

Sister Care brings tools for healing the residue of wars

By Rhoda Keener and Carolyn Heggen

Two Sister Care leadership training seminars were held in eastern Ukraine, May 16-18 in Dnipro, and May 25-27 in Zaporizhzhia, cities located just north of Russian-annexed Crimea and 135 miles west of the current conflict on the border between Ukraine and Russia. Most of the participants were part of the Russian Baptist church or leaders of various social service agencies. Seminars were led by Carolyn Heggen, psychotherapist specializing in trauma healing, and Rhoda Keener, Sister Care International Director for Mennonite Women USA (MW USA).

Many of the 86 attendees talked about the toll of past wars – World Wars I and II as well as various regional conflicts in the 1990's when the Soviet Union broke up when Ukraine gained independence from Russia, and the 2014 Russian invasion that was met with intense fighting. They shared the many ways the churches are responding to the needs of persons living in the current war zone, often sending food or medical supplies, and developing church ministries for wounded soldiers and their widows and children. Keener said, "The reality of living with war for so many years was a constant presence as we taught and learned to know these women."



Valentina Syzonenko (right) with participant

When women were asked about the problems or needs of women in Ukraine, both groups named war as one of their challenges. One woman shared: "I was a refugee and for six months I could not talk."

Heggen said, "The response to us and our teaching was extremely warm and enthusiastic. Numerous women said they had never before had the stories of the Bible connected to their own life stories. Another said they have not had training in 'practical theology' and appreciated gaining tools based on Biblical principles for their personal healing and to help others heal."

Mary Raber from Mennonite Mission Network connected MW USA to Luda Zolotaryova who planned the events. Raber, who has taught at Odessa Theological Seminary since 2009, said there are very few cultural Mennonites in Ukraine because some were internally exiled to Siberia or Central Asia and others immigrated, especially to Paraguay, Canada, or Germany at various times during the twentieth century. Many Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union came to identify themselves as Baptists.



The local coordinator of the Sister Care workshop in Dnipro, Valentina Syzonenko, and her pastor husband, Sergii, showed Keener and Heggen some of the nearby Mennonite homes and schools from the 1800's, now being lived in by others. One of the Mennonite schools had been built for children with physical and cognitive disabilities. The Stalinists came to the school, marched the children into a field and shot them.



In the old Mennonite village of Khortitsa, there is a moving memorial in honor of the many Mennonites who were killed there or who “disappeared”. The words on the memorial are in Russian, Ukrainian, German and English: *To Mennonite victims of Tribulation, Stalinist Terror, and Religious Oppression*. Heggen says, “We both had eyes filled with tears, not just for our Mennonite ancestors, but for all victims of violence, genocide and trauma around the world.”

Rhoda Keener (left) and Carolyn Heggen stand beside the memorial for disappeared Mennonites in Ukraine.

Ukraine is the 18th country where Sister Care leadership training has been taught; the Sister Care manual is available in 15 languages with Russian and Ukrainian translations provided for these seminars. The seminars were funded by United Service Foundation and gifts from individual donors.