

**Emily Loewen:** The biggest difference that I've noticed so far is just all the streetlights are out. And at first, I thought that was to conserve electricity but one of our colleagues here told us that it's actually been that way since February, or since the beginning of the invasion because they turn out the lights so that the cities can't be seen at night.

**Meghan Mast:** *That was Emily Loewen, MCC Canada's marketing and communications manager, during her recent trip to Ukraine. You may recognize her name from the end credits of the podcast because she's the head producer.*

*Today, a bonus episode. We're bringing you Emily's audio diaries and interview clips she gathered from Ukraine.*

*I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.*

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

*Since the beginning of the invasion, Ukraine has been having a lot of blackouts and cuts to power with damage to infrastructure.*

*And cities purposely turn their lights off at night to protect against bombing.*

*Just a quick note, that you'll hear a couple acronyms in this episode and I wanted to explain what they stand for.*

*AMBCU is Association of Mennonite Brethren Churches in Ukraine, and an MCC partner.*

*IDP stands for Internally Displaced People and refers to people who have left their homes but remain within their home country.*

*Back to Emily with more.*

**Emily:** Today we're in Uzhhorod. And there is electricity here today, though it feels a bit eerie when you're when you're out in the streets. So tomorrow, we're planning to have our first day of meetings with partners, we're gonna be meeting with AMBCU. They're going to show us to one of the IDP shelters where MCC has been providing food and other support for people who've been displaced from the further eastern parts of the country. So yeah, I'm looking forward to the meeting and learning more about the work that our local partners have been doing for months now. And that's making a real difference for people. I'll try to check back in tomorrow. Once we've once we've had that meeting.

Hi, this is Emily again. We got back to our hotel this evening, after a day of visiting with one of MCC partners AMBCU. We had just a really full and rich day of hearing about the work that they're doing and getting to see some of it first-hand. They told us how they've been delivering support, like relief kits, canned meat and comforters all across the country. That they are based here in the western part, or they start here but they have been taking things to places close to the frontline as it's been safe to do so. Together with them we visited a shelter nearby and we saw several MCC comforters in use in the shelter. Those bright squares stood out really nicely against the grey blankets and were just a really bright sign there. I got to meet a mother of two young kids. One of them, the youngest was just a year and a half. And she told us how they had to flee their home. They've just really had the clothes on their backs when they left.

**Mother (name not used for security reasons) speaks in Ukrainian—with translation by Ira Dehtiarova:**

The first week of the war we slept in the basement. we have a basement. And in the winter, it's very cold. So, we understood that we will not be able to stay there for a long time and we decided to run.

**Emily:** They're living in a shelter that received support through MCC's partner. And she showed us the comforters that they have and she told us how when the shelter doesn't have electricity it gets really cold but they use the comforters from MCC to wrap their kids up and keep them warm.

**Mother (name not used for security reasons) speaks in Ukrainian—with translation by Ira Dehtiarova:**

Sometimes it's cold here because they turn off electricity and then there is no heat in here. And when it's cold, we like just cuddle ourselves in the blanket with a child and the matter of fact, it's not all about a blanket but about the care that we receive. And it's very nice for us to have this care.

**Emily:** The power cuts seem to be a really common issue for people here. We're hearing about how the people don't know when the power will be on or off. And so they've adjusted to, they know when it comes on, all the things they have to do have cook food, have a warm shower, heat up their house, charge the devices and do laundry and they have to do that all really quickly when the power comes back on because they don't know when it will go off and how long it will be off for. Even today, in the restaurant after we had lunch the power cut just as we were leaving. So yeah it's a real issue for people all across all across the country. We also heard from the partner from Roman who's the director of AMBCU. Yeah, he told us a bit about how the church and he's seen how the church is providing for people in this really difficult time, including himself when they fled. They used to live in Zaporizhzhia and they fled, soon after the fighting started. And he said, even on their journey across the country, they were supported by people from different, different churches giving them a place to stay, and that the church has continued to provide support and community for people. And that, yeah, he's said his faith has been strengthened during this really difficult time that he can see God in the ways that they've been able to help. Yeah, that they see God in this and that he feels like his faith is stronger than it was even before. He also told us that, you know, there's the frontline of the fighting, of the conflict. But their church has their own frontline.

