

Chosen



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More than 10 years ago, Pastor Justin Vetrano took a trip to the Byzantine Empire, touring Lutheran churches and learning about Lutheran history in Transylvania, Istanbul, Bulgaria, and Romania. There he met Neina, a young woman who was the tour guide. Less than a year later, they married. “It’s a real, wonderfully romantic, beautiful story,” he shares.

They returned to Romania often to visit Neina’s family. This past year, the trips became more frequent, but for entirely different reasons. God orchestrated connections in Romania and other parts of Eastern Europe for him and his wife to serve His people living in a war-torn region.

“When it looked like war (the Russian invasion of Ukraine) was imminent, I was watching closely,” Pastor Vetrano shares. “My wife’s grandmother lives 30 miles from a main Ukrainian border crossing.” Pastor is a paramedic and firefighter in New York and has experience working in disaster areas. He knew help would be needed.

“Having my eyes on mission work, I thought about our possibilities,” he says. “We recognized we have a unique opportunity — most can’t just get on a plane and fly to Grandma’s house and drive over to the border. We felt a responsibility that’s very unique.” He and Neina agreed: they were chosen to connect their church, their region, and their country with Neina’s family and homeland. This began the Life for Ukraine project.





There is a time for everything,
and a season for every
activity under the heavens.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 NIV



Less than a week after Ukraine was invaded, Pastor Justin and Neina Vetrano were volunteering at the border on their first humanitarian trip to Romania.



Less than a week after Russia invaded Ukraine, Pastor Vetrano and Neina flew to Bucharest. They ate quickly and drove to the border town of Isaccea, where thousands of Ukrainian refugees were crossing every day.

“We got there after 10 p.m., and we saw an incredible sight,” he recalls. “Women, children, and the elderly were fleeing — walking miles and miles, spending hours and days in long queues trying to leave their country and get to safety.” Crossing the Danube on a ferry, waves of 600–800 refugees came — every two hours — into a town of 2,000 people.

The couple quickly realized most were arriving in Romania with no plan — no contacts, and no place to go. “They didn’t speak the language. They’d been traveling for days. They had a suitcase, and the children had backpacks. It was bitter cold and the middle of the night when we were first there,” Pastor recalls.

The immediate need was transportation away from the border — but where? They needed a place to stay. Buses had taken people from the border for several days, but no one had been paying them. That was unsustainable. What were their resources?

The couple had some cash — donations collected from their friends and congregation before leaving the U.S. Neina’s past vocation as a Romanian tour guide meant she had contacts. “Neina negotiated contracts with bus companies,” Pastor says. “We paid them to run people from the border, and we made contacts with guest houses and hotels.

That was our immediate work. That was all on day one.”

Pastor soon received a call from the Mayor of Isaccea. “He heard about us and was hoping we could pay for all of the buses.” He chuckled, “We’re not that big, but it gave us an opportunity to partner with the Romanian authorities, because they were completely overwhelmed.”

Pastor and Neina spent the next week working 16–18 hour days at the border, welcoming people — part of their Life for Ukraine ministry of hospitality. “We gave them hot tea and a sandwich. We worked with other volunteers to get them organized onto buses,” he added. Language was an overwhelming obstacle. “Ukrainians don’t speak Romanian, Romanians don’t speak Ukrainian, and only some Ukrainians speak English. It was a chaotic scene.”

Pastor Vetrano shared beautiful moments which came during the chaos: “I contacted a Lutheran church in Romania. The pastor’s son, Sergio, was already working hard at the border, and he began working with us. He got calls from Lutheran pastors and others in Ukraine who were sending people across. We became a direct contact for people at the border.”

And he will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:40

Notified of a Lutheran group coming from Ukraine, Pastor searched through the thousands of refugees, asking “Sandwich? Are you Lutheran?” He found the group, and, as he was helping them onto the bus, a text message came from a fellow pastor in Germany. He was looking for Ukrainian Lutherans expected at his congregation. “I was with his Lutherans right then. I

had no idea we were sending them to my dear friend of 25 years, who was going to be taking care of them. It was unbelievable.”

Connections continued: a house in Neina’s hometown, Constanta, the closest large city to the border crossing, was available. A businessman converted his office building into refugee housing. “We asked to bring some people,” Pastor says, “so we drove in our personal cars and a bus to Constanta. We offered him money to help feed the refugees, but he absolutely refused. It was amazing.”

One week after arriving, so much had changed, but it was time for the couple to return to New York. “The press and news outlets (at home) heard our story, so we got lots of news coverage,” he recalls. The spotlight boosted Life for Ukraine and more people donated, allowing the work to continue.

While in New York, the businessman from Constanta called to introduce them to another man who wanted to donate his villa, a large building in the heart of Constanta, to be converted into refugee housing. “We saw the building (through FaceTime); it was amazing, so we said ‘yes,’” Pastor says.

Returning to Romania less than two weeks after the first trip, their focus was on converting the villa into housing for 50 people. Work included adding a kitchen, building bathrooms and showers, and buying and assembling furniture. Some work was contracted; some was done

by Pastor Vetrano and volunteers. “It was a huge project (done) very, very quickly,” he adds. “I don’t know how we did it — we were carried by angels.” After 10 days, it was time to return home. Just before leaving, a woman in Odessa called him. In three days, a bus of 50 children with severe disabilities was arriving. They needed housing. Neina returned home, but he stayed to finish the project. He contacted a deacon in his church and a friend, both of whom are handy in construction, asking for their help. A day later, they arrived in Romania. They spent another week building a commercial-sized kitchen, putting beds together, welcoming the children, and getting them settled.

