

Where Worlds Meet
Special Edition

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Central Europe
Refugee Update



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A Greater Need

Nazarene volunteers serve refugees in Greece, Serbia, and Croatia

Photo courtesy: Jon Morton

By Teanna Sunberg
Central Europe Communications

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<http://www.eurasiaregion.org/resources/>

The controversial EU-Turkey Deal of March 2016 resulted in expansive EU-nation border closures to tens of thousands of refugees across Europe. In the months before March 23, Courage for the Journey (Central Europe Field NCM Refugee Response) was distributing supplies to thousands of refugees who briefly passed through the Balkan Highway on their journey toward Northern Europe. As the nature of the refugee situation shifted, so has the Nazarene response to people caught between war and hope.

Whereas migrants were previously travelers on a difficult road, they are now people who fall into multiple asylum-seeker categories: Some are stuck in an illegal limbo dependent upon smugglers to sneak them across borders; others reside in transit camps waiting months for an official country reassignment; and still others are now in the process of becoming residents in their new host country. The needs of

these individuals are vastly different and complex.

“Though the dramatic numbers of people passing through have slowed, there are now thousands of people stuck in our neighborhoods on the Balkan Highway,” said Jay Sunberg, Field Strategy Coordinator/Central

Europe. “This is a great opportunity for the church to be intentionally and incarnationally present.”

As the EU-Turkey Deal went into effect, teams in Greece, Former Yugoslav Republic of

Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia shifted their focus to meet the needs of the more permanent camps in Greece and Croatia, and on those who are stranded in Serbia. The Courage for the Journey teams continue to readjust as the situation evolves.

GREECE

Over the summer, a team of college see “SERVE” • page 3

“This is a great opportunity for the church to be intentionally and incarnationally present.”

-- Jay Sunberg

SERVE: Focus on integration, settlement

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students and other volunteers led by Dorothy Tarrant, the on-site coordinator for Courage-Greece, regularly visited multiple camps, with focused visits in two refugee camps near the Katerini community. They spent the summer building relationships, teaching English, and facilitating aid-distribution of food and clothing.

Courage-Greece also partnered with the local Greek Evangelical Church in Katerini to minister to multiple families, mostly Syrian, who were temporarily settled in the community as they waited to be reassigned to a new country. The local congregation has a goal of providing temporary housing to 100 refugee families. Nazarene volunteers helped prepare homes and apartments, and taught English classes. The volunteers, who were also living in the community, were often invited to share meals and from that experience learned life-transforming lessons about receiving hospitality and about Syrian culture. On average, volunteers interacted with close to 2,000 refugees weekly over the summer.

As the calendar shifts to autumn, Tarrant and the team have taken on additional teaching responsibilities to help partner non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fulfill EU mandates for providing school to refugee children. There are concerns among humanitarian actors regarding what happens to the thousands in northern Greece as winter arrives and people continue to wait for re-assignment. The un-winterized camps will not be adequate housing for the cold winter that is to come.

CROATIA

Unlike camps in Greece where refugees wish to leave the country and move on to other parts of Europe, in Croatia's capital, Zagreb, volunteers work to help people adjust to a new culture and to ease integration between Croatians and the refugee population. The country is in the process of accepting their EU quota of resettling 1,700 refugees. They anticipate meeting



those numbers by the end of 2017.

Chris and Karen Lewis are the on-site coordinators for Refugee Response in Croatia, and Dave and Betsy Scott lead the overall work for the Nazarene church in this new EU country. There is constant adjustment to the needs and the demands of the 500 to 600 refugees they are currently working with in Zagreb. Nazarenes partner with NGOs like Save the Children, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Croatian Interior Ministry for Refugee Response to run children's activities, provide education for kids who are significantly behind in schooling in a variety of subjects, and English classes for local refugee populations. The Croatian Red Cross, which mediates much of the work with local NGOs, has been a strong partner for the Nazarene team, according to Chris Lewis.

