

Ukrainian Baptist seminary students minister near war zones

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LVIV, Ukraine (BP)—While others have fled to safety, 80 percent of the 1,300 students at Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary have chosen to stay in the country to serve those in need.

In cities as close as 15 miles to warzones, students have fed, clothed, housed and sheltered refugees. They've taken ammunition and other supplies to soldiers, and given toys to children. They've prayed, worshiped and shared the gospel. More than a dozen students are soldiers in the war, two of them suffering injuries.

Yet in the midst of their varied ministry, about 300 Ukrainian Baptist Seminary students shared their stories during a special one-week seminary session on campus May 16-20.

'Fresh air'

Seminary President Yarsolav "Slavik" Pyzh described the session as "fresh air."

"One of them was just crying, literally crying," said Pyzh, a Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary alumnus. "The main thing was to get everyone together, encourage each other, share their pain, pray together, be together and leave blessed and encouraged to do what they are doing.

"For them, that was like fresh air in the midst of the difficulty they were living through."

In Lutsk, which Russia began bombing March 11 just days before the seminary's special session, student Sofia found respite in work.

"There was a lot of work, so you were not distracted by war. You were just doing what you should do," Sofia said in a seminary video-recorded during the special session.

"When people are coming and you just know you have to feed them, and you have to house them, and every day, you have people and people and people. So, you just get through it all, distracted by it from the war."

Gained new appreciation

Seminary student Mykhailo is ministering in Irpin, just 16 miles outside the heavily damaged capital city of Kyiv.

"I began to appreciate the people around me in a completely different way. I appreciate every call from relatives," he said on the video. "I believe that Ukraine will win. We just have to wait for it."

Sergiy is serving at a church in Rivne City, a community in northwestern Ukraine on the border of Russian ally Belarus.

"They would come to our church, and we would find a place for them to live," Sergiy said of refugees. "We also would supply them with all the basic needs, like dishes, food, beddings and other things. And then we would come and visit them in a day or two, fellowship with them, and bring them food, bring them everything what they needed. And we prayed for them."

About 225 of the 300 students who attended the session are engaged in humanitarian aid, Pyzh said. About 46 percent of those in attendance have hosted refugees in their homes, 44 percent have organized the housing of refugees in churches, 41 percent have communicated with people and shared the gospel, 30 percent helped cook meals, 20 percent helped

evacuate people from war hotspots, and five percent are serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Prepared to serve

Oleksander Savich, head of the the seminary's pastoral ministry program, said students thanked him for preparing them to serve in times of war.

"We're excited to hear different stories from them—how God used them to bless people around them," he said in a video filmed at the close of the special session. "One of the students from the pastoral group I'm with told me, he said, 'I want to say thank you for the values that you are teaching us all these years, because they helped us not just survive as a church, but they helped us to be strong and to serve the people that are around us. So you helped us to be strong during the wartime.' I think this is the best compliment we can have as a seminary."

The second week in June, the seminary will hold a graduation ceremony for 400 certificate program recipients, scheduling graduation for 300 or so bachelor and master level students in September, Pyzh said, hoping the war might have quieted a bit.

"Russia is pushing bigtime so I think we are losing some of the ground. It's very difficult for people, because when our forces are losing, everyone is getting depressed, and more and more people get killed and more and more territory gets occupied by Russia," he said. "Now it's a very difficult time for us, because for the last week or so, we've been steadily losing, not gaining ground."

Pyzh continues to minister through Journey Church, where he serves as a pastor, encouraging about 100 weekly worshippers to remain humane in the midst of crisis.

Grateful for partners in ministry

The seminary continues to form partnerships in Poland, integrating Ukrainian refugees into about seven local churches for ministry; providing counseling to refugees, including women, children and teenagers, and building a network of Ukrainian churches to serve refugees. About 50 churches are committed to join the network, launching with an online training session June 11.

Pyzh continues to thank Southern Baptists for their generous support that has exceeded \$10 million and encourages Southern Baptists to continue praying for peace and other war-related concerns.

He thanks the many churches that have directly supported the seminary and encourages Baptists to find ways to help Ukraine rebuild after the war.

“I would like them to continue to pray for Ukraine, so that we will have peace, but at the same time, to get prepared about helping us to rebuild our country” he said. “I know that Southern Baptists are very, very talented and gifted people in rebuilding. We’re already receiving a lot of help through Send Relief and other Baptist institutions. But I hope that we will have a lot of churches and cities who will be willing to partner with our churches in order to rebuild our nation, and bring the gospel at the same time.”