**Roman (with translation by Ira Dehtiarova):** Even if we talk about 400,000 injured people, and if we talk about 10 million IDPs or refugees. And I don't know even the number of people who are psychologically affected, about millions of hungry people. So, this is the front [line] of the church, this is our front [line]. So our area is injured soldiers, injured people, people who ran away. And this front or area of work will last even longer after the war is finished. It's long term. And it's the front or area of rehabilitation.

**Emily:** The church has its own frontline of providing physical support to people like you know, relief kits, hygiene kits, canned meat and the comforters. But they also are providing psychological support to people during this difficult time. And that's, that's the frontline that they're that they're fighting on and trying to support people in that way. And I thought that was a really interesting way to look at the church's role in a time like this. It's been a really full day. So grateful that our partners were willing, willing to host us here and meet with us and show us the work that they've been doing. I know they're so busy. So I was grateful they took the time to talk with us.

The other thing that happened today, was as we were heading back from our visits with a partner, we learned that the air alarms had gone off for the whole country. So that is an alarm system that goes off when there's missiles coming in. So, I think, from what I understand, sometimes the alarms only go off in

one part of the country or another. But sometimes when the missiles are more widespread, they put the alarms on for the whole country. So that included the area that we were in. It's, it's interesting, because it's not, we didn't actually hear it. It's in some places, I think they sound an alarm for just a little while and then they turn it off so that people don't have to continue to listen to it for hours. But there's actually an app that people can check for the area that they're in, what alarms are going or not. So today there was missiles in a bunch of different locations across the country. I know some hit in Zaporizhzhia and there were some people who died there. And then there were others fired at other other places. I hadn't heard what had been damaged yet, if anything. Yeah, so we're on the far western part of the country. That's been really safe. I think it was only not even this city but somewhere about an hour away was hit just once at the very beginning of the conflict and not since then. So, we felt pretty safe in coming here and people here seem to believe that they're very safe. But yeah, it was just interesting to sort of see the way that people have adapted to learning how to check what's going on how they're hearing, what alarms are going off and what needs to happen. And yeah, what's going on in other parts of the country. People tend to stay indoors, a little bit more things closed down. But otherwise, it feels very normal. Whereas, but you know, in other parts of the country, that yeah, things are happening in other parts of the country, which is a weird experience.

Hi, this is Emily again, we just finished another day meeting with one of MCC's partners here in the western part of Ukraine, Blaho Center. They started years ago before the pandemic actually providing education for Roma kids. Roma are an ethnic group in places all over Europe. They face a lot of discrimination and often don't have the same level of education that other people have. And so this partner, started by a Roma woman, has been providing education support to that community for years. And then when the war broke out, they actually turned the school into a shelter, and had people living in the shelter for several months until she was able to rent a larger, it's a former restaurant and a hotel, and turn that into a shelter for both Roma people and Ukrainian people who are from other parts of the country. And they're doing really good work providing a warm space for people and MCC is supporting the meals that people are eating there. They feed, they provide three meals a day. I got to see the cooks shredding beets and slicing cabbage and making just an absolutely massive pot of borscht steaming on the stove, for people to have a warm meal. And, yeah, we got to tour the shelter and see the rooms where families are staying.

But I think the sight that will stick with me today the most is that we went back to visit the education project and the lights and electricity had been cut as they are often throughout the country. And the kids were still there. I think it had been on earlier when they first arrived. But it was off by the time we got there. And yeah, kids were wearing jackets and touques and sitting in the dark or with just the light from the sun outside. Yeah, they were still at their desks and learning. And yeah, they were working on I think letters and doing some math. And yeah, just watching those kids sit in the dark and learn was both really sad, but also just really amazing to see that the life continues on, they're still continuing to, to get that support that they'll need. And that will give them a brighter future. And yeah, I'm just grateful for the sort of caring environment that our partner has provided for these kids.