Many throughout Europe have fear or mixed feelings about refugees, so the team is working on programs that will help refugees and Croatians adjust to one another. The Lewises open their home to refugees for dinner or to hang out in a home setting. They also lead a Bible study that is open to everyone. Recently, a man from Iraq heard a short devotional

about the love of God, and said that the message was something people from his culture needed to hear more about.

"All across Central Europe, Nazarenes are excited about how we can be a part of ministering to these amazing people," said Sunberg. "The leaders in Croatia have done a super job of responding, and as the situation has shifted, they've transitioned well. We are now seeing the fruit of their long-term investment in lives."

SERBIA

The exact number of refugees currently in Serbia is unknown but estimated to be more than 3,000. In mid-July, NGOs on the ground began to see numbers surge in response to a new law passed in Hungary which allowed Hungarian law-enforcement to be more aggressive in their response to refugees. Between 15 Sept., 2015, and 23 March, 2016, Serbia was the main transit country for tens of thousands of refugees. With the EU-Turkey Deal, the numbers initially began to slow as Greek camps swelled in response to the closed EU borders, but in reality the deal simply readjusted the tide.

"People are still crossing borders,

COURAGE: Travel grows more dangerous

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Photo courtesy Teanna Sunberg

but now we are forced to use smugglers in greater numbers. They make us pay more and it is even more dangerous than before. Many times, we have gone without food for days while we waited for the smugglers to move us on. They are very dangerous men,” said a Syrian mother of three who is leading her family across Europe.

She broke into tears as she discussed the emotional and physical ramifications of this journey for her children. The family arrived in Belgrade the night before the interview for this article and slept in the park with hundreds of others. In an exhausted sleep, Muhammad, the father, felt nothing when thieves slit his trousers and made off with all of the family’s resources: money, phone and documents.

Courage for the Journey—Serbia are four Trevecca Nazarene University

graduates: Tori Stone, Christina Corzine, Megan and Curtis Rich, who arrived just as the numbers in the park were beginning to rise again. The team partners with two organizations: Refugee Aid Serbia and Hot Meals Idomeni to distribute food and clothing. They are intentional about personal interactions meant to dignify an often inhumane situation. For the specific family mentioned above, that meant connecting them with a camp that gave them refuge, several hot meals in the park, clothing and personal items for their journey. Hours later, the mother sent a message to the Nazarenes who had helped: “We arrived at the camp safely. Thank you for your kindness.”

In many ways, Serbia’s refugee population is the most vulnerable. The vast majority arrived on Greek shores or crossed borders into Turkey after

March 23, and as such, they fall into the category of people unqualified to be relocated in western EU countries per the EU-Turkey Deal. Smugglers offer the only hope for making it to western Europe and to the safe life for which they long. The non-EU Serbian borders with Croatia and Hungary make it a gathering place as people wait.

As of September, temporary camps in Serbia are burgeoning with families and single men are rarely considered for shelter. As temperatures begin to drop, fears of a harsh winter gather strength. In the camps, children who have missed out on schooling continue to while away the hours with no formal education.

“My children had to stop going to school in February,” their mother, an English teacher, whispered as she wiped away a tear. “We never imagined that the journey would be so hard or so dangerous, but the war made staying impossible.”

The only certainties of the current global migration through Central Europe is that there is no end in sight and that more change is on the horizon. A real-time example of that very truth is a recent text from a Syrian family now connected to Nazarenes. Upon receiving word that they were being reassigned to Romania, they wrote asking about the country. A Romanian Nazarene who heard about the family responded, “As soon as they arrive in Romania, the Church family here is ready to welcome them with open hearts.” With this news, it becomes evident that Romania is also beginning to accept their EU quota, and with that decision, they become a new country on the Central Europe Field responding with welcome to refugees. ●

They were coming for him in the morning

Extremist militants were coming for him in the morning. M* received the news with terror. He was only 15 years old, but he was not surprised. Some of his friends had already been taken. Extremists would come for them and take them away to train and fight for their “cause.”

