

Ukrainian pastor reports suffering but says God is good

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In spite of continued missile attacks, widespread dislocation and the threat of a major Russian assault in coming weeks, Ukrainian Pastor Igor Bandura insisted, “God is good.”

“There is a lot of suffering, but the spirit of the nation is strong,” said Bandura, vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists. “The spirit of the church and of Christians is strong.”

Bandura provided an update on churches in his country during a webinar hosted by the Baptist World Alliance. Marsha Scipio, director of BWAid, moderated the Zoom call and took questions from the virtual audience.

“The war has gone on longer than we expected,” Bandura acknowledged.

Early on, Baptist churches provided respite care to internally displaced people from Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine. And throughout a bitter winter, they have become “centers of hope and heat,” he said.

Frightened and anxious Ukrainians quickly learned they could go to Baptist churches for physical assistance and emotional support, Bandura noted. But some also have found spiritual direction and support, he added.

“We see how God is working,” Bandura said. “Not everybody comes to church only because they get [physical assistance]. ... We see men and women who are really open to the church, to the Bible and to the meaning of prayer.”

Supporting and encouraging pastors

As the war between Russia and Ukraine reaches its one-year anniversary in late February, the Ukrainian Baptist Union is seeking to provide support and encouragement to pastors—both those who were displaced from about 300 churches in Russian-occupied territory and those who have been serving day-in and day-out to meet needs.

“Most of our pastors are really tired,” he said. “You can see this when you speak with them and when you look into their eyes.”

The Baptist Union has sponsored two-day and three-day retreats for pastors and spouses “to just let them rest, and we minister to them with the word of God,” Bandura said.

Pastors have adapted their sermons to the crisis, he noted. Preaching in wartime demands “unusual preparation”—not dealing with complex theology, but requiring simplicity and “gospel-centered” clarity.

Preachers recognize worshippers include “people who are just trying to understand who Christ is and what he is doing,” Bandura said. “It’s very contextual, because people would like to find Christ in the middle of their terrible situation.”

Adapting to meet needs

In some cities, 70 percent of buildings have been seriously damaged, and the infrastructure has been destroyed, he noted. Churches distributed generators made available by the Baptist Union.

“People need not only food, but also the means to prepare food,” Bandura said.

With assistance from BWA and the European Baptist Federation, the Ukrainian Baptist Union is preparing mobile kitchens and equipping teams to staff them in areas where people are unable to prepare their own meals.

The Ukrainian Baptist Union and the European Baptist Federation are discussing how to create a network of Ukrainian Baptist churches throughout Europe, recognizing many refugees will not return to Ukraine.

Texas Baptist Men continues to work with Baptists in Poland to minister to refugees. TBM has supplied food, heaters and generators in recent months to churches that are caring for refugees from Ukraine.

Ukrainian Baptists are asking Christians worldwide to pray for peace with justice in Ukraine. Just as the Ukrainian military needs other countries to provide weapons, Ukrainian Christians need the prayers of fellow believers globally, Bandura noted.

“The most powerful weapon—the spiritual weapon—is our prayer,” he said.