

Key Questions for the Contextualization of Ministry among Ukrainian Refugees

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The United Nations Refugee Agency defines refugees as “people who have been forced to flee their homes and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.”¹ From the beginning of January 2011 to the end of January 2022, my wife and I were privileged to serve in Ukraine. For us, it became a second home. Then, at the end of January 2022, we were required to leave Ukraine due to the threat of war. At that point we emotionally became refugees.

On February 24, 2022, the war broke out in Ukraine and thousands of Ukrainians fled to Poland where they became physical refugees.² In early March 2022, my wife and I moved to Żory, Poland to work with Ukrainian refugees. As we wrestled with how to do this, I realized we needed to focus on: What is the situation like? What are the people like? What do they need

¹ UNHCR, “What is a Refugee,” UNHCR. Accessed August 27, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/what-refugee>.

² In early March 2022 100,000 Ukrainians per day were arriving in Poland. See: “Ukrainian refugees arrive in Poland ‘in a state of distress and anxiety,’” UN News. May 27, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1119172>.

to hear? How do they need to hear it? These questions were not developed through abstract reflection, scientific investigation, or group discussion. They arose out of our efforts to minister to the Ukrainian refugees. The first question grew out of the fact that we like the refugees had been thrust into a new context. They were trying to figure out how to live in that context and we were trying to understand how to minister to them in it. The second question arose out of the first. We were convinced that ministry is done best when it is based on the characteristics of the people one is trying to reach. Our task was to try to figure out how much this new context for Ukrainian refugees was changing them as people. How were they like the Ukrainians we had been ministering to and with for years and how were they beginning to differ from them? The third question developed as we tried to share God's Word with the refugees. We noticed that many people and agencies both secular and religious were focusing on trauma healing as they worked with the Ukrainian refugees. We were sceptical that psychology alone could give them what they needed. We also were firmly convinced God's inspired Word contained the anchor these refugees needed to navigate the chaos in which they found themselves. However, we had to determine which aspects of biblical truth were most needed at this moment. The fourth question emerged due to three key factors. One, in Ukraine the government was pushing Ukrainian as the only acceptable language for Ukrainians. Two, many of the Ukrainian refugees were from eastern Ukraine where Russian had been the dominant language until the beginning of this phase of Russian aggression. Three, the refugees were having to learn Polish to deal with life tasks in their new setting.

The Situation: What is it like?

At the heart of ministry contextualization is the conviction one should adapt ministry methods to fit the context. As J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry note in their book *Developing a Strategy for Missions*, "Unlike principles, they do not always translate effectively from context to context. Methods that

worked well in one context may be disastrous in a different context.”³ So, to do contextualization properly among Ukrainian refugees in Poland, we needed to consider some key aspects of this new context. One, thousands of Ukrainians per day were arriving in Poland. Two, most of the refugees were women and children. Men 18 to 60 were forbidden to leave the country.⁴ Three, few of the refugees intended to stay long-term in Poland.⁵ Even the ones staying in Poland were just looking for a place to land temporarily until things settled down back home.

Four, the refugees in the beginning were largely from eastern or central Ukraine (especially from Kyiv). In time, as the war has shifted, more and more refugees from southern Ukraine have arrived.⁶ Five, no one knew how long the war would continue. Six, for most of the refugees, this was the first time to live cross-culturally surrounded by a new language and culture. Seven, all the refugees were emotionally traumatized, and, in the beginning, most were in panic and survival mode. Over time, they began to establish a sense of temporary stability.

The People: What are they like?

At first, I was tempted to view the refugees as Ukrainians as a new type due to their new location and level of trauma. However, I quickly realized the tendencies that had served as a baseline for contextualization in Ukraine

³ J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry, *Developing a Strategy for Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 239.

⁴ Afshan Khan, “Inside the Journey of Ukrainian Refugee Children and Families,” Unicef. March 23, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/inside-journey-ukrainian-refugee-children-and-families>.

⁵ “How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?” BBC. July 4, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>

⁶ For information, relating to the intentions of Ukrainian refugees and their geographical origin see: “Regional Intension Survey Result (3rd Round).” UNHCR. June 9, 2023. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/304?sv=54&geo=0>.

were applicable in Poland. As Ukrainians, they needed at least three things for life to be worth living.

One, they needed community. Although impacted by Western individualism, Ukrainians are still a collective-minded people. They draw a sense of self-identity, worth, and security from being a part of a group.⁷ These refugees had lost their community when they fled Ukraine. Now they were alone in strange land. So, to minister to them it was important to provide events where they could gather and fellowship with other Ukrainians. Trauma healing trainings, worship services, picnics, and camps have provided this community for them.

Two, Ukrainians needed music. Music helps them deal with the highs and lows of life.⁸ As soon as the first worship song began at the first worship service in Żory, tears rolled down the faces of all present but by the end of the last song smiles had appeared. Worship services and concerts have provided the means for meeting this need.

