

California church welcomes Ukrainian refugees

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TIJUANA, Mexico (BP)—David Slabodenko speaks with urgency, running on about three hours of sleep each night as he organizes church volunteers to greet hundreds of Ukrainian refugees a day in Tijuana, Mexico, and get them to safety in the U.S.

Once in California, Russian Baptist Church in West Sacramento will spearhead sheltering the refugees, welcoming as many as possible into family homes, and then in temporary shelters in buildings at the church that draws about 2,700 Russian and Ukrainian worshippers on Sundays.



A Ukrainian refugee family is among many finding refuge at Russian Baptist Church in West Sacramento, Calif. (BP photo submitted by Russian Baptist Church)

“We’re not able. It’s not enough,” Slabodenko said. “In Sacramento, we

have around 200,000 Slavic people who speak Russian and Ukrainian, but we're not going to be able to take all these people in. So, we're trying to get American churches also involved. I just want to tell you guys, this is the time to open our hearts, to open our minds and just help these people.

"One man called me (from Ukraine) crying. He said: 'David, please help me. Today, my son just got killed, and all I have left from him is his hand and feet. And I don't want to be here anymore. Please help me. Help me to get to U.S.'"

Russian Baptist Church is working with increasing urgency as President Joe Biden opens the U.S. border to as many as 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, as Biden announced March 24.

The Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission began urging the U.S. government two weeks ago to receive Ukrainian refugees. In a March 11 letter, the ERLC asked the Biden administration to work to secure religious freedoms in Ukraine, to support other countries in resettling displaced Ukrainians and to rebuild the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

"We welcome this action by the president, as it is something we have directly advocated for with the administration," Leatherwood told Baptist Press. "It is a solid initial step toward aiding Ukrainian refugees who are fleeing from the terror being inflicted on their country by Vladimir Putin. Our hope is that this will lead to further action, including increased funding and support to rebuild our nation's ailing refugee programs."

Some church members open homes

Some members of Russian Baptist Church already have received refugees into their homes, Senior Pastor Mikhail Avramenko said. He'll assess how many refugees are already being sheltered among congregants and provide

a registration process March 27 for congregants to indicate how many refugees they can house.

“We’re going to accept them in our families first,” he said. “And then we’ll open our gym and our second building and our classrooms to convert them to temporary living facilities. We can (house) maybe 200 people. But we don’t have this plan settled, because we think maybe end of March, there’s going to be influx of people coming to Sacramento.

“Many, many people are going to come from Ukraine. And we have formed a committee, a Fast Response Help Committee. So, they are taking all kinds of requests from emails, texts, phone calls from Ukraine about material help, financial help and spiritual help definitely, maybe settlement help.”

At least 3.4 million Ukrainians have fled the country in the past month, the United Nations said March 25, and millions more are displaced internally.

“It brings awareness that we are children of one God,” Avramenko said. “We are all under one God, no matter what ethnicity you are. In our church, we have like 26 different nationalities. The majority, I would say, they are Russian speaking,” he said, with many coming from former Soviet republics.



Russian Baptist Church Senior Pastor Mikhail Avramenko and associate pastor Igor Dronov (kneeling second and third from left, respectively) join church members in packing donated supplies to send to Ukrainian refugees in Europe. (BP photo submitted by Russian Baptist Church)

about 300 refugees, overwhelmingly Ukrainians but a few Russians, are arriving in Tijuana daily, sometimes hoping to rest before crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, Slabodenko estimated.

"We're receiving around 300 people every day in Tijuana. We're trying to find volunteers to go to Tijuana airport and just meet people," he said. "Right now, these families, they're coming with kids—five, 12, nine kids—which we're trying to find volunteers, send them to Tijuana, and literally bring them from the airport to the border line.

"The first thing we need to do with these people is to greet them and calm them down. We just need to tell them that everything is fine. 'In a few hours you're going to be in U.S. Don't worry,'" Slabodenko said. "Because there's also a lot of bad people meeting people. They're charging them money (for help). They're trying to do evil stuff."

Many of the families are intact, having left in the days before the Russian invasion when men under 60 were free to leave the country.

Iglesia Bautista, a congregation in Rosarita, Mexico, is helping the California church respond to refugees in Tijuana through a longstanding church-planting and missions partnership. Several smaller Slavic churches

are also helping Russian Baptist Church resettle refugees, Slabodenko said, but his group of volunteers in Mexico was only six people and a few cars strong March 25.

Russian Baptist Church will send a shipment of supplies to Europe March 26 to aid Ukrainian refugees, has sent 100 Russian-language Bibles to Mexico for refugees and before the invasion, launched an English as a Second Language class in West Sacramento.