

Voices: The joy of the Lord at a refugee shelter in Poland

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I recently returned from Poland as part of a disaster relief team deployed by Texas Baptist Men to assist Baptist Church Chełm in their ministry to Ukrainians.

Our team helped at a distribution center, where relief supplies were sorted for dispersion, and at the church, which was turned into an intake center for refugees coming across the nearby border. I spent our deployment at the church, which the town referred to as “the shelter.”

I find it difficult to recall afterward exactly what I expected prior to arriving in Poland. I remember my surprise at the beautiful modernity of 21st-century Poland, a stark contrast to the images of its devastation during World War II with which many of us are most familiar.

Whatever my prior conception of Poland and my part in serving refugees, I could not have envisioned the way this deployment would affect my perception of Christ’s church, nor how I would grow in my own understanding of joy in Christ.

Seeing the Lord at work

Our basic assignments at the shelter were quite simple and pragmatic. We cleaned the church every day: sweeping and mopping, disinfecting surfaces, endlessly cleaning the bathrooms, taking out the trash and recycling, straightening up the children’s playroom, and “other duties as assigned.”

There was a certain sense of contentment, knowing that doing these things freed up the church members and town's volunteers to process and help refugees during intake and placement.

As we made beds, we prayed the Ukrainian families would lie down in peace in the safety of the Lord. While cleaning mirrors, we begged God to allow each person to see themselves the way he sees them.

As is so often the case, though, it was in the interruptions to our work that we saw the Lord's power on fullest display. Between filling soapy buckets and emptying dust bins, we saw the faces, actions and hearts of both a people oppressed and a congregation with open arms.

The Ukrainian refugees were actively grateful, often wresting the mops and toilet scrubbers from our hands so they could give back to the place that gave them sanctuary. The Polish volunteers were committed to diligent service and superhuman hospitality toward their neighbors.

It was difficult to believe that until about two months ago, these two peoples long had been at odds with one another.

Seeing Christ's joy differently

But it was the Ukrainian and Polish believers who caused me to rethink my interpretation of Christlike joy in every circumstance.

These people had every reason to be depleted of joy—the Polish for their often sleep-deprived service to the refugees, and the Ukrainians for the utter devastation of their homes and separation from family and community.

But they were not depleted in the least. Even when a phone alarm sounded, indicating someone's home village was expecting an air raid imminently, they rejoiced in the Lord through their tears both in prayer and song.

I saw the love of Christ shining so brightly through Ukrainian believers as they uplifted one another with Scripture. They encouraged us as volunteers to remain strong in our faith and reminded us that to suffer is to experience the imminent presence and power of the Lord, for when we are weak, we are able to experience strength and power in him.

Most of the refugees are women and children, the men being required to stay in Ukraine to protect and defend their towns. Communication via smartphone must be limited for security. Even so, they served and worshiped.

When they were moved to other locations, they said their farewells, promising to serve the Lord in their next place while they await the end of the war.

Seeing Jesus in non-Christians

The humbling part came when I realized many refugees serving so gladheartedly and gratefully were *not* Christians. They easily could have fooled me as I forced myself to keep pace with their labor. I thought of just how much joy and service would be required of God's people to live set apart from those eagerly serving.

If you are wondering where such gladness could possibly emerge that even non-Christians would find themselves duly infected, we need look no further than the Lord's use of the shelter, the Baptist Church Chełm—congregation of 60 to 80 people led by a pastor who lives out the doctrine of *imago Dei*.

Seeing the power of love

Pastor Henryk of Baptist Church Chełm has made a life of welcoming and

loving the oppressed and forgotten. The father of seven biological children and nine foster children, he did not suddenly begin to care about people as bearers of God's image only when war broke out in Ukraine a few months ago.

I would wager, given his actionable love for others, his congregation was not surprised in the least when the Russian invasion began, and they found themselves stacking up their pews into great piles to make space for beds.

Pastor Henryk's ministry has been used by God to light on fire believers in Chełm, greater Poland and Europe to serve the oppressed in humility and love. Volunteers from Latvia, Belarus, Germany, Italy, Northern Ireland, England, Austria, Sweden and beyond have flocked to this little Baptist church to help others in their time of distress.

Refugees and volunteers are coming to know Christ because of this little Polish church and because of the abiding joy of Ukrainian believers.

When we first arrived, I was determined to pray Isaiah 35 over those who came in and out of the shelter:

*Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come...*

But as I looked around at the depth of faith surrounding me, I realized their God *had* come, and in this time of distress, they are seeing the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

Rachel Jones is the children's pastor at First Baptist Church in Plano. The views expressed are those of the author.