

A Bright and Shining Light

Images of executed civilians, mass graves and bombed-out hospitals have dominated the news alongside mounting evidence of widespread war crimes since Vladimir Putin launched his genocidal war against Ukraine on Thursday, Feb. 24. War is a devil's banquet of violence and brutality. This war is no exception as Russian soldiers rape, torture and murder their way through Ukraine's cities and villages.

But there is another story coming out of this war, a story of light shining in the midst of grotesque darkness, a story of what God is doing through His people as they extend the mercy and compassion of Christ to the millions of people forced to flee their homes. Believers in every region of Ukraine have risked their lives to rescue civilians from the advancing Russian troops who have not proved up to the challenge of fighting the Ukrainian army but seem adept at torturing and murdering the defenseless. The shining light cast by Ukrainian believers provides the strongest possible evidence to the authenticity and relevance of the gospel in the 21st century.

Supernatural Deliverance

The world has been amazed by the resilience of the Ukrainian people and their army in the face of the Russian onslaught. Though Russian forces outnumber the Ukrainians 10 to 1, with staggering advantages in tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters and airplanes, the Russians achieved almost none of their objectives in the opening weeks of the war. The Ukrainians forced them to withdraw from advanced positions around Kyiv and Kharkiv and retreat to Russia.

Military experts and the news media have struggled to explain the abysmal failure of the world's fifth-largest military against the outmanned and outgunned Ukrainians, most frequently citing breakdowns in coordination, logistics and

equipment as well as the absence of a high-quality corps of noncommissioned officers who provide leadership to small units on the battlefield.

Indeed, all of these factors are part of the picture. But believers report other stories from the battlefield—stories of supernatural deliverance.

During the first days of the invasion, in accounts that read like Old Testament stories, Christians in L'viv reported seeing Russian missiles disappear in mid-air, Russian columns getting lost and Russian troops asking for directions.

Believers across the country mobilized to rescue civilians from advancing Russian troops as soon as the Russians crossed the border. Pastor Gennadiy Mokhnenko, renowned internationally for his work with orphans, lived in the now-destroyed city of Mariupol. He and his team have worked nonstop since the beginning of the war to help over 1,000 people escape the doomed city. "Every child, woman and old man taken out from under Russian bombs is a miracle," Mokhnenko says.

Miracles indeed.

Mokhnenko and his team are the target of artillery fire two or three times every week. The Russians even used drones to seek and destroy a car they use to evacuate the elderly. To date, they have not succeeded.

On another occasion, the Russians opened fire at close range on three buses filled with orphans and children's workers as they exited Mariupol, despite the fact that the word "children" had been painted in large letters on the windows of each bus. The attack left two of the buses in smoking ruins; miraculously, no one died.

Pastor Henry Madava of Kyiv's Victory Church dispatched rescue teams to the front lines to escort people to safety from areas

where they could no longer leave by train. Without government protection or armed escort, they rescued hundreds of people and housed them with members of one of the 200 Victory churches in Ukraine. One of their teams picked up refugees at the train station in Kramatorsk hours before a Russian missile destroyed the building, killing 59 civilians.

Alosha Syrota is a quiet, unassuming man whose demeanor belies his courage. He studied at a Bible college in San Antonio, Texas. Even before leaving for the States, God spoke to him about returning to Ukraine. I met Syrota when he interpreted for me on my first trip to Kyiv in May 1999, days after he came home. In one way or another, he has been with me for 23 years.

I called him just before the war started and asked if he and his family wanted to leave the country. I knew that he, like thousands of other Ukrainians with ties to the West, would be on Russia's hit list if captured. In his soft-spoken way, Syrota declined. He would take his wife, mother and daughter to his wife's home village about 100 miles outside of Kyiv, but he would return to the besieged city. Over the next few weeks, he and his team extracted team members and friends of our ministry and moved them to areas outside the war zone. Every one of them is safe.

