

Trenches and flowers

The power of hope in Kharkiv, Ukraine

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CORNELIA KÄSTNER-MEYER/LWF



A flower in a bullet shell was one of the handmade gifts offered to the LWF delegation by the children of the Lutheran Congregation of the Ascension in Kharkiv.

PEOPLE WERE PLANTING FLOWERS next to trenches along the main road leading into Kharkiv, a city in eastern Ukraine, when our Lutheran World Federation (LWF) delegation visited in May 2024. Checkpoints, concrete blocks and “hedgehogs” to stop tanks also lined this road, just 24 miles from the Russian border. The front had advanced to the town of Vovchansk, 21 miles away. Air alerts sounded every other hour. It was a rather ominous view of a city preparing for an invasion, a second time. Yet here were people—city employees—planting flowers.

Despite my uneasiness about visiting a country at war, I knew it was important. I wanted to see the work I’d been writing about—the work of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine (GELCU) and the LWF’s humanitarian country program. Our visit taught me about the power of hope and how serving others can also strengthen you.

MAKING LIFE LIVABLE AGAIN
Thanks to other Lutherans

around the world, including the ELCA, the Ukrainian church and humanitarian workers run a variety of programs: reception centers for refugees, the renovation of apartments damaged by missiles, and 14 “heating points” where people can receive hot meals and charge their devices during power outages. They are also working on plans to build underground schools.

Traces of war could be seen in Kharkiv’s Saltivka quarter, where buildings featured boarded-up windows and housing façades blackened by smoke. Missiles had left large, gaping holes in some buildings, as if a monster had taken a bite out of them.

One resident, Maria Ivanivna, shared that after a missile hit her apartment in 2022, LWF repaired windows, doors and plumbing, and painted the walls, making her place livable again. On top of the duvet on her bed rested heaps of green fabric strips—supplies Maria uses to make camouflage nets for soldiers. Inside her cupboard, several photographs are displayed:



Maria Ivanivna offers a hug during LWF General Secretary Anne Burghardt's May 2024 visit to Kharkiv, Ukraine. The LWF rehabbed Ivanivna's apartment after a missile struck it in 2022. Behind her are pictures of her sons and one grandson, who are fighting in the army, and her grandson.

Near Kharkiv, this reception center for refugees from the frontline is supported by LWF and local partner Spilna Sprava dla Ljudey.

her two sons in uniform, her 21-year-old grandson in uniform, and another grandson who is 10.

"They are with me always," she said, pointing to their pictures. "When I wake up, and when I go to sleep, I pray that they come back alive."

'THIS IS US'

At the underground headquarters of one of our local partner organizations, an elderly couple packed toothpaste and toilet paper inside plastic bags. At a reception center, young men and women served as volunteers, helping the LWF and local groups to care for evacuees from the front line.

Inside one of Kharkiv's "Metro schools" (classrooms located in subway stations),

teachers helped children to learn in relative safety. Since the war began, right after the COVID-19 pandemic, children in the district have done lessons online. Teachers chose to brightly decorate the underground classroom, doing everything in their power to give the children a joyful school day.

"This is us," Katia (last name withheld) said, referring to the flowers planted next to trenches and checkpoints. Katie, a GELCU staff member who served as our translator, said that she was not surprised: "There was a discussion [about] whether we should spend money on flowers at this time. ...Many people said, 'Yes, we want the flowers.'"

Katia lives with her brother and elderly father in the

residential area where LWF works. We got the impression that she stayed because of her family. When asked if she was afraid, she shrugged. "We are not yet in artillery range," she said. "When they start shelling, that's dangerous."

Members of the Lutheran congregation in Kharkiv welcomed our delegation warmly, presenting each of us with a handcrafted gift from the congregation's children. One such gift was an empty bullet shell someone had transformed into a vase. In it were three delicate flowers, carefully constructed of wire and paint to symbolize something church members told us was important: "our hope that no child should die by a bullet anymore." 🌸