

Suffering and Non-Violent Resistance in Ukraine

1 Peter 4:12-16, 5:6-11 by Patty Friesen May 21/23

Slide 1 - 3 Ukrainian women - In our spring series on peace, here are stories of active non-violent ways North Americans are supporting Ukraine. Every day, a group of senior women gather at the Mennonite Family Centre in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, to share some meals, take care of personal hygiene needs, visit, sing, and have a Bible study. "We are here as a family. ... We eat here, we socialize and talk, and we receive support," said Galina Petrovna, age 84 in the middle, a retiree who has been attending the day program at the Mennonite Family Centre for eight years.

"This is mainly elderly and disabled people who need material and emotional help," said Sergey Butyrin, the centre's assistant director. "We try to create an atmosphere like a family so that everyone can feel that they are loved and accepted here ... to remind us of humanity and love." "It is a pity that now a difficult and disturbing time has come, the war has begun. "Life before the war, and now, is hard for us says Lydia Utina in the middle. It was hard for us when there was a COVID epidemic, and people hardly worked, there was little money, but we were supported by the family centre. They helped with groceries. When it was possible to come to the centre, we were fed breakfast and lunch."

Back at the centre, 83-year-old Dina Khvostenko on the right reflects on what it was like to grow up in Ukraine during the Second World War — and how it compares to the current conflict. She, too, is grateful for the island of peace she has found at the centre. "We feel good here, we eat, we pray, we sing, we eat," she said. "Thank you to

the people of your country who help us, who support us, and thanks to the staff of the centre. May God send mercy to them.”

Slide 2 - of Otto and Florence Driedger - The Florence Centre is a unique community development program located in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Families who once kept their children at home, ashamed of their disabilities, now have a place to gather for support. University students who come to the Florence Centre to do their social work practicums find their lives are impacted positively as they interact with the community. Lucy Romanankova, director of the Florence Centre, says the needs in her community are great and she is appreciative of the support they receive. “We are always impressed that people who live in Canada think about Ukraine,” she says. “We are very, very grateful for your support and encouragement.”

Slide 3 - In Zaporizhzhia, Maxym and Anya Oliferovski direct New Hope Center, an organization supporting at-risk youth and families in crisis, in partnership with MCC and Multiply, the North American MB mission organization. Maxym Oliferovski shared in Feb. 28 interviews with MCC and Christian Leader magazine that he and his wife relocated to the city’s outskirts and are staying to help others as long as possible. The couple have been working to help families with children evacuate to lessen the trauma of war. Some people do not have transportation, and roads and trains are packed, so they have coordinated shared vehicles when possible.

“So many people just go to western Ukraine hoping this will end soon and they can come back,” Maxym said. “... As we stay here, we pray that we will be helpful and can provide help and leadership to our church, help to families, help to communities, whatever is needed.” Thanks to the pandemic, their small church learned how to

worship online. He told Christian Leader that although the 20-25 families in the church are now scattered, they have still been able to gather on Zoom for prayer and encouragement from Scripture.

“We have two Mennonite Brethren chaplains in the military, and we’re in touch on a daily basis,” Oliferovski said. “They’re saying that the soldiers are praying; they are accepting Jesus.” Many men have joined territorial defense groups, and the government is arming civilians while others make homemade explosives. “If some people choose to get a machine gun, I wouldn’t condemn them,” he said. “But I will tell them, ‘When you start doing that, you just got into the war. You need to be responsible for that.’ I’ll speak more to that in a bit. (Anabaptist World March 3,2022)

Slide 4 - Sergey Panasovich, pastor of New Hope Mennonite Church in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Twice a week, Panasovich said, he drives four hours to Avdiievka to coordinate peacebuilding and material aid programs supported by MCC. Panasovich’s congregation belongs to the Association of Mennonite Brethren Churches in Ukraine. The association is one of MCC’s partners. In 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and instigated fighting in Donbas, New Hope launched war-relief ministries. Members opened their doors to people who fled the shelling and fighting. Elderly women donated chickens. Delivering food to the war zone, Panasovich saw “strong men cry because there were people who didn’t forget about them,” he said.

Slide 5 – Safely here in Osler, we’ve been trying to do what we can to support Mennonite Central Committee’s work in Ukraine. Our youth planted 3 trees in memory of Mennonite history in Ukraine and prayed for peace in the present conflict. They also made school kits last year at our church picnic.

Slide 6 – As adults we are making cream gravy and rhubarb sauce for the MCC Sale on June 17 at Forest Grove church to help in work in Ukraine and around the world. But I have to keep asking if it is enough. I have to admit my own pacifism is challenged in these times as it is for Anabaptists in Zaporazhzhia who are joining militia groups. French Mennonite pastor Salome Haldeman addressed the Mennonite World Conference in Indonesia that Pastor Nora attended last summer, saying,

Slide 7 – Mennonite World Conference “The war in Ukraine has shaken European Mennonites commitment to nonviolence. We affirmed non-violence when our context was peaceful, but in the face of war we see nonviolent resistance as naïve and unrealistic. After Russian invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, the nearness and reality of war shocked Mennonites in western Europe. Today we are afraid that war may overtake Europe,” said Pastor Haldeman, who graduated from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. “Suddenly our theology and beliefs feel obsolete. A storm took over Europe and the churches’ convictions collapsed.” She continues,

“The way to survive the storm, is to build convictions on the solid rock of Jesus and act on them. Citing the tradition of calls to action at Mennonite World Conference, she urged the global church to work for peace. At the 1984 Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, American writer Ron Sider encouraged starting a nonviolent peace force, which sparked the creation of Community Peacemaker Teams which has been active in non-violent resistance in Palestine, Mexico and Colombia.

Haldeman says, “what does it look like to practice love of the enemy on a collective level in our time and place? It may very well look like nonviolent resistance.

Maybe Mennonites could prepare for war resistance with a nonviolent boot camp. Nations prepare for war with military training. It might be time for us to create a widespread training for church people to learn and practice the basics of civil disobedience like singing, marching, sitting down in front of the enemy. Europeans need the help of the global church if we want to find our footing in the field of practice. Please train us. Practice with us, so we can learn together.

Slide 8 – Ukrainian conscientious objector Vitaly Alekseenko began serving his one year jail term. The 46 year old Christian pacifist refused a military call-up because of his religious convictions but was told that alternative civilian service does not exist. Yuri Sheliashenko, secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement told journalists that Alekseenko planned to read the Gospels and pray for peace and justice while serving his sentence. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year, at least six conscientious objectors have been imprisoned. Pacifism is a real struggle for Ukrainian, Russian and European Christians right now.

1 Peter 4 reinforces because Christians share in Christ's suffering now, they can rejoice later. Put in other words, now suffering and joy combine; but in the end, there will be only joy. This comfort has given Christians comfort through the millennia to stand up to all kinds of oppressing forces and so we pray for our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, Russia and Western Europe as they try to be faithful to what they feel Christ is calling them to do. Let us pray...

You who open doors and dismantle barriers, open our hearts to praise you, that we might live the full truth of who we are, that we might live as neighbours and friends, no longer strangers and enemies; open our hearts to the transforming power of your

love, that we might forgive and reconcile, making peace and learning war no more, that we might be your people, one body in one Spirit to tell your grace to all the world. We pray in the name of the One who walked among us as brother and friend. Amen. #862

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