Supernatural Provision

As Russian columns converged on Kyiv and Kharkiv and millions of Ukrainians fled their homes, Victory Church in Uzhgorod showed its city that God can still supply the needs of hungry people. Before the invasion, this city in western Ukraine had a population of 100,000. Within days, more than 1 million refugees streamed in, outstripping the city's capacity to feed and house them.

Pastors Andrew and Tatiana Poletaevi responded immediately. Working with city officials and restaurant owners, the church

opened a food kitchen to feed people 24/7 and were soon feeding 20,000 people a day. Two months into the war, the church continued to feed 2,000 people every day.

Church members not only fed the hungry, but many also took refugees into their homes. When they kept coming, the Poletaevs looked for temporary housing. God gave them favor with local business owners who made space available rent-free. One nightclub owner gave Pastor Andrew the keys to his building.

Many refugees arrived in Uzhgorod with nothing but the clothes on their backs, some fleeing their homes just as the Russians entered their towns. Many stepped off trains carrying nothing but their passports, so Victory Church clothed them as well.

Pastor Andrew, certain they were not doing enough for the refugees, sought the Lord. He sensed God speaking the words of Matthew 24:14, "This gospel must be preached." He sent church members to the streets of the city, ministering compassion, praying for people and leading hundreds to Christ. An average of 20 people came to Christ every day. The church also provided counseling and support for trauma sufferers.

Despite the constant demands of serving the unending stream of refugees, the church came together twice a day to pray for the refugees, for peace and that justice would come to the invaders.

What makes this story so powerful is that Victory Church is not a rich megachurch, but a small church with limited means. It has been repeated hundreds of times throughout Ukraine. In the first days of the war, worship spaces across the country became true sanctuaries. Nearly every family took total strangers into their homes for weeks at a time. The International Center for Christian Leadership, the graduate school founded by this writer and the bishops of 10 Pentecostal and charismatic unions, housed and fed over 100

refugees. People were crammed into classrooms, offices, the library, the cafeteria and dormitories.

The stories extend beyond the war zone; some of the most powerful testimonies of divine provision unfolded in Poland as believers ministered to millions of refugees. Poland is a nation of about 38 million people, but Polish evangelicals number less than 60,000. The country has fewer than 600 Protestant churches, most of them small and with limited financial resources.

Despite their low numbers, these believers provided food, clothes, housing and transportation to thousands. No refugees were turned away. "When the war started, we immediately began getting requests from the people in Ukraine who wanted to get to Poland because their houses were being bombed," reports Marek Kaminski, leader of Poland's largest fellowship of Pentecostal churches. "It seemed everyone rushed to the border because people were escaping and because the Polish government allowed anyone to enter if they could show a passport and picture."

As refugees began pouring into Poland, no international ministries or nonprofit organizations had arrived. No government agencies were in place. "We in the churches rushed to the border to help Ukrainians find shelter," Kaminski recalls. "We turned our church sanctuaries into dormitories.

"They came to us weak, dehydrated and hungry," he adds. "They needed immediate help. They needed transportation to get to our churches close to the border where they could find food, shelter, clothing and toiletries."

"We drove in our little cars to the cities and villages on the border and filled them with families, most of them mothers with children," Kaminski says. "Many would come for a brief time and then go somewhere else, either in Poland, Germany or another country. We spent a lot of money on fuel and food. We

did not have mattresses, sheets or washers and dryers.”

Miracles Raining Forth

Kaminski does not look like a hero. He does not stand out in a crowd. In another place and time, this soft-spoken, slightly built man of average height may have been a college professor. His doctoral dissertation examined the history of the Pentecostal movement in Poland. But his appearance belies his passionate faith in God’s ability to provide. When he speaks, he exudes a quiet confidence and gentle determination to care for every person who crosses the border.

“We did not ask what it would cost or call a committee meeting,” he says. “There was no time. We gave what we had.”

