

# In Touch Special Supplement May 2023

## Aid for Ukraine



Aid for Ukraine has been supporting refugees from Ukraine arriving in Poland since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and now also supports communities in Ukraine itself.

Six volunteers from the Marlow and Maidenhead URC churches' Aid for Ukraine project travelled to Poland at the end of March to see how the aid is rolled out, to see what else could be done to help and to help unload one of the lorries arriving in Poland which had been loaded three days earlier in Maidenhead.

We share some of the experiences and thoughts of those who went so that this can guide us for the future.



Aid for Ukraine

[www.christchurch-marlow.org.uk](http://www.christchurch-marlow.org.uk)

[www.maidenheadurc.org.uk](http://www.maidenheadurc.org.uk)

## Introduction

Thank you.

We heard that quite a bit on our trip. That's a "thank you, to you!" from people in Poland, and in Ukraine. So many people are so thankful for the aid we have collected and sent, and the connection that this has brought about.

But I want to say thank you to you as well. Those of us who were fortunate enough to go on this trip, were greeted most warmly by people – not quite like rock stars, but we were embraced by those we met as long-lost family. That was because we represented 'Aid for Ukraine', and people really appreciated what this has accomplished and is still doing. The welcome we got was for every pot noodle donated, every candle given, every pack of nappies taped to other packs, and every box made with a knitted heart in it or message on it.

Those who went on the trip made sure that it was self-funded, and that we didn't distract from the time and energy of the people we met. They still have their families, jobs, and other responsibilities, all while living with such need around them.

You can see more comments in *In Touch* – the church magazine. But everything in this supplement is here because it sets the scene for what we are doing, and hopefully gives a reflection on our own experiences.

*Rev David Downing*



## A Realisation?

I recall quite soon after we began our collections for Ukraine in February last year, commenting to David that 'when it was all over' it would be nice to be able to go and meet some of the people we had been sending things to.

Sadly, it is far from being over, but recently I did get the opportunity to be part of a visit to Poland, to the towns where our donations were, and are now being sent. In Maidenhead on the Tuesday morning we helped load the truck (the eighth to date), then six of us - David, Valerie, Alison, Anne, Maria and myself - flew out to Warsaw on the Wednesday. We then drove down to Tomaszow Lubelski in south-east Poland - the destination for our truckload.

To be able to see where our donations were going was good. During our visit there were happy times and sad, reflective times, but to meet those involved out in Poland and Ukraine was an amazing experience which will stay with me for ever.

*John Holton*

## Aid for Ukraine Volunteers Visit Poland

At the beginning of the war, there were many thousands of refugees arriving in Poland daily, with very few possessions, with little or no documentation and with only the clothes they were wearing. Aid for Ukraine took on the task of supporting the local authorities and volunteers in Susiec, a small town about 10 miles from the Polish/Ukrainian border in south eastern Poland. The cultural centre in Susiec became the headquarters for coordinating help for the newly arrived refugees. Hundreds of volunteers were mobilised. Staff at the centre, led by the director, Johanna Kowalczyk, worked around the clock, providing aid to the new arrivals in the form of food, clothing, paperwork, bedding and shelter, as well as emotional support for families who had left loved ones behind. The volunteers, many from the police, fire brigade and ambulance teams, also had to

be looked after. At one point, one thousand sandwiches were prepared each day to feed the arriving refugees and the volunteers.

The Aid for Ukraine volunteers were welcomed warmly by Johanna and her team at the community centre and were able to watch a presentation about the community's work at the height of the refugee crisis. Johanna was most grateful for the help and support that had arrived from Marlow and Maidenhead.



The volunteers toured the kitchens and the food preparation areas as well as the offices. Many of the items in the kitchens had been provided by the Meals from Marlow project, organised by Tom Kerridge and his volunteers.

It was good to see in real life what had only been seen in photos

previously, and good to see that the equipment is now being used for community projects. It was both humbling and emotional for the volunteers to be thanked so often and so genuinely for the support and the donations sent.

Aid for Ukraine has been sending lorries with donations to Poland since March 2022. The latest lorry was loaded with donations from Marlow and Maidenhead by volunteers from both churches in Maidenhead on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> March. The



visiting Aid for Ukraine volunteers were delighted to help unload this same lorry in Tomaszów Lubelski on Friday 31<sup>st</sup> March.

