

Ukrainian religious freedom hinges on national survival

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala.—Religious liberty in Ukraine depends on the country's survival as an independent nation, Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told the [Baptist World Alliance annual gathering](#).

"If Russia wins, Ukraine will disappear," he warned.

And if Ukraine falls to Russian aggression, the religious liberty of its people will be imperiled, he asserted.

Russia's current leadership and genuine religious freedom "are mutually exclusive," Bandura said. The Russian regime now in power "does not respect freedom and independence," he added.

In areas of Ukraine under Russian domination, pastors have been beaten, church buildings destroyed and families separated, Bandura reported.

Even so, Russia's invasion of his country has drawn together its citizens and instilled in them a resolve to maintain their freedom and independence, he insisted.

"Our nation is united. No one is willing to surrender," Bandura said.

Grateful to the global Baptist family

He expressed gratitude to the global Baptist family for their "support, solidarity and prayers" during difficult times in Ukraine.

"Thank you for standing with us in these dark days," Bandura said.

Baptist churches in Ukraine were able to respond quickly, setting up church-based shelters and respite centers for internally displaced people almost immediately after the war started because they organized for ministry three weeks prior to the invasion, he said.

“God had prepared us for this,” he said.

BWA General Secretary Elijah Brown affirmed Bandura and Ukrainian Baptists for the timely and innovative ministries they offered. The “lessons learned” and the trail blazed by Ukrainian Baptists already are “lighting the way” for emergency responses elsewhere in the world, Brown said.



During a panel discussion, Igor Bandura (left) of the Ukrainian Baptist Union; Alan Donaldson, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation; and Elijah Brown, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, respond to questions about the global Baptist response to the crisis in Ukraine. (Photo / Ken Camp)

When asked during a question-and-answer session about Russian Baptists' response to the invasion of Ukraine, Brown pointed to a "generational divide."

During a trip to Russia in May, Brown said, he noted participants in the Russian Baptist Youth Congress voiced solidarity with Christians in Ukraine and passionate support for the Ukrainian people.

When he and BWA President Tomás Mackey met with Russian government officials, as well as with Russian Baptist leaders and representatives of the Russian Orthodox church, they called for the immediate cessation of violence toward Ukraine, the creation of humanitarian corridors for relief, protection of religious freedom and agreements to establish a just peace.

"We are one family, and we love all its members," Brown said. "But we are of one perspective: This is an unjust and sinful invasion."

Baptists from Lebanon, Nepal and Nigeria participated in a panel discussion spotlighting the multiplied international impact of the attacks on Ukraine, often called "the breadbasket of Europe" for its grain production.

People in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa who already were in dire situations have experienced food insecurity and dramatically increased fuel prices since Russia began its assault on Ukraine, they said.

'Theology of interdependence'



Volunteers pause for prayer before beginning their work at a warehouse and distribution center in Chelm, Poland. (TBM Photo / John Hall)

Alan Donaldson, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, noted European Baptists treasure their independence and autonomy, but they also gained deepened appreciation for their interdependence as they cooperated to respond to needs in Ukraine and the refugee crisis that resulted from the Russian invasion.

Donaldson voiced hope that lessons about the value of interdependence learned in times of crisis will result in a more fully developed “theology of interdependence” that endures in peacetime.

[Baptist World Aid](#) Director Marsha Scipio reported BWA received more than \$4 million to help Baptists in countries surrounding Ukraine respond to the needs of at least 5 million refugees and 7 million internally displaced people.

Rachel Conway with BMS World Mission noted Phase One emergency relief continues in some places. As some Ukrainians in neighboring nations return to their country and others seek to make new lives for their families outside their homeland, Phase Two will focus on recovery, resettlement

and—eventually—rebuilding.