

Session 3

Being a refugee or internally displaced young person

While living in a war zone is dangerous and challenging, leaving your home to seek safety in another part of the country or another country altogether brings its own challenges for people of all ages. What might it be like for the young people of Ukraine to be refugees in another country, or internally displaced people moving to another part of the same country such as to the relative safety of Transcarpathia?

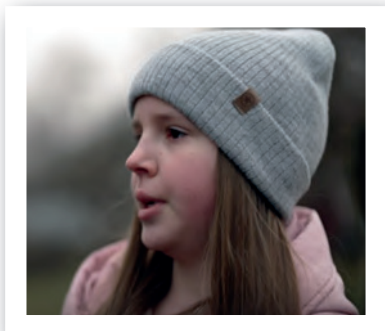
There have been almost seven million refugees (one in six of the pre-war population) since the invasion in 2022, and 3.7 million internally displaced people as of February 2025, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees statistics.

Discussion: Before you read any further, think about what challenges being a refugee or internally displaced young person might bring. Would the challenges be the same or different for each?

Sudden change:

Often the decision to leave the family home and seek safety elsewhere is made suddenly, with little time for preparation. It might even be because the town or village is being bombed or soldiers are entering the town and it is no longer safe to remain there. No time to say goodbye to friends, no time to pack more than a few things, as much as you can carry. Maybe even having to leave pets behind to fend for themselves. Viola, 13, describes the moment bombing started: "Smoke filled the kitchen where mama was standing; she was trying to put out the flames. She told us to leave. I grabbed my sister and we ran. We didn't even have time to look back at our house and we didn't know where we were going. Eventually someone helped us to evacuate." <https://bbc.in/428qu7N>

For children it also means leaving most of their toys behind – just grabbing maybe the one toy that most reminds them of home and brings them comfort. Did you have a special toy growing up? Does it still mean anything to you? <https://bit.ly/41PVUQ9>



Discussion: There is a radio programme called *Desert Island Discs* where people say what music and books they would want to have with them if they were stranded on a desert island. Instead of music and books (unless they are what you choose), and assuming you'll have food and drink available, what three items that you possess would you want to have with you on a desert island and why? And what about clothing, if you could only have the clothes you are wearing and one change of clothes?

Separation from loved ones: A major impact of leaving your home during wartime is that families are not always able to stay together, especially the men of the family, who usually stay behind as soldiers to defend their country. Elderly family members, too, may be unable to face the difficulties of moving away and need to stay behind. Not only do people have to deal with the pain of separation, which is hard enough, but also with worrying about whether their loved ones are safe. The Red Cross and other charities help separated families keep in touch by providing them with free phones and phone calls if possible.

Action Point: Do you have someone you haven't been in touch with recently – a family member or a friend? This would be a good time to send them a quick message to say hello.

Alexander describes what it's like to be separated from his father: "My father was not able to come home until nine months into the war. He told me that I had to be as strong as him." See how this separation from families affects young and older people <https://bit.ly/41FsOmk>. Not long after Alexander's father visited the family, he was killed by a landmine.

A new but temporary home: As soon as someone starts the journey away from their home, knowing that it may no longer be there when they return, they often don't know where they will next find a place to live. They may be homeless or living in a camp. They may find a welcome offered by places such as the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia, but this will not necessarily be a home of their own. Often a family will find themselves housed in one room, or sharing a dormitory with others, and facilities for laundry



and cooking and personal hygiene may be shared with many others. As you are probably aware, some families in other countries opened their homes for refugees to come and live with them. While this is a really generous offer and in many cases was successful, it was not ideal as a long-term solution.

Education: Obviously, being a refugee or internally displaced young person will disrupt someone's access to education. Changing schools at the best of times is challenging and for many children and young people their school is almost a second home as they spend so much of their time with their friends there. At best it will mean settling into a new school, and some find themselves with no access to education at all. This may be due to lack of school places being available or may be because they are needed at home to help the family or care for younger children. The curriculum may be different and the language the lessons are taught in may be different too, all making readjustment more difficult. The more fortunate young people, however, may find that their new schooling is better suited to them than their previous school and gives them opportunities they might not otherwise have got.



Activity: One issue that a refugee or internally displaced young person might experience is having to learn a new language simply by being dropped into it. Watch this episode of *Brave Bunnies*, a children's programme from Ukraine, and see if you can work out what the storyline is. Can you pick up any words?

<https://bit.ly/4iKh2ho>

Bible Link: Leviticus 25:35

<https://bit.ly/4t0YWtz>

Prayer: This Bible passage is exemplified in the actions of members of the Reformed Church of Transcarpathia who care for the incoming eastern Ukrainian people as they do for their own. Create a circle of paper people by folding a strip of paper into a concertina shape and cutting out one person with hands touching each side of the paper. Join the hand of the last person in the strip to the hand of the first with tape. Then make some paper people who are not attached. Write on these paper people the needs that displaced people or refugees might be experiencing. Ask God to help these people find a welcome in their new homes, then break the circle and tape the paper people into the gaps so that they become part of the same circle.

Mental Health: Just as those who stay in their homes during war time often experience trauma affecting their mental health, so those who have taken the decision to leave their homes in search of a safe place will also have to deal with the impact this may have on their mental health. This is more than just home-sickness. It may involve culture shock, isolation, fear, worry for the wellbeing of others, uncertainty, and more. Fortunately, the Church and other groups reach out to support those who are struggling to overcome the trauma of violence and fear, and provide counselling as well as opportunities to relax and play as a respite from thinking about war.

Activity: Create a board game based on the travel from a home in eastern Ukraine to a place of safety in Transcarpathia. Think about what drawbacks might hinder progress and what support might make the process easier and build these into your game. How you structure the game is up to you.

Recipe: A taste of home – Olivier Potato Salad

This is a staple dish eaten at a Ukrainian New Year celebration. It may not be nice to celebrate New Year in a new place which is not your first choice of place to be, but it is nice



to have something which is familiar. This potato salad is served cold. It consists of boiled and diced eggs and potatoes. Meat (usually a boiled sausage similar to a frankfurter, but it could be any meat) is cooked and chopped and mixed in with the egg and potato cubes. Finally, cubes of pickles are added (gherkins, for example). Everything is then mixed with a good helping of mayonnaise and stored in the fridge until it is time to eat it. It is a simple but tasty dish.

