

# **Commentary: Pray for and support Baptists in Ukraine**

February 6, 2024

Two years after its full-scale invasion, the Russian Federation continues to wage war against Ukraine, creating a terrible situation for all the people of Ukraine, especially those suffering in the occupied territories.

Ukraine is fighting not only to remain a free and independent nation, but also to protect its religious freedom. In the areas of Ukraine currently under Russian occupation, Baptist churches have experienced open hostility and intimidation, indicating what is at stake for all Baptist churches throughout the country if Ukraine ultimately does not prevail in the war.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022, 71 churches have ceased to exist in occupied areas, and 231 continue to serve; 20 houses of worship have been destroyed, and 21 have been confiscated.

In these occupied areas, 93 pastors have left, and 69 pastors have remained. Cases of abuse, imprisonment and murder of pastors have been reported. Pastors endure pressure, supervision and control from hostile occupying forces. Some have faced fines for holding illegal worship services.

Occupation authorities force churches to register under Russian law but deny registration applications and threaten to close churches and confiscate property.

# Reasons for hostility

What drives this hostility against Baptist churches? In short, Russia does not tolerate freedom, especially freedom of religion.

The Russian Federation is particularly hostile to Baptist churches, because they consider the Baptists to be American spies. This, of course, is completely unfounded. It would make no sense for Ukrainian Baptists to spy on their own country.

The ideology of the so-called “Russian world” fuels this aggression, seeking to erase the national identity of Ukraine, including any form of Christian practice except the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow not only shares this ideology, but, in fact, is one of the key creators of this modern Orthodox heresy.

The Russian world ideology is a pointedly anti-Western political and cultural concept. It is used to justify Russia’s military invasion into the territory of independent Ukraine and systematic terror against Ukraine’s civilian population.

Ukrainians are dehumanized and have become victims of missile and drone attacks on infrastructure and civilian targets, assaults and shootings.

The U.S. State Department [reports](#), “Estimates from a variety of sources, including the Russian government, indicate that Russian authorities have interrogated, detained, and forcibly deported between 900,000 and 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens, including 260,000 children, from their homes to Russia—often to isolated regions in the Far East.”

These atrocities are recognized internationally as war crimes for which Russia must be held accountable.

# Call for accountability

In a [statement](#) released by the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious organizations following the worst attack yet on several cities across the entire country on Dec. 29, 2023, the Ukrainian Council of Churches condemned this terror attack.

The council called on international faith-based organizations “to consider the issue of the moral and other forms of responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church, which through all conceivable means supports the Russian aggression against Ukraine, incites ethnic and interfaith hatred, and, through preaching of the ideology of the ‘Russian world,’ incites genocide of the Ukrainian people.”

The issue of religious freedom in Ukraine is of international concern, and as vice president of the Ukrainian Baptist Union, I have been drawing attention to this matter since 2014 when Crimea and parts of Lugansk and Donetsk came under Russian occupation.

The situation has become worse since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in Feb. 2022.

In April 2023, I testified in Washington, D.C., at a hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission. This independent commission of the U.S. federal government monitors compliance with human rights provisions outlined in the Helsinki Accords.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share what is happening in Ukraine with concerned American officials. Freedom of religion is a high value in Ukraine, and one of the freedoms our defenders are fighting and giving their lives for.

# **A call for prayer and support**

While the plight of churches in Ukraine is of interest to free countries around the world, it should be an even greater priority for the worldwide church and a matter of urgent prayer.

What can Baptist churches in America do? Please pray for Baptist churches in occupied territories in Ukraine to remain steadfast in the face of open hostility and oppression. Remember your brothers and sisters who are facing such terrible opposition, and please stand with us in prayer.

Pray for Baptist churches in regions of Ukraine that are still operating in freedom and reaching many people with the gospel and helping those in need with relief efforts. During this time of spiritual openness, newcomers are attracted to churches that have helped them during the crisis.

Throughout the country, more than 3,000 new believers have been baptized during the first year of the full-scale war, and we expect the number for the second year will be even bigger. This includes many older people who have been displaced from their homes and relocated to other cities. Baptist churches are seeing a ripe harvest as they preach Christ and help hurting people.

Please continue to support Ukraine, recognizing if Ukraine fails to win this war, it would not only be disastrous for Ukraine, but it would be a disaster for Baptist churches. The Ukrainian Baptist Union is the largest Baptist denomination in Europe.

We are asking God to allow Ukraine to remain free to preach the gospel unhindered, making the most of the many gospel opportunities we have here now.

Unfortunately, the war hasn't ended yet, but we are planning for the future

already. We look forward to establishing [church-to-church partnerships](#) with Baptist churches in America and laboring together as members of one body to bring people to Christ.

Together may we look to our Lord, praying in the words of Psalm 65:5: “You answer us in righteousness, with awe-inspiring works, God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the distant seas.”

*Igor Bandura is vice president of the Ukrainian Baptist Union.*