

Ukraine seminary leader urges prayer for transformation

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NASHVILLE (BP)—“Pray for the transformation of our nation,” Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary President Yaroslav “Slavik” Pyzh implored Southern Baptists at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission’s trustee meeting Sept. 10 in Nashville.

“Next time you mention Ukraine to God, please pray that our people will love God and respect the law,” Pyzh asked.

He presented the lingering war as an evil that has given uncommon opportunity to spread the gospel, even as he prays for peace and victory.

Although Ukraine’s population is not precisely known, the number of Protestant believers has doubled since Russia launched its latest attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Pyzh said. Hope has countered the death and hopelessness the war has wrought.

As he searched for a reason for the war, “my answer that God gave me is that war is an opportunity to transform the nation,” he told ERLC trustees.

Seminary increasingly affected by war

Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary in Lviv, about one hour from the Polish border, increasingly is affected by the war that began on Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia, he reported.

Within the past week, a Russian missile struck a neighborhood near the seminary, damaging windows and exterior walls of a dormitory housing 20 female seminary students.

"It was less than 100 yards away from our school," Pyzh said. "One of our dormitories lost all the doors and all the windows, and 20 ladies that were staying there, it scared life out of them. So, we had to let them go because they couldn't study after that.

"That's what Russia is doing," he said, speculating whether it was a targeted attack on the seminary and its spread of the gospel.

"But one thing that I know for sure," he said. "When Russia comes to Ukraine, Baptist (religious expression and outreach) does not exist anymore."

Ukraine's victory is crucial, as defeat will mean the end of Christianity in the nation.

"Whatever you can do as a country," he said, "and whatever you can do as a church is critically important to us. ... There's no room for church there (in Russia). There's no room for Christians there.

"Whatever you can do in order to help us, it's not only helping the country, but it's helping us as believers to proclaim God there," he said. "So, every effort you put there has a whole lot more meaning than you can think of."

Ministry continues in wartime

Seminary students planted about 55 churches in the 18 months spanning January 2023 to June 2024, Pyzh said.

The war has closed some 500 churches, destroying some church buildings and displacing members. In response, the seminary and Baptist leaders in Ukraine including the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, have worked to minister to internally displaced people and offer them the gospel. Many have come to Christ, leaders have said.

Concurrently in partnership with Southern Baptist Send Relief and others, Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary has opened 18 WeCare Centers, providing humanitarian, spiritual, educational and counseling support, legal aid, medical care, childcare, home repairs, generators and other supplies.

Combined, such centers typically serve between 20,000 and 25,000 individuals a month, Pyzh said.

But even as many are coming to Christ, others are rejecting him, Pyzh said, with the number of atheists also doubling during the war and major growth among 18- to 25-year-olds.

"I understand why these young people are calling themselves atheists," he said, "because they cannot make sense out of that reality" of war.

Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary continues to thrive during the war, he said, enrolling 700 new students this year, exceeding an anticipated 500.