

Session 1

Here we are



Bible verse: Psalm 121:1-2

I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Some people call this the soldier's psalm and think that King David wrote it while camped and waiting to go into battle. Others call it the traveller's psalm (it mentions nothing about battles) and think it was written when David was travelling through a mountainous area. It is quite a suitable psalm to start our thinking about Transcarpathia, a mountainous region of Ukraine. Discuss why mountains might have made David think about God. How might he have been hoping for God's help?

Transcarpathia, or Zakarpattia as it's known in Ukrainian, is an eastern region of Ukraine, covers 13,000 sq km and lies south of the Carpathian Mountains. It borders Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Romania. Mountains cover about 80% of the land, with the rest of the area being meadowland. I wonder if you can find Transcarpathia on a world map? Three large rivers flow through. They are Tysa (<https://bit.ly/4bNdHMK>), Borzhava (<https://bit.ly/4bQ7SOB>), and the Tereblia (<https://bit.ly/4huBQIK>), and there are several beautiful lakes and waterfalls. Dotted around the region are pockets of communities. The last recorded population figure was 1.2 million. Since the war began in February 2022 the numbers will have increased, with many displaced people residing there.

Twenty per cent of the religious community of Zakarpattia identify as Ruthenian Greek Catholic, 7% are Roman Catholic while 70% belong to the Eastern Orthodox church. One per cent are Protestants (<https://bit.ly/4c5QTHX>), including members of the Reformed Church of Transcarpathia. Only 1% of the population does not follow any religion and 1% are undecided. You can see that the Christian religion is very strong in this area.

Activity: Transcarpathia has many traditional crafts, including embroidery, woodcarving and pottery.

Why not have a go at recreating your own Transcarpathian pottery. Mould some salt dough or air-dry clay into a plate or bowl shape. Use a lolly stick or cocktail stick to create some patterns on to it. Many people use the sunflower design as a basis for decorating household



items. Another famous symbol in Ukraine is a multi-pointed Christmas star called a zirka. Could you recreate one of these patterns? Once dry, your plate or bowl could be painted or varnished.

The Transcarpathian flag and the coat of arms combine the colours of the Ukraine flag with a red bear standing up on two legs. It is believed to represent the mountains. Yellow and blue has been part of the flags of Ukraine for many years so we cannot be sure why those colours were chosen, but people today often say they represent a blue sky over golden fields full of crops.



Game: With a paper plate resting on your head and a pencil in the other hand have a go at drawing the coat of arms of the Transcarpathia flag onto the plate. The aim is to do this as accurately as possible without looking. You could do it by looking at the coat of arms while you draw it or, to make it a little harder, you could get someone to describe the coat of arms to you while you draw it.

The Transcarpathian region has, at various times in its history, belonged to different countries before now being part of Ukraine. It has been part of Hungary, part of the Czechoslovak republics, part of Russia, and part of Transylvania (in modern day Romania). The population is a mix of nationalities and ethnicities, with over thirty represented in this relatively small area. As a result, many different languages are spoken by its people. Ukraine itself became independent from Russia in 1991 and Transcarpathia became part of independent Ukraine, although many people from the region voted for the region to be autonomous (i.e. for it to be self-governing).

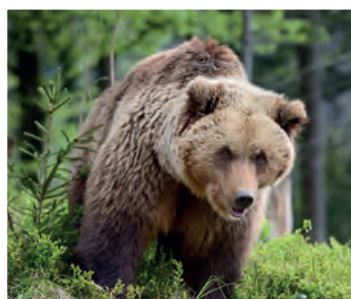


Discussion: Hospitality is deeply ingrained in the culture of Transcarpathia, with people known for their friendliness and willingness to share their culture and traditions with visitors.

Take some time to reflect on how we, you, welcome others. What does it mean to be welcomed? How would you like to be welcomed? How does God welcome us? What could we do as a country or as individuals to help others new to our country feel welcome? What might need to be considered when welcoming them? Do you think people view the UK as a hospitable country or not?

Action Point: Who do you know who is of a different nationality or ethnicity to you? Chat with them about your respective backgrounds and get to know each other a little better. Perhaps you could each prepare something to eat that represents your nationality or ethnicity and share it with the other.

You have seen the image of the bear on the Transcarpathian coat of arms. The brown (not red!) bear is native to the mountains of Transcarpathia. Although brown bears are not an endangered species as such, numbers are decreasing rapidly. It is seen as endangered in Ukraine and is a protected animal, which means, among other things, that it cannot be legally hunted except in specific circumstances. Hunting still affects the bear population, as does climate change (affecting their food supply), deforestation and human encroachment (affecting the available habitat). Wolves are another creature found in the Carpathian mountains in this region. They are an endangered species, although important to the eco-system. Now, of course, the war has brought added dangers to the wildlife of Transcarpathia and Ukraine in general.



Research: Look at this page <https://www.inaturalist.org/places/transcarpathia> to find some of the plants, animals, birds and insects of Transcarpathia. Some are common to the UK too, but some are more unusual.

The climate in Transcarpathia is temperate, similar to that of the UK, which means it gets neither too hot nor

too cold and does not tend to suffer from extreme weathers. The region is predominantly rural and undeveloped, being traditionally one of the poorest parts of Ukraine, and even the cities are small by comparison with many countries and regions. The main city in the region is called Uzhhorod and the other 'big' city is Mukachevo, each with a population of about 100,000 people. Compare that to London's population, which in 2024 was 7,556,900, Edinburgh at 464,990 or Cardiff at 447,287. There are five more cities in Transcarpathia, which are each home to between 10,000 and 30,000 people.

The Russo-Ukrainian war is the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War. It has been going on for years, but the most significant event was the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Eastern Ukraine has suffered most – Transcarpathia has the advantage of being protected by the surrounding mountains, which all but cut it off from the rest of the country and make access by military vehicles and planes extremely difficult (though not impossible). As a result, many Ukrainians who did not want to leave their country as refugees relocated to Transcarpathia as internally displaced persons. Transcarpathia may witness little in the way of fighting but it is affected indirectly by a sudden influx of people to the area, by power cuts and internet outages, by fuel shortages and inflation, and by the priorities of the Ukrainian government being directed towards the war effort rather than the day to day life and needs of the population. At the same time, many people have left the area as refugees or to join the army.

The Reformed Church is the oldest Protestant church in Transcarpathia and is connected to the Reformed Church in Hungary. The United Reformed Church in the UK is supporting the Ukrainian work with displaced people through a fundraising and awareness campaign. You can learn more by watching this video by the Revd Kevin Snyman, a Commitment for Life representative, who visited Hungary and Transcarpathia in 2024. to see what churches are doing and how we can best support them: <https://bit.ly/3ERj3u4>



Prayer: Using blue and yellow Post-it notes or pieces of sugar paper, write down or draw images to represent the things that this session has prompted you to talk to God about, things you would like to thank God for, or ways in which you would ask God to help and strengthen people in certain situations. Use your written prayers to form the blue and yellow stripes of the coat of arms. Draw an outline of a bear to go on the other half of the coat of arms and on it write or draw the things that God might be asking you to do in response.