Because the stream of refugees arriving in Poland has tapered off, Aid for Ukraine changed its focus in late summer last year from helping Ukrainians arriving in Poland to helping Ukrainians in Ukraine.

Headed up by a very enthusiastic, energetic Polish lady, Ewa Piwko-Witkowska, a group of volunteers drives vans and cars into Ukraine to take much needed supplies to villages, towns and hospitals, quite often putting themselves in danger. Aid for Ukraine works with Ewa's group to provide what is required.

This way, it knows that what is sent is needed and useful. It also knows that the aid is going directly to people in need.



The volunteers from Aid for Ukraine helped unload the truck into a small flat loaned to Ewa by the local council.



From there the donations are sorted, sometimes repacked then loaded into smaller vans and cars to be delivered to various parts of Ukraine. Ewa herself drives into Ukraine every ten or twelve days. Meeting Ewa was inspiring for



the volunteers and helped them be even more determined to keep on sending aid where and when needed.

Visiting the area, the volunteers were impressed by the enormity of the task the Polish people had undertaken to help Ukraine in its hour of need. From council officials to local priests, from emergency services to local businesses, from hospitality workers to shop assistants, everyone gave help when asked, sometimes also without being asked. A lasting memory for the Aid for Ukraine volunteers will be a letter they each received on arrival from the hotel manager in Tomaszów thanking them for “helping our neighbours”.

Aid for Ukraine would like to thank everyone who has donated over the last year.

*Anne O’Hagan*



*Unpacking the 8<sup>th</sup> lorry*

*(the car is not part of the Aid for Ukraine project)*



## Church on Sunday in Poland

On Sunday 2 April, David, Anne, John, Alison, Maria and I drove to Hrebenne, a small town of around 200 inhabitants right on the Polish/Ukraine border, in order to attend the Ukrainian service at St Nicholas Church.



This beautiful wooden church was built as an Orthodox church in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and was acquired by the Catholic Church after World War II. It is now under the administration of the Greek Catholic parish but serves both Roman and Greek Catholics.

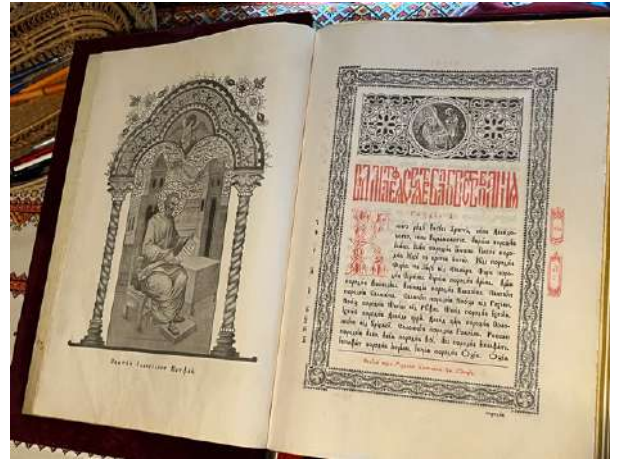
While we were waiting for the Polish service in the church to end, we chatted with the Ukrainian priest who was going to lead the Ukrainian service. Thankfully Jolanta had kindly arranged for a lovely girl called Eliza to interpret for us. The priest spoke to us about what it was like in Hrebenne after the Russians invaded Ukraine and large numbers of fleeing Ukrainians streamed across the border at Hrebenne. He was very much involved in providing support to the arriving refugees and is now helping to provide support to people in Ukraine.

The service was conducted in Ukrainian and although we did not understand what was being said or sung, we were more or less able to follow the service. We took our lead from the rest of the congregation as to when to stand and sit! The singing was led by a few members of the congregation without any musical accompaniment or even hymn books. We were able to join in one of the hymns whose only word was “Allelujah”!

Maria told us afterwards that the priest explained to the congregation that we were from the UK, that we were running a project called Aid for Ukraine and thanked us for the support we had provided - and were continuing to provide - to Ukraine.



John and Alison slipped out towards the end of the service in order to go to Susiec to take part in a Palm Sunday service there. The rest of us had another chat with the Ukrainian priest after the service finished with Eliza interpreting for us again. The priest told us about the church and also showed us a beautiful edition of the gospels and the place where a relic is stored. He then left us in the capable hands of the verger who talked to us about some of the icons in the church and even opened the safe so he could show us some of the church's most treasured items including a silver communion chalice dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and a handwritten copy of the gospels from the same period.