That’s when the miracles of provision started. “We had to build showers, kitchens,” Kaminski says. “We didn’t have tools at all, just good hearts. When we started, we did not start with the abundance of resources. We started with the lack of resources, no money. We never turned anyone away. We always had food. Initially, there wasn’t much help from the West. We couldn’t wait. We had to start.”

Because of Putin’s energy policies, the price of gas shot up 53% in a matter of weeks. This would have posed a serious hardship to Poland’s small Pentecostal churches in normal times, but with the massive influx of refugees, the pastors now had to heat churches 24/7.

“We had no money,” Kaminski explains. “But no one said, ‘We have no money.’ Every pastor said, ‘We have to provide the housing.’”

“Of course, the Lord provided,” he adds. “How it happened, I have no clue.”

“The Ukrainians needed to evacuate people from the war zone,” Kaminski adds. “We bought old vans and gave them to Ukrainian

believers who drove them back into the country. Many lives were saved.”

Slowly, the money came—first, from inside Poland; then as God’s people gave out of their need, funds came from other sources, including American churches.

“It is not just the case of believers helping. It is the whole country,” Kaminski notes, adding that some churches received help from local restaurants.

As the tide of war shifted and the Ukrainian army drove the Russians back from Kyiv, “We switched to sending food and medical supplies to Ukraine,” he says.

The churches also changed their approach to helping the refugees in Poland, moving toward long-term help and giving families privacy rather than putting them in large rooms.

The response of believers to the refugees’ plight is the story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, of what happens when God’s people dare to believe Him for the impossible. It is a story as old as the Scriptures, as vivid as the little boy with the loaves and fishes and as contemporary as today’s news.

Supernatural Grace

Stories of supernatural deliverance do not mean that every Russian cruise missile missed its mark or that no believers have been killed. The Russian retreat from Kyiv pulled back the curtain on post-apocalyptic landscapes of bombed-out churches, gangland-style executions, mass graves and bodies strewn in the streets. Believers have been terrorized and murdered in every city and village occupied by the Russians.

Satellite images revealed a mass grave in the yard of the Church of Saint Andrew and Pyervozvannoho All Saints in the village of Bucha, Ukraine. Rescue workers discovered more than

400 bodies at the site.

Bucha was the opening act of Russian brutality and war crimes; the seaside city of Mariupol felt Russia's full fury as artillery and missiles pulverized thousands of apartment buildings, schools and even a maternity hospital. A Russian pilot targeted and destroyed a theater, clearly marked as a sanctuary for children, killing more than 600 people, most of them women and children. Ukrainian officials estimate the death toll in Mariupol exceeded 20,000, though exact figures may never be known. Gennadiy Mokhnenko and his team have been repeatedly delivered from Russian attacks; his adopted daughter, Vika, was killed by tank fire.

Every human being grapples with the mystery of suffering at some point in life, especially when one person is spared and others are not. That struggle is as old as the book of Job, but the mystery of suffering finds its best answer in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. His suffering was redemptive and qualified Him to become our "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 4:14-16, NIV). Through the gruesome and humiliating torture of crucifixion of the man Jesus, humans find forgiveness of sin and the gift of healing. Christ's suffering becomes a model for the suffering of His followers.

Whether in the arenas of the Roman Empire or the jungles of South America, Africa and Asia, the gospel advances on the sacrifices of God's people. It is true in Ukraine today. Vladimir Putin is determined to either destroy the churches of Ukraine or to bring them to heel. It does not matter. The grace believers demonstrate under pressure is causing light to shine in the darkest of places.

Gary Kellner is the founder and former executive director of International Center for Christian Leadership, the first graduate school of leadership studies in the former Soviet Union. He served as the president of Save Ukraine Now, an interdenominational organization supporting the Ukrainian

people through advocacy and by providing humanitarian aid during the Russian incursion in 2014. He has worked in Ukraine since 1999.