M didn't believe in their so-called cause, but neither had his friends. Why did they go with the soldiers? He knew they went because they had no choice.

People in far away lands would say that they should fight for their homes. He saw their posts on Facebook. But these people didn't understand.

They could wait for the soldiers with a gun. Of course they could. And when the soldiers came, they could shoot one, and if they were lucky they might even shoot two before the rest of the soldiers blew their heads off. But that would not be the end. As a message to any other young people who might think they could do the same when they came for them, the extremist soldiers would then kill their whole families.

They were coming for M in the morning. When they came, he would have only two choices: go with them, or refuse and watch his whole family die before his own life was taken by these merciless soldiers.

M lay down in his bed for one last time. In the morning, no matter what happened, his life would never be the same. His childhood was over, and perhaps within 24 hours his life would be as well.

As darkness filled the room, he didn't think he would possibly be able to sleep. He must have dozed off, however, because the next thing he knew somebody was nudging him in his bed. Had the soldiers come for him early?

Startled and nearly overwhelmed with fear, he looked up and saw the eyes of his uncle, H*. His uncle put a finger to his lips and warned him to keep quiet. “Come with me,” he whispered.

And his uncle whisked him away in the night.

The soldiers came for him in the morning, but he wasn't there. His family was spared, and now M and his uncle were refugees. They had a perilous journey ahead of them. The journey through mountains and sea was one that would claim many lives, but they knew they had no choice. If M's family was going to have a chance, they had to be brave.

And this, my friends, is how refugees are made.

This is also one of the reasons why around 60 percent of the refugees in Europe are young males. Because M's story is not unique. It is one that has been repeated over and over, tens of thousands of times. As hard as it is for them to leave their homes, they have learned that their flight is their families' only chance of survival.

In M's case, he eventually ended up at a refugee camp in Slavonski Brod, Croatia. Karen and I became good friends with him and his uncle as they were stranded in that camp, which was really more of a prison, for two months.

Then eventually they were released and moved to an asylum-seeker's centre in Zagreb, where they are now living. They have freedom of movement within Croatia now, and they have started coming to the Nazarene church with us. They have recently announced that they now believe that Jesus is God. The other day, Uncle H sent me the lyrics of an Elvis Presley song that spoke deeply to his heart:

*One pair of hands formed the mountains
One pair of hands formed the sea.
One pair of hands made the sun and the moon
Every bird, every flower, every tree.*

*One pair of hands formed the valleys, the oceans, the
rivers, and the sand.
Those hands are so strong so when life goes wrong
Put your faith into one pair of hands.*

*One pair of hands heal the sick
One pair of hands raise the dead.
One pair of hands calmed the raging storm
and thousands of people were fed.*