The tour finished with a visit to the bell tower. Anne and I were invited to ring the larger of the two bells as apparently this brings any ladies ringing the bell good luck!

*Valerie Brownridge*

## Palm Sunday in Poland

We knew our trip to Poland would be good but oh my, it exceeded all expectations. When we flew out on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> March the only firm arrangement was the unloading of the truck we had helped load here the previous day.

But arrangements for the other days soon fell into place, aided by Jolanta (THANK YOU!) back here in Maidenhead, and we were given huge welcomes.



The first one of which was a letter which greeted us in our hotel rooms in the town of Tomaszów Lubelski:



In the nearby small town of Susiec, to where our donations were originally being sent last year to support the Ukrainians flooding over the border, we received a heartfelt welcome and thanks. This was shown in several ways including a tour of the Cultural Centre, hub of their volunteering activity, and a visit to local sights and beauty spots – Susiec is a tourist area, packed with visitors from May to August.

But for John and me the highlight was Palm Sunday. We were greeted by Johanna, Director of the Cultural Centre, and sisters Kate and Magda, our lovely translators, who introduced us to the Head of the Commune and to the priest.

The music started and, led by the clergy and the rustic cross carried by the firemen, the hour long procession through the town was underway. More joined in as we passed their homes, each holding a colourful palm frond.



Fourteen times we paused to genuflect and hear a reflection on leading a Christian life. By the end we were able to sing along with the chants! As the

hundreds filed into the church Kate whispered, “we have to sit at the front ... but don’t be scared!”.

During the service, which John and I found moving even though it was in Polish and our first experience of a Catholic Mass, the priest welcomed us and presented us with a little gift as a token of their appreciation.



After the service had finished, the priest was keen to show us the piles of boxes in his house and garden, donations from UNHCR which he himself drives into



Ukraine every week. (Susiec started receiving these UN donations last summer and that meant they could no longer receive anything further from our Aid for Ukraine project. This partly explains why we had to switch to supporting Ewa in Tomaszów Lubelski.)

What a joy to be able to worship with our Christian friends in Poland, whether at Catholic Mass (in Polish) or a few hours earlier at an Orthodox service (in Ukrainian). We were also surprised to hear that Kate, our translator, was a Scout Leader at one of the schools where she teaches English, but I think she was even more surprised when we told her that we too are Scouts! (The day





before in another village we had spoken to three lads in Scout uniform, a surprise once again.) We are in email contact with Kate and may meet up when she and her colleagues bring a party of school children to London in June.

*Alison Holton*

## Ewa

Sometimes you meet God at work. I think we met God at work in Poland. We didn't just see God at work, we met an angel!

As I said right at the start of the project, it is still worth noting that the core of Aid for Ukraine is the work of women, from Jolanta, Natalie and Hayley at the start, to most of the volunteers still helping, and of course Ewa in Poland.

I have had the privilege of chatting with Ewa a few times on Zoom prior to our trip, but being with her was inspiring. Ewa is so humble about the amazing work she is doing, it's no wonder she has at least one award for her humanitarian work.

Ewa coordinates the team for unloading the truck, she gathers drivers to go into Ukraine (some of whom live a long way away), she sorts out who needs what in Ukraine, and she spends most weekends driving into





Ukraine... and she works, and she has a family... and she is doing a degree; and she gave us some of her time. An angel at work.

Ewa has a lot of purpose, and I think that comes from a real sense of doing the right thing, driven by the injustice that she sees. Her experiences are far from normal. Even those of us who have worked with aid for refugees in Calais and other places won't have experienced the air raid warnings, the dire conditions, and the pressures of dealing with people in such tragic circumstances. Please hold her in your prayers.

Being with her gave us all a dose of inspiration, hope, and purpose.

*David*

## A day in Ukraine

While we were in Poland, there was a window of opportunity to get into Ukraine. Two of us took the chance: Maria, whose family is Ukrainian, and me.

Maria was going to get the chance to be with her family while Ewa and myself could spend the day in Lviv. We were thankful to have Ewa as she was able to get us through the customs (at Hrebenne) without too much delay.