So we'll have another day visiting some shelters tomorrow with AMBCU again. Yeah, seeing more of their work providing, I think food and shelter for people who've, who've come here from different parts of the country.

Hi, it's Emily again. We had another really good day with an MCC partner today AMBCU. They showed us to two different shelters, about an hour away from Uzhgorod, the city that we're in. Yeah, the first stop was at what used to be a hospital. And now apparently the first floor is sort of a health clinic. And the second floor has people living in the former hospital rooms. So, we went along with them to distribute the food packages that MCC has been supporting there and to meet the people who've been living there. As it has been in a lot of places we've been, they didn't have electricity when we got there which meant it was dark and it was cold. Everyone in there was wearing their jackets and their slippers and housecoats and hats. Even inside just because it was pretty cold. But yeah, they told us stories about having to leave their homes in the eastern part of the country when the fighting started and how they're really happy to be in to shelter and have a place to stay, but that the struggles with heat and electricity are sort of a big issue. And people were really grateful for the support that they were receiving with the food regularly that a lot of people can't find a job in this area, they want to work. But there's too many people who want work and not enough jobs, or not jobs that they're qualified for. And so, people get some assistance from the government for being IDPs, but it's not really enough. So, the food packages that MCC is supporting make a really big difference for people. And yeah, it was really inspiring to hear.

You know, from the outside, when you read news about Ukraine, it feels like you'd think people would feel really discouraged and hopeless. At least that's what I assumed. But so many people are mostly reflecting on the many ways that other people have helped them, that communities have supported them. And they're feeling really positive about things. And that's been really surprising for me to hear, but it was really inspiring to see their approach and how they're feeling.

And one of the partners, Roman the director of AMBCU, was saying that the volunteering also is really helping people get through, that the community is really coming together. And volunteers are helping pack and deliver food, these food packages. And that's really important work. But it also helps them feel like they're part of doing something bigger during a situation like this, and that's really helping people. It helps the volunteers and it helps the organization as a whole.

Something that I, the conversation we had this morning that I think will stick with me the most was AMBCU was started doing some trauma support. One of the volunteers shared with us about the work she's doing with kids. She's a massage therapist, but has also been doing horse therapy. They found some horses in the community where they're living, and they're doing equine therapy with kids. And she was saying how they started noticing the kids were really withdrawn and affected by having to flee their homes during violent conflict. And so, they've been trying to use massage therapy and the equine therapy and other supports for kids to help them process some of what they've been through in that she was noticing a real difference in how kids were opening up more and telling them about their experiences. And yeah, she told us a story about a young kid who when they fled their home, they had to run out I think really quickly. And they were living in like a grape field for a while and they were at least tried sheltering out there instead of being at their home to try and stay safe or living in sort of dugouts for a little while.

**Massage therapist (name not used for security reasons) speaks in Ukrainian—with translation by Ira Dehtiarova:** In the first days these guys were closed, they didn't have a desire to communicate. They were sad. And when our team went to work with them, they started sincerely sharing their stories and these stories they shared with us on the eighth or ninth lesson that we've had with them. They started to tell what, what they would like to do, what kind of activities they would like to be involved in. They

started to be more active physically, they started to run to each other or to run to help each other. My favourite question when I get acquainted with children is, what are your dreams? All of them respond for the war to be finished.

**Emily:** *(Getting emotional)* As a mother of a kid who's almost four, it's really hard to hear and to think about and to see the kids who've been through so much trauma and to just think about their childhoods, so interrupted by something so, so dramatic, and that that's going to stick with them for so long. It's really hard to think about, and it was hard to hear about. So, I'm just really thankful that partners are providing the food, which is really important and obviously essential and needed, but that they're also trying to care for people beyond that, and help them process the trauma. And yeah, do what they can to help people get through the difficult time in a sort of more emotional way and in the physical way.

