

# Reaching Beyond Our Doors

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

Last Sunday, I had the honor to speak to First United Methodist Church of Vandalia congregation to update them on Victoria and Oleg Prokhodov and their three children. Victoria is the niece of Zoryana Mills. This special family moved to the United States a year ago through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' Uniting for Ukraine Program. Our church, along with members of the John Calvin Presbyterian Church in Bridgeton, Missouri, provided funds to help Oleg, Victoria, Marianna (8-years-old), Gleb and Alisa (6-years-old twins) acclimate to their new life here after escaping the ravages of war in Ukraine.



Here is the text of my comments/update:

Thank you, Pastor Curtis, for this time to update our church family regarding Victoria, her husband, Oleg and their three children, who arrived this time last year from the war torn country of Ukraine. It has been my honor to be involved with our church's effort to support these special people—Zoryana's niece and family—as they moved from the Ukraine to the US.

Let me step us all back in time before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. At that time, Oleg was working as an attorney, Victoria was in an upper-middle management position for a logistics company in Ukraine, similar to Fed Ex here in the states. The children were healthy, happy, attending school and playing with friends, always looking forward to Aunt Zoryana and Uncle Charlie's next visit to her homeland.

Life changed, as you might suspect, after the war started. The parents were able to keep working at their good paying jobs, the kiddos went to school but only when it was safe to do so and when it was not safe, they had to retreat to the rather damp basement in their building during bombing raids. Respiratory illnesses were typical results of time sheltering in the basement.

Despite Zoryana's pleas for her family to come to the US, to escape the dangers of war, all were reluctant to leave the only home they knew. But bombing in Kyiv, where they lived, was a regular occurrence. As the number of incidents of fragments from Russian missiles being found in their front yard increased, Victoria and Oleg made the difficult decision. For the sake of their children, they decided to leave Ukraine—to finally make Aunt Zoryana happy—and join her here.

They arrived a year ago and it has been a year of lots of first. There have been a multitude of positives along with a handful of negatives during this first year. At first Gleb, the preschool boy of the family, didn't like school. He cried every morning and wanted to stay

home. Now, he LOVES school, just like his sister Marianna and Alisa. The school has provided remarkable support with interpreters and special services and the children are thriving. They have friends, not just among the one other Ukrainian family in the school, but with just good ole regular midwestern elementary kids.

Victoria and Oleg are both working. Oleg, the one-time attorney and talented photographer and graphic artist, is now driving a school bus. He is happy to be employed. Victoria, a one-time corporate executive, is working for minimum wage detailing cars. Illnesses have plagued all five of the family members as they have adjusted to their new home, building up immunities to the germs we have here that were new to their systems.

Soon after the family's arrival I remember Zoryana relaying to me how happy Victoria is to not be on edge waiting for the next siren to go off signaling a bombing raid. The quiet provided the peace they so desperately wanted and needed.

Zoryana stays in close touch with Victoria, talking almost every evening. Last week, during one of their regular conversations, Zoryana sensed something was wrong. She said to Victoria, "Are you alright?" And Victoria confessed that she is scared. Scared for the future for her family here, scared for her family left behind in Ukraine."

I told Zoryana, we need to do something to relieve at least part of that fear. The support from the St. Louis church was pledged and provided for just one year for rent and utilities...has ended. No doubt, some of Victoria's worries are over financial issues. Imagine how difficult it must be for a family who was getting along just fine financially before the war started to face "making rent." Despite working hard, "ends" are simply not meeting.

So today, I ask you to do two things. First, most importantly, pray for peace. Pray that the war ends and people on both sides stop dying and the once beautiful land of Ukraine is no further decimated by the endless bombing. Secondly, consider giving to this church's Ukrainian Refugee Fund. This fund will be utilized to make up the difference the wages of Victoria and Oleg's jobs don't cover for their ongoing living expenses. My best hope is that we can promise another year of support so that fear can be relieved.

I can only imagine the strides forward this amazing family will make during their second year here. I can only imagine the support this very generous church family and our friends can and will provide. Know that no gift is too large or too small. Simply mark you check or on-line giving with URF for the Ukrainian Refugee Fund.

I want to end with this age-old story, no doubt, some of you have heard before.

A man was walking along a beach that was awash with starfish. He bent down to pick them up and toss them back to the sea...one by one, they were returned to the lifegiving water



from whence they came. As he did so, he was approached by another man coming from a different direction. That man stopped him and asked, “Brother, what are you doing? You can’t possibly help them all!” The first man responded with a smile as he held aloft a starfish and giving it a toss back to the sea said, “Maybe not, but I just helped THIS ONE.”

During this advent, as you gaze upon the stars all around...atop our Christmas trees, in the night sky, above the manger in the Nativity set... I hope you will remember this story...and...if called upon by our Lord, to help this one, that you answer this call by donating to the First United Methodist Church of Vandalia’s Ukrainian Refugee Fund.

This concludes my remarks. Thanks for listening.

After the church service, I was asked if others would be made aware of this fund and the Prokhodovs’ need. My original plan was to only update our church family and request additional support for those to whom our church had made a commitment. Then I realized that others—both individuals and organizations—might appreciate an opportunity to share in this commitment...to actually be able to help someone, five “someones” in this case, who have been impacted by this tragic world event.

So, if you are reading this and would like to contribute, feel free to send a check to the First United Methodist Church of Vandalia Ukrainian Refugee Fund, 127 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Vandalia, IL 62471.

If you are reading this and know of others who might be interested in contributing, feel free to forward this email to them, adding your own thoughts and introducing them to Victoria, Oleg and the children. You are also welcome to print this and share with groups with whom you are associated and you believe would be interested in supporting this effort.

Again, I say...Thank you for listening.

In Christ’s Love,

Ann Schwarm