The journey through the west of Ukraine showed a lot of flat land, but with many amazing villages and towns each of which seemed to have incredibly beautiful churches.

Our arrival in Lviv revealed a city ready for what might come its way, with big metal X-shaped roadblocks ready to be deployed if necessary, but also a city bustling with life. I think both Maria and

myself were glad that Ewa was driving – especially with some of the road junctions and roundabouts being so busy!

I was given an amazing tour of the city, learning much about its history and seeing many of the churches there. Churches are playing such a central part in



the life of the city. People were praying inside and outside the churches, even at crosses that were outside churches.

A highlight was going to the church of St Peter and St Paul. Here was a church that was still mourning the death of soldiers from earlier conflict in the Donbas region. But this church is a garrison church and its priests take it in turn to minister on the front lines.

While there I was able to spend over an hour with Fr Roman. He spoke good English and shared some of his thoughts

and experiences – often broken by the parishioners handing in bags of donations! Locals were dropping off bags (large and small), anything that they could do to help others in the country who are struggling.

A church receiving donations.... Now there's an idea! In some ways this felt like a sister church.

The donations given to this church are being sent to families near the front lines, and to families of soldiers. We shared a real moment of connection, even delaying the start of lunch-time mass so that we could have our picture taken in the front of church.

While in Ukraine, I was able to record some short videos which will be available to view on our Facebook page and our web site.



Lviv was very much a city getting on with life, but a life that has a cloud hanging over it. Ewa and I had lunch around 3pm. I asked her how often they tested the air raid sirens. She didn't understand my question. I explained that the two sirens that had gone off during our time hadn't caused any alarm, so I assumed that they were practices. No, they weren't – they were real. But everyone just checks their phones to see what the threat is. The threat wasn't for Lviv – a different city was being targeted. Life goes on.

For me, the most powerful part was talking to Father Roman. When I told him about what we were doing, and the prayer vigil that we hold (every Sunday in Marlow at 4pm), his eyes filled with tears. He spoke about how he knew people were helping Ukraine, but to know that people cared for Ukraine was something he hadn't come across. What a powerful moment.

It was a privilege to be there. It was wonderful to meet people there. It was amazing to meet Fr Roman – I will share more news from him when I can! It reminded me that we aren't alone in doing what we can to help those who are caught up in this human travesty.

We are part of a family that believes in better days.

*David*



## How did Aid for Ukraine happen?

If you don't already know – this project started almost immediately Ukraine was invaded. Maidenhead URC already knew Agata, in the Polish school which used our premises. David made contact and within days a group of amazing people had come together. Jolanta, Natalie and Hayley with other parents in schools set in motion fundraising, donations, finding a lorry which could make the journey and contacting friends in Poland who knew what was needed for the stream of refugees leaving Ukraine.

Marlow URC opened up as a second collection centre and the communities started to attract support from many amazing businesses, schools, other churches, local leaders and individuals.

The needs have changed over the year and logistics are always a challenge. But because of the knowledge of the situation on the ground, through Eva and many others, we continue to provide items that are really needed at the right times. It is hard work, but continued support is still needed.



## How you can help:

These are the main practical donations that we need currently, however financial donations also help as they enable the project to buy specific or more expensive items when they are needed.

### Essential

Canned and instant food

Power banks

First aid items

### Also needed

Toiletries, Adult pampers/incontinence items

Cooking oil, sugar, coffee, tea

Rice, pasta, flour, breakfast cereals

### Clothing - Men's clothing\*

Sweatshirts, T-shirts, shorts, tracksuit trousers, boxer shorts, socks

**All of these items should be brand new or in mint condition**

*\* These items will be used to support a hospital specialising in amputations*

**At the moment, we do not need either women's clothing or bedding.**

If you are unsure about what to donate, please ask!

**Christ Church URC**, Marlow (Oxford Road) is open for donations on Fridays from 10am - 12 noon and on Sundays from 4.15 - 5pm

**Maidenhead URC** (West Street) on Saturdays from 10 am – 12 noon.

If you would like to buy things from an Amazon wish list, please email [revmandm@gmail.com](mailto:revmandm@gmail.com)

If you would like to make a financial donation you can scan this QR code or look for Maidenhead URC on [www.justgiving.com](http://www.justgiving.com)

