

Dan Darling: Ukrainian church and people resilient in war

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KYIV, Ukraine (BP)—Ukrainian Christians are resilient in the lingering war with Russia and yet optimistic of “a just peace,” Southern Baptist Dan Darling said on the heels of a weeklong tour of Ukraine and Poland.

“I was inspired by the resilience of the church in Ukraine,” Darling told Baptist Press. “I talked to one pastor who said that God is doing really good work. Their churches are growing, even in the midst of war.”

Darling, director of The Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, was among a dozen evangelical leaders and religious freedom advocates invited on the tour sponsored by Defenders of Faith and Religious Freedom in Ukraine Dec. 1-7, focused on encouraging the Church in Ukraine.



A church is destroyed by Russian shelling in Orikhiv, Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine, on May 20, 2024. (Photo by Ukrinform/NurPhoto via AP)

Just two months from the war's third anniversary, Russia has destroyed, damaged, seized or looted at least 640 houses of worship in Ukraine, according to Defenders of Faith Ukraine research.

Not a single evangelical church remains in Russian occupied territories, the group said, and believers are banned from worship.

Even so, the church is seeing new growth, planting new congregations, helping displaced Christians and drawing new believers.

"Church leaders made a really strong moral case for Ukraine's survival," Darling said. "They view Ukraine—and I think it's an accurate view—in many ways as the Bible belt of eastern Europe. They actually feel that Russia's attack on Ukraine, that there's a spiritual dimension to it.

"It's trying to shut down really good evangelistic work around eastern Europe. They made a really strong case for Ukraine."

Ukraine's victory is crucial in saving evangelism's presence in the region, pastors believe.

Darling and others in the delegation met with numerous evangelical and Christian leaders, including Igor Bandura, vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists; representatives of the multid denominational Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations; representatives of Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary in Lviv; and leaders of Save Ukraine, a ministry serving families and children damaged by the war.

Darling delivered remarks, along with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the first Ukrainian Military Prayer Breakfast at the Refectory Church of the Kyiv-Perchersk Lavra on Dec. 5.

He also met with leaders of Ukraine's Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and

with evangelical leaders in Krakow, Poland, where Ukrainian refugees have been received warmly by evangelical churches.

Darling found the trip important because of Southern Baptist missionary work in Ukraine, including individual church missions and the work of Send Relief and the International Mission Board, as well as the importance of religious freedom advocacy in the region.

“I do think it’s in America’s interest to have a free and democratic Ukraine,” Darling said.

Among others taking the trip were Galen Carey, vice president of government relations for the National Association of Evangelicals; Tim Goeglein, vice president of external and government relations for Focus on the Family; Eric Patterson, president and CEO of the Victims of Communism Museum Memorial Foundation; Peter Burns, International Religious Freedom Summit executive director; Ken Blackwell, senior fellow for human rights and constitutional governance with the Family Research Council; Kelly Currie, U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues under the first Trump Administration; and Annabelle Rutledge, communications coordinator with Concerned Women for America.