Three, Ukrainians need celebration. Holidays are a big part of Ukrainian culture, both secular and religious. When Easter 2022 rolled around, Ukrainians in Poland found themselves in country where this holiday was not celebrated the way in which they were accustomed. Where could they buy the *paska* cake that is so much a part of Ukrainian Easter celebrations? Where could they take their baskets to be blessed? What day should they celebrate Easter? The Poles (Roman Catholics) celebrated it on April 17, but Ukrainian tradition (Orthodox) demanded they celebrate it on April 24. We had to adapt to meet this need by holding a large Easter celebration with Ukrainian food and music on the central square. Christmas, Easter, and other holiday celebrations have become a large part of our contextualization strategy.

⁷ "Country Comparison Tool." [www.hofstede-Insights.com](https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=ukraine). <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=ukraine>.

⁸ For a discussion of the role of music in Ukrainian resistance see: Nichole Faina, "Learn about Ukraine's Resilience and Its History with Russia through These 4 Songs," University of Pittsburgh. March 1, 2022. <https://www.pitt.edu/pittwire/features-articles/ukraine-russia-history-through-music>.

Camps and kids' events have also helped meet this need. After one kids' event, a preteen girl came up to my wife, hugged her, and said, "Thank you for doing this. Every day I must take care of my little sisters and brothers. Today I just got to be a kid for a few hours. This was the first time since I left Ukraine."

The Message: What do they need to hear?

Going into ministry to the Ukrainian refugees, I knew our task was to not tell the refugees what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear. We needed to give "people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."⁹ The refugees wanted to hear the war would be over soon. They longed to hear that Ukraine would win and would become a member of the EU and NATO. Some hoped we would say that God hates all Russians.

What they needed were words of hope. The government and NGOs were meeting their physical needs. They were assisting with food, housing, and medical expenses. At first the Polish government was even providing free intercity rail transportation for Ukrainian refugees. However, they could not offer the hope that would help them establish some temporary normal and move toward recovery.¹⁰ The Psalms of lament became key tools in this process (e.g., Ps. 10). Above all, they needed to know there was a Savior, who invites them to come to him for hope, healing, and salvation (Mat. 11.28-30).

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

¹⁰ For discussion of the unique role of churches and religious organization in refugee recovery see: "The Unique Role of IAFR on the Refugee Highway," IAFR. Accessed August 27, 2023. https://global-uploads.webflow.com/5e753e90e64659ba51ecd6ad/60551956c600b70f2558a9fd_IAFR%27s%20Unique%20Role%20on%20the%20Refugee%20Highway.pdf.

The Form: How do they need to hear the message?

As J.D. Payne and John Mark Terry have noted, “Contextualized communication involves the right person communicating the right message in the right language in the right form in the right place to the right people.”¹¹ That was how we needed to communicate with the refugees. They needed to hear what we had to share in a language they did not have to work at understanding.

Many refugees have been learning Polish, but Russian and Ukrainian were still their heart languages. Speaking Russian is not politically correct in Ukraine today.¹² However, many of the refugees grew up in regions where pre-war Russian was the dominant language, or Ukrainian and Russian were spoken without a significant differentiation. Upon hearing a language that they could easily understand, their hearts relaxed and their ears opened.

The refugees preferred to hear this message from someone who had lived in Ukraine. Many well-meaning American volunteers have come and tried to help. However, the refugees responded better to fellow Ukrainians and to our team of missionaries that lived in Ukraine before the war. Regardless of who shared this message, the refugees wanted to be sure that person really cared about them.

Conclusion

Many things are changing regarding the Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Their numbers have decreased.¹³ The places new refugees are from have changed as fighting has engulfed southern Ukraine. The level of Polish proficiency among many refugees has radically increased as they have stayed in Poland.

¹¹ *Developing a Strategy for Mission*, 138.

¹² Martin Fornusek, “Poll: Less than 10% of Ukrainians Speak Primarily Russian at Home,” Yahoo News. August 23, 2023. <https://news.yahoo.com/poll-less-ten-percent-ukrainians-214057497.html>.

¹³ Adriana Sas, “Ukrainian Refugees in Poland 2022.” Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293564/ukrainian-refugees-in-poland/>.

The financial support from the Polish government has decreased, and the laws regulating it have become more stringent.¹⁴ No one knows what will change in the future. However, I believe the four questions that have guided the contextualization of the ministry of our missionary team and our Ukrainian partners over the past eighteen months are fundamental enough to continue to provide guidance regardless of whatever may come.

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¹⁴ "Poland: Amendments to Ukrainian Refugee Hosting Laws Showcase the Need for Continued Humanitarian Support," IRC. January 27, 2023. <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/poland-amendments-ukrainian-refugee-hosting-laws-showcase-need-continued-humanitarian>.