God chose this place and specific people to care for the refugees. Pastor continues, “We had established our footprint in Constanta, partnering with the two gentlemen who had donated spaces for housing. Sergio was working for us full-time, and my brother-in-law left his job and moved to the city to manage this project.” Another housing center was built. Now there were three locations to accommodate 150 people.

Last summer and fall, Pastor Vetrano spent his time in the U.S. raising money, hours each day on the phone or FaceTime to coordinate with his partners, and traveling back to Romania when he could. He met with a Romanian governor and the U.S. Ambassador’s office in Bucharest, seeking support. Partnerships were forged with the European Union and the Romanian

Government, who supplied funds for refugee necessities. Meeting the daily needs for those living in the centers was full-time work. “Food, clothing, medical doctor visits — everything you need for children and moms and the elderly — we had to provide, because they had none of it.” The team spent \$3,500 a week in food alone — all donations gathered from his New York church’s website.

Finding long-term residency for the refugees was the next challenge. Many traveled to Germany, while others were sent to Spain, France, or England. “I sent more people to my friends at the Lutheran church in Germany. We were getting them into western Europe where there are more services to help them, and it would open beds in our centers so more people could cross the border.”

The next priority was a school. Most students had missed almost five months of instruction. An agreement was finally made with the Romanian Education Department to establish Ukrainian classrooms in Romanian schools.

Moving forward, the Life for Ukraine team is recognizing the need for assistance for displaced persons in Ukraine who either never left their country or who have returned, only to find their homes and neighborhoods destroyed. “We’re still running our centers in Romania. They’ve got them humming on a good schedule, so now our work is extending into Ukraine, where we have developed a partnership with the Lutheran churches,” Pastor says. “We are sending supplies — food, clothing,





medical supplies — into Ukraine, and they are being distributed by the local pastors to the people in need. However, this is an incredibly fluid situation. It changes every day.” The Ukrainian pastors are serving as an extension of Life for Ukraine as they distribute necessary items, providing pastoral care through the Lord’s Supper, Bible study, and prayer.

Counseling services are also needed. “There is a lot of trauma when you witness war. I’ve never experienced anger — real anger, the way in which I saw it in the people we met. They were being invaded, their families were being killed, and their country was being destroyed and taken over. It was not only grief, but an anger I had never witnessed before. It is so difficult — trying to find ways to provide psychological and counseling services for these people — but we don’t speak the same language.”

But you are a
chosen race, a royal
priesthood, a holy
nation, a people for his
own possession, that
you may proclaim the
excellencies of him
who called you out
of darkness into his
marvelous light.

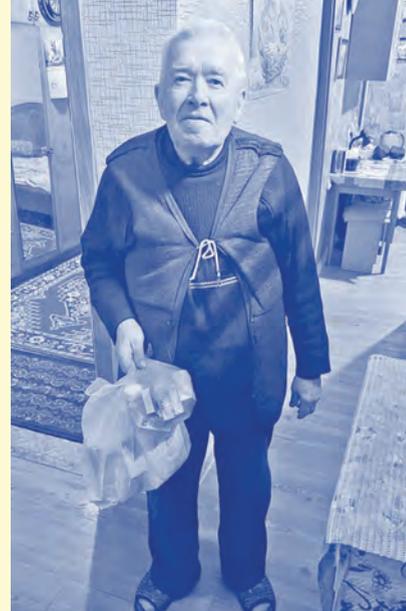
1 Peter 2:9



“When you see thousands of people walking across the border, you realize each person has a story, a family, a life; they have a soul, they have faith. When you meet them eye to eye, humanity becomes very real. These are kids just like my kids and the kids in my church. You recognize the impact of what is happening — 6,000,000 refugees have left their country. That’s 6,000,000 souls and 6,000,000 stories. It’s unimaginable!”

Sustaining care for the Ukrainian people will be necessary well into the future. Rebuilding homes, schools, churches, and communities will eventually come. The system and current plans are in place to continue — as long as donations are received. “Money is the resource that is most needed, because we can buy things in Romania, and our Lutheran pastors in Ukraine can distribute it. We’ve established our own Lutheran supply chain.” Ninety-nine cents of every dollar donated to Life for Ukraine goes right to caring for the refugees in the houses or for supplies into Ukraine. The one cent goes to feeding staff, or buying gas for the vehicles. None of the money is for administrative costs — it is all going to the people on the ground who are working.

The LWML Atlantic District, for which Pastor Vetrano serves as pastoral counselor, raised and donated money to the Life for Ukraine project. The project also received support and donations from other LWML groups and Lutheran churches around the country. “I’m amazed that God has enabled me, a pastor from Long Island, and, through my wife and the support of so many, to have a direct impact on the people who are in such great need. I’m really humbled this is happening.” Q



Update from Pastor Vetrano:

Wide-spread power outages were felt all winter across Ukraine as power stations were bombed, bringing new waves of women and children looking for safety into the refugee centers. Christmas and New Year were celebrated in the centers with joy and hope.

Transports of food, medical supplies, and generators have increased dramatically into Ukraine.

Supplies are delivered to Lutheran pastors in Odessa and Mykolaiv who organize distribution to the people of Ukraine (pictured above).

Rev. Justin Vetrano is the founding/ Senior Pastor of THE LIFE Lutheran Church in Old Westbury, New York. He is very passionate about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ through his work as a church planter and in various missions across the globe. He serves the local community as an interior firefighter, paramedic, and chaplain for the Carle Place Fire Department. Last fall, Justin and Neina welcomed an infant daughter, Ileana, into their family, which includes two more daughters, Sydney and Kassie.

More information about the work in Ukraine can be found at the Life for Ukraine Facebook page, or at thelifeny.org/ukraine.

