

# Ukrainian Baptist leader says spread of the gospel at stake

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KYIV, Ukraine (BP)—Christians in the United States should consider the spiritual dimensions of Russia’s war on Ukraine, especially as military aid to Ukraine grows uncertain, a Ukrainian Baptist Union leader said.



Elijah Brown (left), general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and Igor Bandura, vice president of the Baptist Union of Ukraine, stand behind a pulpit made from a missile shot down over Ukraine. (Photo from Twitter)

“You should remember the spiritual dimensions of this war, especially the attempt of the evil one to use Russia to destroy Ukraine as a goalpost for Christianity in Eastern Europe,” said Igor Bandura, vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, shortly after a December trip to the United States.

“This is not only a war of Russia against Ukraine. This is a war for Christian

values, for the possibility to spread the gospel in freedom, and to fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus.”

Bandura describes Ukraine as “the home of evangelism and missions in eastern countries,” pushing back against a post-Christian climate.

The spiritual dimensions of the war are notable, Bandura said, as the United States considers continued military aid to Ukraine, and as Hungary blocked a \$50 billion aid package to Ukraine from the European Union.

The Baptist Union has lost 300 churches in Russian occupied territories including Crimea, he said, which Russia has occupied since 2014.

Entire congregations fled for safety in the wake of the February 2022 invasion. Displaced pastors have planted about 100 churches in the European Union to serve Ukrainian refugees, he said, and additional displaced pastors are leading churches that were already established abroad.

## **Training pastors to plant churches**

As congregations persevere, Southern Baptist missionary Michael Domke, based in Hungary, works with Ukrainian pastors Rustam and Anatoly to train men who hope to plant churches, teaching methodology through Generation Ministry.

Pastors spanning the entire country enrolled in the program. They are planting churches in areas where they live, overcoming infrastructure damages of war.

“Ukrainians are very resilient, and the condition of a building is not something that stops them from doing church work,” Domke said. “I’ve been in churches in wintertime with no heat, and it’s been full of people. That doesn’t stop them.”

Before the war, Generation Ministry typically trained five or seven church planting teams a year, but today it is conducting three schools simultaneously, hoping to train 24 church planting teams through September 2024, Domke said.

Those enrolled complete about seven two-day, three-night sessions spread over a year. Most will plant churches with no compensation.

“One of the major motivations,” Rustam said, “they feel the calling and the duty that they’re supposed to do that for the nation of Ukraine in these hard times.”

Church planters secure meeting spaces by applying for government facilities at no cost or repairing older church facilities.

At least one pastor currently enrolled in Generation Ministry hopes to plant a church in Bucha, the scene of mass civilian carnage when Russia occupied the city for a month in February and March. Rustam attends Bethany Baptist Church in Bucha, which is recovering after 80 percent of its members fled during Russia’s occupation.

Bandura pastors Bible Church in Irpin, one of the first areas Russia captured and Ukraine has since recovered. All of Bible Church’s members evacuated during Russia’s attack, Bandura said, but about 70 percent have returned. Bible Church actively serves surrounding communities through six volunteer centers the church established. In cities surrounding Irpin, Bandura counts three new churches plants.

As the war endures, churches are challenged to remain hopeful.

“The last few months were very difficult for us emotionally and spiritually, because our expectation that the war would ... end was not fulfilled. The war is still here,” Bandura said. “And there is no understanding when it will be finished.

“We all started to realize that the war would be going on at least the next year, unless God will work a miracle.”

Congress failed to pass a December aid package that would have included \$61.4 billion for Ukraine. Instead, President Biden pledged \$200 million in available drawdown funds for weapons, artillery and ammunition, urging Congress to do more.

Bandura expressed strong gratitude for the love, commitment and support of Baptists in the United States, and he appreciates continued prayers until God provides a solution to the war.

“If Ukraine (does) not survive in this war ... what we are sure is that there would not be room for Baptist churches,” Bandura said. “Baptists like me and other Baptists would either run away from the country, or we would be arrested and killed.”

He encouraged Baptists to advocate for Congress to find a way to continue aid to Ukraine, terming such aid a matter of life or death.

“This is what we are praying for, and we are hoping for help from the United States, because it’s very difficult to live under threat and discouragement a long time.”