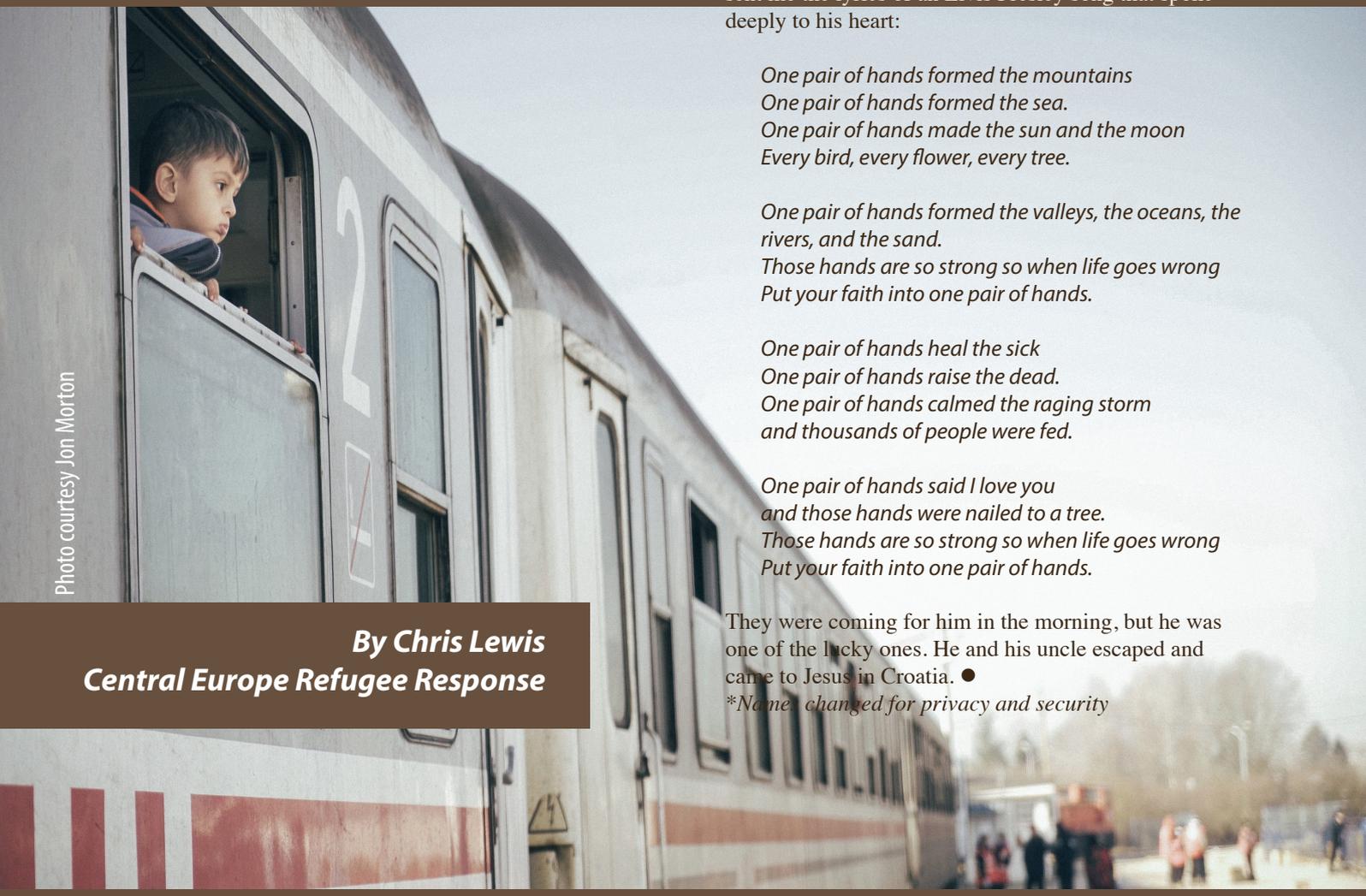
*One pair of hands said I love you
and those hands were nailed to a tree.
Those hands are so strong so when life goes wrong
Put your faith into one pair of hands.*

They were coming for him in the morning, but he was one of the lucky ones. He and his uncle escaped and came to Jesus in Croatia. ●

**Name changed for privacy and security*

Photo courtesy Jon Morton

By Chris Lewis
Central Europe Refugee Response



The day the refugees fed me

By Chris Lewis
Central Europe Refugee Response

Photo courtesy Jon Morton

K* and his family arrived at the Bregana border crossing between Croatia and Slovenia not long after the last refugees were allowed through the border. After this the refugees would be going a different route and no longer going through Slovenia at least for the moment. Thousands had gone through, but now this group of 28 relatives were stuck there alone in the hot no-man's land between two countries.

When K and his family arrived, they were told they were not going to be allowed across the border. They were very upset. Several of the women were crying, and the men were angry because they said they had been promised they could go through Slovenia. One of them said to me, "We've been told so many lies. We don't know what to believe anymore." They decided to just wait at the border hoping the police would change their minds and let them cross.

I didn't know what else to do but to wait with them. Once they had gotten over the shock of being denied entry somewhere once again, I discovered them to be a very friendly group of people. A lot of them spoke English, so we were able to have great conversations.

