

# Ministry in Ukraine

By Rev. David Breidenbach

Wisdom From the Fields, April 2024

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## Invasion!

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“Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;  
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”  
— Psalm 82:3-4 *ESV*

“David, do not worry. We do not believe in big war.” How I wish Aleksandr’s words were true! 10 days later, the air raid sirens started blaring and the sound of missiles ripped through the pre-dawn sky, followed by explosions and the resulting concussion of air assaulting their eardrums, shaking the Gross family violently out of their beds.

SON ministry partner, Pastor Aleksandr Gross and his family were bewildered, terrified, and for a short while, in denial that the unthinkable had actually happened... a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine... in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!



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## Beginning of SON’s Work in Ukraine

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Aleksandr and I have been friends a long time, stretching back to 2007, where we first met in L’viv, Ukraine. My wife, Angela, and I were part of a team sent on an exploratory mission to see if a meaningful partnership could be formed between DELKU (German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ukraine) and our mission organization, Spiritual Orphans Network - SON (known as East European Missions Network (EEMN), at the time).

It would be two more years before my wife, two daughters, and I would have the chance to meet Aleksandr’s family: his wife, Alyona, and two young daughters, Anna-Mariia and Marta. They are a remarkable ministry family, with the gifts of hospitality and compassion, serving a 4-point parish in the southern Odesa region of Ukraine, near the Black Sea.



Alexandr Gross family

In 2009, our organization began sending short-term mission teams, co-hosting Summer English Bible Camps, with the Gross family and their many coworkers. The camps served, and engaged in the Gospel, hundreds of village children and were hosted at local schools. It solidified a long-standing partnership that flourished into many years of connecting spiritual orphans to the global family in Christ.

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## COVID Pandemic Brings Ministry Changes

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In 2020, COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill. While many congregations in the Western world entered a new era of live-streaming worship and virtual Bible studies, the reality of inadequate digital infrastructure in Ukraine necessitated a more personal ministry model during the pandemic. Ukrainian pastors became travelling outdoor evangelists and couriers of much needed meals, supplies, groceries, and medicines. They were often the only connection to the outside world for many elderly and shut-ins, and those otherwise isolated from the advent of technology.

Little could the world have known how Covid ministry was preparing Ukrainian pastors for responding to what the people of Ukraine were about to face: being thrust into the most horrific and unfathomable reality... full-scale war with Russia.

In response to the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, the Ukrainian government imposed martial law, plus restrictions on men younger than age 60 from leaving the country, as all were subject to conscription in defending Ukraine. This meant most married pastors faced driving their wives and children to safety at the western border crossings and saying, "Goodbye." Suddenly, pastors all over Ukraine were alone and facing the uncertainty of what lay ahead. By God's grace, even to this day, pastors in Ukraine have been able to continue serving in their calls, though in ways not even the Covid pandemic could have prepared them.



Pastor Oleg saying goodbye to his child

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## SON Starts Ukraine Relief Fund

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Within 24 hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, SON was asked to start a Ukraine Relief Fund. The response was both inspiring and humbling, with over \$600,000 contributed within the first six weeks, and has grown over \$1,000,000 today. That immediate and generous response from North American congregations and individuals has allowed us to respond quickly to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and abroad.

It seems that we were being prepared, all along, for "such a time as this." Distributions from the SON Ukraine Relief Fund first went directly to Ukraine to purchase petrol for convoys (many of them arranged and driven by Ukrainian Lutheran pastors) for transport of women and children, the elderly and disabled, and international students to safer borders.

Relief dollars continue to be used to purchase food, medicine, and other necessary supplies for delivery to shut-ins and those otherwise unable to leave the country. By the fourth week of the war, donations received through the SON Ukraine Relief Fund enabled the evacuation over 2,000 people and fed thousands more.

In cases where refugees had plans to move further into Europe, help was offered to work out the details of travel, including a small stipend to help with costs. Similar aid is still being extended to Ukrainian refugees through SON ministry partners in Austria, Czechia, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Moldova and Poland.



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## Relief Efforts Continue

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Two years later, with no end in sight to this horrific war, we continue to give financial aid and connect people who can render aid. Dozens of generators and heaters, and several transport vans were purchased in the first year of the war. Later, a tractor for planting crops, several industrial generators to power refugee centers and an orphanage were purchased. At this writing, SON is partnering to bring six Ukrainian students to the U.S. for study in high school and university.

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## Long-Term Solutions

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What does the future hold? Only God knows, but we will continue to work to meet the immediate needs of those displaced and uprooted by the war in Ukraine and are prepared to respond as longer-term solutions reveal themselves.

At the same time, we are training seven different SON teams to serve alongside our overseas ministry partners this summer, in Latvia, [Albania](#), and [Slovakia](#), where we'll host Bible camps for children and retreats for teens. These will almost certainly include relocated Ukrainian students who are adapting to their new lives and new cultures of their global neighbors. No matter the mode or method of ministry, SON is in mission to Connect Spiritual Orphans to the Global Family of Christ. To God be the glory! Amen.

**For more information, visit the [SON website](#), [email us](#), or call (505) 994-3278.**



### **Breidenbach, David**

Spiritual Orphans' story speaks deeply to Pastor David Breidenbach. Raised in an agnostic household, David heard the Gospel for the first time during a Good Friday service in 1992. Touched by this experience, he quit his broadcasting career to become a Lutheran pastor. He has been Executive Director of SON since 2015.

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### **Links:**

Ukraine: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine>

L'viv: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lviv>

DELKU: <https://nelcu.org.ua/en/>

SON: <https://sonetwork.org/>

Odessa region: <https://ukrainetrek.com/odessa-oblast>

Black Sea: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea>

English Bible Camps: <https://sonetwork.org/?s=English+Bible+camps>

Ukraine Relief Fund: <https://sonetwork.org/2022/05/21/a-word-about-son-ukraine-fund/>

Austria: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria>

Czechia: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Czech-Republic>

Latvia: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>

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