

Faith leaders praise House approval of foreign aid

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Conservative religious leaders who had been imploring Speaker Mike Johnson to back assistance for Ukraine and Israel celebrated the House of Representatives' passage of foreign aid packages April 20, clearing the way for the measures to go to the Senate.

Brent Leatherwood, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, was among those lobbying Johnson—himself a Southern Baptist—on behalf of Baptists in Ukraine and the United States concerned about the plight of Ukrainian Christians.

"That is why we asked Speaker Johnson and congressional leaders to come together to meet the challenges of this moment," Leatherwood said in a statement to Religion News Service.

"In the House passage of bills relating to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, the Speaker sent a strong message to autocrats and terrorists alike that our nation will take a stand to support vulnerable lives and oppose the tyrants who threaten them."

The push on Ukraine included an April 17 meeting between Johnson, Pavlo Unguryan—an evangelical and political leader from Ukraine—and a Ukrainian citizen whose wife and child were killed in a March attack on Odesa.

Praise for Johnson's efforts

Gary Marx, president of the new coalition Defenders of Faith and Religious

Freedom in Ukraine and former executive director of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, praised the House leader's "courage and his willingness to listen to the cries of Ukraine's faithful."

In the same statement posted on social media, he added, "As we celebrate this victory, we recognize that there is still more work to be done."

On April 18, Marx had written to Johnson on behalf of the coalition seeking congressional support for Ukrainian Christians. The letter also was signed by Rick Santorum, a former Republican senator and chairman of Patriot Voices, and Adam Hamilton, a prominent United Methodist pastor in Kansas, among more than a dozen other faith leaders.

"We are pained and shocked by the widespread, vicious persecution of our brothers and sisters in Ukraine by Russian forces," reads the letter. "Russia is waging a war against Evangelical and Protestant Christians at a scale likened to 'cultural genocide.' These Christians are being persecuted, harassed, intimidated, imprisoned, tortured, mutilated, and killed—simply for worshipping God as they see fit."

Other leaders of political groups that largely represent evangelical Christians pressured Johnson to shepherd support for Israel through a Congress with contingents on the right and left opposing the aid package. Twenty-one Republicans joined 37 Democrats in voting against the Israel aid bill.

In a virtual press conference organized by Johnson's staff as the House prepared to vote, Sandra Hagee Parker, chair of the Christians United for Israel Action Fund, lauded the speaker, praising his "fortitude" in pushing for the "vital issue" of Israel aid.

"The enemies of America are watching and waiting to see what America does, and we should do everything in our power to have Israel's back," Parker said.

She echoed Johnson's remark that Russia, China and Iran constitute a new "axis of evil," harkening back to former President George W. Bush's State of the Union address in which he called out Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

Anyone who doubts that the three states are mounting a "united front against the enemies of the West is simply sticking their head in the sand," Parker said.

Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, said at the press conference the United States must "rush" to Israel's defense.

Reed suggested Johnson, despite threats from some GOP members to challenge his speakership, ultimately will be celebrated by conservative Christians if the bills are passed.

"We must never waver, and once this bill passes and it gets to the president's desk and it's signed, Speaker Mike Johnson will get a lot of credit for moving through a minefield to get this done," Reed said.

A more diverse group of a dozen religious leaders who had been seeking support for the people of Gaza sent Johnson a note of thanks for his efforts, coupled with concern about final passage of the aid they sought.

But please ensure humanitarian aid

"We, as a group of diverse faith leaders, thank you for including in the legislation you have brought before Congress life-saving humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza as well as humanitarian and refugee assistance for other areas facing wars and famine," wrote the leaders of Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations in an April 19 letter. "Please ensure that humanitarian aid is included in the bill that is passed."

Signers of the letter included Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Bishop Vashti McKenzie, president and general

secretary of the National Council of Churches; Mary Novak, director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice; Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism; and Barbara Williams-Skinner, co-convener of the National African American Clergy Network.