The group included men, women and

children. In spite of a lot of media that tries to paint a different picture, this is the reality we often see on the ground. A lot of families are fleeing the terrors of war in search of freedom and safety.

I asked this group several times if they needed anything. "Do you need some water...food?" Every time I asked they said they didn't need anything. They had enough for now. I asked one of the men, Jamil, "Do you need anything at

"I just want a home."

-- K*

all?" He replied, "I just want a home."

At one point I sat down with them to talk, listen and laugh as they joked and made the best of their difficult situation. I held one of their babies, a beautiful child, and then they started getting food out of their bags.

It wasn't a fancy lunch, mostly just apples and bananas. But they handed me an equal portion with the rest of them and asked me to join them.

For one quiet moment in no-man's land I was reminded of a universal truth: We are all people, and we all need to be loved. The world focuses upon our differences, but we really aren't that different. And in case you are wondering what was so special about eating together, these new friends come from a culture where eating together is an ultimate sign of acceptance and equality.

Jesus lived in a culture that shared this same value, and He did a lot of His greatest ministry while eating with people. It's at the table (or in this case, sitting on a hot curb) that we recognize our common humanity, as well as our common needs.

I've fed a lot of refugees, but on the day they fed me I was humbled. After about five hours the police finally let them cross the border, but for that short while, time stopped and reminded me that we are all just people who share the common need of love, fellowship and a Savior.

When asked how we can pray for the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing across Europe, I often say this: Pray that they will be treated like people.

I've often seen them treated like criminals, surrounded by police and

MEAL: Young man expresses pain through art

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armies with guns. I've also seen them treated like cattle, with people herding them into vehicles like cows or throwing food at them with no sense of dignity remaining to them. A lot of people also sit around and discuss them from the comfort of their homes as a political problem. But what they often miss out on is the truly human touch.

These are people who need Jesus. A lot of them are disillusioned people who are running away from a militant version of their religion and are ripe for the Gospel. Others are Christian brothers and sisters who need our love, prayers and support.

I heard from K a few days after he and his family had made it safely to Sweden. He is an artist, and he shared with me the last piece of art he created before he left Syria. He called it "The Departed."

When he showed me the pictures of this piece of artwork, I noticed especially the broken faces. I told him I had a good idea what they represented. He replied by saying that the faces were broken because he knows that after the immigration and all the separated families, "Nobody stays whole."

K chooses to remain anonymous, but he gave me permission to share his artwork with you on behalf of hundreds of thousands of broken people who are without a home and seeking a place of



Photos courtesy K*

safety. Looking at these broken faces reminds me of the thousands of broken lives I see day after day. They are real people who need to be loved, and their only chance of being whole again is Jesus.

In our first conversation after he arrived in a safe place, K repeated to me what he and others said that day on the border, "Thank you so much

for everything you have done for us. It means so much."

Now I know that this "thank you" is not just meant for me. It's meant for everyone who is giving of their time, money or energy to help them. Have I seen some bad attitudes of the type the media often tries to tell us is the norm? Yes, I have seen it in a few people. But from most of the people I just find gratitude. ●

**Name omitted for privacy and security*



Hanna's story



Photo courtesy Jon Morton

By Chris Lewis
Central Europe Refugee Response

It is not her real name, but we will call her Hanna.

She is 19 years old, and she lived like a princess.

When she tells her story, she always mentions this. “My life in Iraq,” she tells you, “was great. I was living a beautiful life,” she says, “but now it’s all over.”

Her family lived 20 minutes from the city. They had a really nice home, and she was studying to be a dentist.

But there was war in her country.

Her dad had a good job, and everything seemed to be going well.

Then one day she was in the garden at her home when her little brother heard somebody knocking on the front door. Her mother went to answer, and some men were there. They asked where Hanna’s father was, and when her mom said she didn’t know they came in and ransacked the house. They destroyed everything, and they took Hanna’s hand and kicked her. Her mom shouted out until the neighbors heard her, and the men ran away. But by then a great deal of damage was already done.

