likely that a future shelter will accommodate 40-50 people only (the capacity of the current shelter is 70 people). That’s why the leaders of the United Methodist work in **Ukraine** are also in a process of purchasing a former hotel in the West of the country. This facility shall then be partly used as accommodation and partly turned into a place for the rehabilitation of people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Being prepared for surprises

In countries directly neighboring to Ukraine or being located “in the second row”, the general situation also changed. Whether in **Czechia**, **Romania**, **Poland**, or **Scandinavia** – the Ukrainians that have searched refuge abroad are well cared for by the State and have, quite often, found a job and their own apartment. In many cases, their children attend a public school of the respective country. On the other hand, however, there are still some who are accommodated in church premises (e.g., in **Czechia**, **Hungary**, **Poland**, **Latvia**, or **Lithuania**), and much work has been done to be prepared if ever the number of Ukrainians leaving their home country should increase again. Other ongoing activities include, for instance, language courses (mainly in **Poland**) and regular humanitarian transports from **Romania**, **Poland**, and **Czechia** to **Ukraine**.

However, **Boglarika Khaled**, coordinator in **Hungary**, points to an increasingly important reality. “The UMC in **Hungary** does not only offer material aid but also spiritual support – Ukrainian refugees regularly participate in our worship services, and a baby that was born in the Dorcas Refugee camp at the end of July 2023, was blessed during a worship service at Debrecen UMC”, she said. And this reality is true in other countries, as well. According to **Kirsten Hastrup**, assistant to **Bishop Christian Alsted** of the Nordic and Baltic Area, the

UMC in **Finland** organized a summer camp specifically for Ukrainian children. **Szarlota Kaminska**, coordinator in **Poland**, reported about a similar summer camp for Ukrainian mothers and children, that took place in North-Eastern **Poland** and was led by Ukrainian volunteers. In many cases, however, the aim was and still is not to prepare specific programs for Ukrainian people but to rather include them in the regular church activities – and also in regional or even national events such as the “Days of Renewal” in **Poland**.

Having been asked whether special precautions would be taken in view of the coming winter, be it in responding to very cold temperatures or in responding to repeated attacks on the supply of electricity and water in **Ukraine**, **Sarah Putman**, coordinator in **Romania**, explained: “We will deal with a situation when it comes.” And the leaders in the various countries have proven more than once that one of their strengths is indeed to be prepared for the unexpected:

- The UMC in **Romania** has started a self-expanding project to meet the psychological needs of Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainian psychologists from 6-7 Romanian cities and a few other people who work directly with Ukrainian refugees (altogether a group of 16) have been trained in trauma care, group therapy, and other problem management skills. The aim is that the participants return to their cities and start support groups. The members of these groups shall then be enabled to start new support groups themselves.
- Another achievement is the creation of an App to communicate needs.
- In October 2023, the project “Faces of Courage” will be implemented. 20 women from **Ukraine** will tell their stories, and their experiences/emotions will be expressed in face paintings. It is supposed to be a project to offer mental and emotional support and to overcome the experiences of the past.
- In **Hungary**, the UMC is in constant contact with the leadership of the Dorcas Refugee Center near Debrecen and regularly provides the center with bread. When a serious problem regarding the supply of the camp with clean water was discovered recently, it was the UMC that (thanks to a grant from the EmK-Weltmission in Germany) made it possible to move the whole camp for two days to another place so that the problem with the water supply could be solved.
- In **Czechia**, the present situation allows for shifting the focus on work that is done in **Ukraine** and for cooperating with trustworthy people that have built up specific projects. One of the focus areas is trauma healing (→ organization of retreats where people receive help from experts → there is a huge need for such help), the other focus area is a small hospital in Ivano-Frankivsk. Shipments with medical equipment, first aid kits and other medical consumables are financed from own resources – as far as the salaries of the hospital staff is concerned, there is a cooperation with Connexio in Switzerland.
- “We are in a situation where we can help now and then. There would be more opportunities, but to be able to help more, we would need more funds.” With these words, **Jana Křížová** from **Czechia** pointed to two important realities. There is still an amazing commitment of the United Methodists – in **Ukraine** itself, and also in the countries directly or indirectly neighboring to **Ukraine**. And: there is a wonderful solidarity in Europe and the USA that makes, from a financial point of view, these efforts possible. And that will hopefully not cease. Because, as **Bishop Alsted** said: “Even when the war stops, it will continue for decades. The needs to rebuild the country and to heal the people are and will be enormous.” According to him, there is, therefore, also an urgent need to identify and train Ukrainian leaders who in the future can implement the strategic plan involving both diaconal activities and starting new churches. For **Bishop Alsted**, this is more than human efforts. It is, even in these difficult times, about trusting in God and doing “the best we can to follow God where he is already doing and will be doing work among the people.”

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(based on reports from UA, DK, CZ, HU, PL and RO).