We have one more day of partner visits tomorrow. I'm looking forward to meeting a partner called Fire of Prometey. I have not met them before. So, looking forward to seeing more about their work tomorrow.

Hi, it's me again, it was our last day of visiting with partners here in Ukraine. And today, we spent some time with Fire of Prometey. They're a partner that MCC has actually worked with before the war they started in the eastern part of the country, kind of close to the frontlines of the conflict that started in 2014. And they've been doing support for children, sort of mental health and peacebuilding work sort of peacebuilding along those along the front lines, there with people who are living along there and, and just mental health for kids who were sort of living in a difficult situation. And then when the conflict broke out again earlier this year, the people who ran it, the couple, they had to flee with their young child, their young daughter, and they came here to the western part of Ukraine. And they did a lot of work trying to help people from their church or who they knew or from the community back home to come out here. And since they've been living here, they've started up again, a support program for kids. They meet a couple times a week in a church in a small village. And yeah, kids who are IDPs or kids who are sort of maybe lower income or from families in need in this area, and kids from the church. It's sort of a mix of those three groups and they meet a few times a week and they play games they have they sing songs, they've had a psychologist come in and meet with parents as well. They tried to work with the families and provide more psychological support for people who are who have had to flee their home or are living in a difficult situation. And it was really neat to just be there and see how this couple, they just ... the kids loved them. The kids we're so excited to be there, it seemed like they were all having really a lot of fun and they were so engaged.

But of course, as things have been going here, midway through, through the evening, the power went out and the room suddenly went black. And it wasn't long, they set up a generator, outside to turn on the lights. But I don't know, it felt like a really interesting moment when they had while they were waiting for the generator to come back on, Masha, she turned on some music. And the kids all pulled out their phones or flashlights, lots of them were carrying flashlights, and they just they sang along with the music and seemed to be still having a really good time together. And it's representative of how things seem to be in Ukraine right now the power comes and goes, people don't really know, know when it will come on, or when it won't, when it will be off. And it can feel like a dark time, both literally and sort of more figuratively, it's a dark time for the country. But they were so, they adapted and they were still having some bright moments within that. And that feels pretty representative of how this trip

has been, that lots of people are in a really difficult situation right now. But they are finding bright moments within that.

So, today was our last day in Ukraine. And tomorrow, we're going to drive back across the border to Slovakia. We don't really know how long it will take. Getting across here only took an hour. We're hoping it will be you know, not too long. But there's a couple different border crossings in this area that we can try if there's really long lines at one or the other. So, yeah it's been a really rich week. And I'm so glad I had the opportunity to come. And I'm really grateful that we got a chance to go and to see the work that that we're supporting in this western part of the country.

So many of the people had said to us, thank you. Thank you for the support. Thank you for not forgetting us during this time. And yeah, I think there's no way that I can forget them after coming here. What we heard over and over again in Ukraine is that it means a lot for them to know that people are thinking about them, remembering them and praying for them. So, I hope we can all continue to do that. I'll be thinking about Ukraine and the people I met for a long time. And we hope that the war will end soon.

*SINGING OF YOUTH FROM FIRE OF PROMETEY*

**Meghan:** *That singing was from youth at Fire of Prometey, an MCC partner in Ukraine.*

*The audio diaries were recorded by Emily Loewen, MCC Canada's marketing and communications manager, and the head producer of this podcast, during her recent trip to Ukraine. Thank you so much to Ira Dehtiarova who you heard providing translation.*

*That's it for this episode.*

*Next month we'll bring you the story of a program in Zimbabwe working towards gender equity by teaching men to cook.*

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*This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.*

*This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.*

*A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.*

*Thanks and take good care.*