They called Hanna’s father, and he told them to leave immediately and stay at a friend’s house that night. Then he told them to get tickets to Turkey and to leave as quickly as they could.

They ran to Turkey and kept running until they reached Croatia. They hoped to

get to Germany or somewhere in Western Europe, but then the borders closed. They ended up stranded at the refugee camp in Slavonski Brod, which Hanna refers to as a prison. After two months they were released and found their way to a safe place.

The journey was difficult. She saw death with her own eyes, and many times she felt faint. She is safe now, but she is alone with her mother and her little brother. It’s been five months since they left Iraq, and they haven’t heard

“I was living a beautiful life. But now it’s all over.”

-- Hanna*

any news about her father and her older brother. They don’t even know if they are alive or dead.

Hanna says, “All the girls my age are happy. They have their father and their mother, and they go to college. But not me.”

This is one of the hardest things to see during this refugee crisis. We meet thousands of people, and they are family people. They love their families...but their families are separated and torn apart. Sometimes family members are

killed. Other times they are separated, and they can’t see each other because of borders and wars.

We do our best to make life a little easier for those who are in this situation. And sometimes we experience the joy of seeing families reunited.

But many are like Hanna. They don’t even know if their families are OK.

When someone says that these desperate travellers are not “real” refugees, just people seeking economic benefits of Western societies, remember the stories of thousands and thousands just like Hanna. They would NEVER choose to be separated from the people they love.

But this is what war does. This is why war is hell.

While this may be a dark and grim reminder, we must celebrate something positive: that there are thousands of caring people who give their time and energy and resources to help people like Hanna. To help them find hope again.

We also find a new kind of family unit rising up, people who share in the hard journey together...refugees and volunteers who say, “We will not be defeated. War will not have the final say. Together, we will get through this.” ●

“Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”
— Psalm 118:5-6

Do you have pictures of your church ministry in Eurasia that you would like to share with the region? Send them to communications@eurasiaregion.org and we'll consider posting them on our Facebook page.

www.eurasiaregion.org

Churches serve women, children

With Middle East countries hosting millions of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, many of whom have exhausted their savings and cannot work due to host country laws, churches of the Nazarene in the Middle East continue to hold ministries for refugees who have moved into their communities.

One church launched a special ministry for mothers. The monthly mother's training discusses:

1. The role of parents
2. How to discipline your child
3. Trauma
4. Sexual abuse
5. Healthy food and healthy habits
6. Violence against women

The church also started a club for children from 4 to 6 years old who don't go to school. It is held for nine months -- a full school year. The teachers give basics of English and Arabic languages,

colors, numbers, etc.

They will teach them the children's rights and Christian ethics from Bible stories, plus give them a space to play. We are happy to have children from all the community joining.

God spoke to me about how everything we do needs to lead people to forgiveness, and forgiveness will bring people out from captivity and set them free. It will break the authorities of darkness that capture them. Keep this ministry in your prayers. Thank you for all your care and support for God's kingdom. ●

-- Local Nazarene leader

Prayer Requests

- Please pray for the leaders and volunteers of the Central Europe Refugee Response, who are making decisions and showing love and human dignity to the thousands of refugees who cross their paths in multiple locations. Ask God to give them wisdom and abundant compassion.
- Please pray for Hanna, K, M, H and the millions more people of all ages displaced by war and extremism in the Middle East. Ask God to send Christians into their path to show them God's love, and to assist with their desperate needs. Ask the Holy Spirit to comfort them, protect them and bless them with peace.
- Ask God to bring an end to war, conflict and terrorism in the Middle East and around the world, that devastated countries can rebuild, and the displaced may return home to peace and safety.
- Pray for the children who are missing school, experiencing trauma and fear, and who are at risk for illness and trafficking. Ask God to give them special protection, and to shape them to grow up as peacemakers in our world.

Where Worlds Meet is the monthly newsletter for the Eurasia Region of the Church of the Nazarene. To subscribe, e-mail communications@eurasiaregion.org or visit www.eurasiaregion.org.

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