

Refugees fleeing Ukraine find haven with Polish Baptists

CHELM, Poland (BP and local reports) – Bus after bus arrives at the Poland border with war-torn Ukraine, filled with women and children separated from husbands and fathers. Most men stayed behind, now needed in cities and towns throughout the Ukrainian countryside. The grief of those who fled was palpable.

It is one of many scenes that Paul Chitwood, president of Southern Baptists' International Mission Board (IMB), can't forget after a recent three-day trip to eastern Poland, 20 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.

While there he met with various IMB personnel and humanitarian groups and saw Baptists stepping into a role desperately needed during a historic refugee crisis. Speaking with Baptist Press March 6, the jet lag and lack of sleep were in Chitwood's voice. "Didn't sleep a wink on the way to London," he said, referring to an overnight flight that landed Feb. 26.

Change of plans

A vision trip connecting churches in the U.S. with IMB personnel and partners in Europe took place over the following days. The original plan was to leave London and go to different locales throughout Europe, including Ukraine.

The Russian invasion altered those plans. Instead, Chitwood traveled to Poland Feb. 28. Over the course of three days, he witnessed the resolve of Baptists and other ministry partners meeting the spiritual and physical needs of those fleeing an unprovoked war that is claiming the lives of many civilians, destroyed homes and separated families.

After landing in Krakow, Poland, on Feb. 28, Chitwood met with

mission teams and a church planter from Ukraine.

March 1 took him to Chelm (pronounced "Helm") Baptist Church and a visit to the border. March 2 brought a visit to Warsaw Baptist Seminary and meeting Michal Baloha, who is Ukrainian and serves as pastor of Warsaw Baptist Church.

Southern Baptists respond

While the situation for those fleeing into Poland is heartbreaking, there is inspiration to be found in the response. "From the very moment this crisis began, we had missionaries and relief workers on the ground providing resources and offering help," Chitwood said.

"It wasn't something that we had to work up. The response is growing, but our people were there and ready. It speaks to the incredible work God has allowed Southern Baptists to be a part of and the generosity that makes that work possible," he observed.

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Paul Chitwood, IMB president

Approximately 1.5 million refugees have crossed from Ukraine into neighboring countries since Russia's invasion, according to the United Nations refugee agency. In what's been called "the fastest growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II," the European Union is calling for nations to brace for some five million refugees.

Providing refuge

In Krakow, Chitwood met with the IMB's missionary team and a

church planter from Ukraine. "I'm sorry for getting emotional. I wasn't prepared for this in seminary," the planter said.

Chitwood and others spent a several hours greeting people stepping off the buses.

Back at Chelm Church, he met with pastor Henryk Skrzykowski, a member of the council of the Polish Baptist Union. Chelm Church resembles a typical, mid-sized American church. All of it has found a new purpose.

Pews and even the pulpit were moved to the stage to make room for 20 cots. It soon became evident the total number of refugees on the way would greatly surpass 20 cots, so an additional 200 cots were purchased and put into every bit of floor space that could be found.

The several dozen volunteers at Chelm Church have taken every step possible to give comfort. A reception area with coffee, tea, sandwiches, and desserts welcomes refugees. The smell of meals heavy with potatoes and meat rises from the extra stoves in the fellowship hall downstairs. Washers and driers continuously keep linens clean for those needing a night or two of rest before moving on. Efforts also include distributing clothes and finding ways to get food and supplies back into Ukraine.

'Rocked by the horror'

At Warsaw Baptist Seminary, Chitwood spoke with seminary leaders and the pastor of Warsaw Bible Church, who is Ukrainian. "He shared with us some of the stories that are coming out Ukraine," Chitwood said.

Included was a report of Russian soldiers carrying a list of pastors who have spoken out against the war. Even the media's use of the term, "war," has been banned in Russia. Those using it can face 15 years in prison.

As inspiring as it was seeing the Baptist response, the heartbreak making it necessary is present in the faces of those arriving. "I was rocked by the horror of the situation for the Ukrainian people," Chitwood said.

"Suddenly, their country is invaded and everything about their lives has now been rewritten. Their homes are destroyed; their families divided; their loved ones killed. They were in established jobs and homes and now are fleeing for their lives. They're going to other countries where they may not know a soul," he said.

Pray, give

Southern Baptists can offer prayer and financial support for those trying to get out of Ukraine as well as those choosing to stay. "Pray for some efforts we're trying to create to support those on both sides of the border," Chitwood said.

"The food shortage is becoming a humanitarian crisis. People are waiting hours in line in the cold. Pray also for us in coordinating assistance with local partners, churches, seminaries, and other relief agencies," he noted.

Polish Baptists are working to meet those types of needs and others, he added. "They are people with limited resources and are giving everything they have to care for total strangers. Out of compassion, they're wanting to help and show the love of Christ."

Church gifts in support of the SEND Relief response may be given through the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board utilizing the Church Mission Giving Designation Form (Pink Sheet) designating International Disaster Relief/Ukraine Conflict Response. Submit to MBCB, P. O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39204.

Individual Gifts may be given directly to SEND Relief online by clicking [here](#).