



EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

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Be Our Voice: Ukrainian Evangelicals' Transatlantic Ties

Ukrainian Week—an annual forum enabling Ukrainian Evangelicals to convene with their American counterparts—has been held in Washington, DC since February 2022 (<https://uaweek.org>). This year more than a thousand American delegates joined more than 300 from Ukraine to discuss the political, spiritual, and humanitarian ramifications of Russia's full-scale invasion.

"This is a very similar story," Ukrainian Pastor Pavlo Ungaryan suggested to a crowd huddled amid deep snowbanks outside the US Capitol during this February's forum. "How our nations fight against empires,

how we fight together for freedom and democracy, for our faith and freedom." His address was preceded by those of eight congressmen and congresswomen—all Democrats—urging new sanctions due to Russia's ongoing attacks (Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, Eugene Vindman of Virginia, Steny Hoyer of Maryland, James Costa of California, Lloyd Doggett of Texas, Maggie Goodlander of New Hampshire, and Thomas Suozzi of New York).

A few Republicans also support their initiative—the editor of the East-West Church Report was present when one delegation of Ukrainians, including several pastors, visited the office of Republican Congressman Don Bacon of Nebraska—but it has proven challenging for Ukrainian Evangelicals to convey their concerns to Republican voters, even though many are fellow Evangelicals. Some popular figures on the right of American politics—such as media commentator Tucker Carlson and former Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene—have praised Putin's Russia while accusing Ukraine of religious persecution (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/russian-propaganda-finds-sympathetic-ears-among-u-s-religious-right>).

Screened at the Russian Embassy in DC in February 2025, a documentary produced by Serbian film director Emil Kusturica and entitled *People of Christ—Our Time* presented a similar argument that Ukraine—"the territory of our Russian church"—



Outside the US Capitol on 3 February 2026, Pastor Mikhailo Brytsyn displays photos of the seizure by Russian forces of his church in Melitopol, occupied Ukraine. (G. FAGAN)

is being destroyed by the West (<https://ruschurchusa.org/en/2025/02/15/68495/>). However, this film fails to mention the massive destruction of Ukraine wrought by Russia's military, including hundreds of Orthodox churches belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which Russia purports to be defending (www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRqkGa9ng50).

In May 2025 the editor of the East-West Church Report attended the premiere at the Museum of the Bible in downtown DC of *A Faith Under Siege*, an American documentary seeking to counter such messaging

by highlighting the suffering of Evangelicals under Russian occupation (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EAgfWdsyAA). Providing much of the documentary's imagery, most churches that have been damaged or destroyed due to the Russian invasion belong to the UOC (<https://www.mar.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Report-February-2025-1.pdf>). According to Mission Eurasia—declared an "undesirable organization" by Russia on 13 May 2026)—UOC members further account for 22 of 54 clergy "killed in various regions of Ukraine as a result of arrests, abductions, torture, and abuse by Russian forces in the occupied territories; executions at checkpoints; targeted shelling of civilian populations; and indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure using artillery, missiles, and aerial bombs" (https://missioneurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Continued-War-Against-Faith-REVISED_ALT_ONLINE_PAGES.pdf).

The principal concern of some American Orthodox, however, including a delegation visiting Capitol Hill during November 2025, has been directed towards the far less severe—while still questionable—way in which the Ukrainian authorities have sought to deal with elements within the UOC who still sympathize with Russia (<https://religionnews.com/2025/11/21/orthodox-christian-clergy-call-on-us-officials-drawing-accusations-of-russian-influence>).

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Editorial (continued from page 1)

Four years on from the full-scale invasion, there are now signs that Evangelical lobbying in the US is having an impact. Three million US voters have viewed *A Faith Under Siege*, the documentary's executive producer Steven E. Moore told a religious freedom event during this year's Ukrainian Week. In recent months Ukrainian Pastors Vitaliy Orlov and Valentyn Syniy—both interviewed in this issue—have shared with American readers the ongoing war's devastating impact upon their communities through their English-language books, *Great God in the Terrible War in Ukraine* and *Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community*. Introduced in the US House of Representatives on 22 April, a bipartisan bill—"Countering Russia's War on Faith Act"—aims to sanction foreign persons found to have engaged in "efforts by the Government of the Russian Federation to persecute, suppress, discriminate, or otherwise violate the religious freedoms of Ukraine and temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine" (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/8433/all-info>).

This issue of the East-West Church Report features interviews with Ukrainian Evangelicals active in dialogue with their American counterparts, including at *Ukrainian Week*. ♦



Closing prayer following the premiere of *A Faith Under Siege* in Washington, DC on 6 May 2025 (G. FAGAN)

“The causes of this war are mainly spiritual”: An Interview with Pastor Vitaliy Orlov

Born in Kharkiv in northeastern Ukraine, Vitaliy Orlov is one of a team of pastors at Sumy Christian Church, which he describes as “midway between Pentecostal and Charismatic.” The city of Sumy lies only approximately 25 miles (40 km) from Ukraine’s northeastern border with Russia and has therefore suffered frequent Russian bombardment.

The editor of the East-West Church Report first met Pastor Vitaliy during Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC in early February 2026. For this interview, she spoke to him remotely in late April while he was traveling on church business in Poland. The original conversation took place in Russian.

How has the community of Sumy Christian Church changed since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?

About half of our community—especially those serving in the church who have young children—left for different countries around the world, mostly Europe. Unfortunately we have fewer young people now, but many new people have come. Around 30,000 people were evacuated to the city of Sumy from those districts of Sumy Region that lie along the border with Russia, where military action is taking place. There is no life there now—everything has been bombed. I remember driving through those areas earlier and seeing large, beautiful villages where people lived in peace, but now there are no houses left. The people who have come to us from those parts are middle-aged or elderly. They have no work or place to live—a catastrophic situation. Russia has brought us great tragedy.

You have documented this—as well as positive testimonies amid the war—in a recent short book, *Great God in the Terrible War in Ukraine*. How did you collect this material?

In the very first days of the war I became acutely aware that I needed to record this history. Intelligence agencies of major nations said that Ukraine would not last two weeks against the second greatest army in the world. Yet Ukraine essentially destroyed Russia’s entire Black Sea Fleet, even though we have practically no navy! (Laughs.) It is a miracle. There are many stories like that, in which God simply saved people. I believe God stands for Ukraine, not because we are special but because God stands for His word and His principles—He stands for freedom.

You wrote in your book: “The Lord did not take away the pain instantly, but gave the strength to survive it. He did not stop the war with a single word, but gave the ability to stand, fight and not lose hope. It is in this tension, among the ruins and losses, that a deep truth is revealed: when a person reaches the limit of his capabilities, God’s grace begins to act.”

Shortly after your book was published in January 2026 it was distributed during Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC. How did you forge connections with the American Christians who gather there, particularly those active in politics?

We have long enjoyed good relations, even before the war. Most senators and congressmen publicly support Ukraine, as well as around 70 percent of the American public. We are friends with—and pray with—very many American Christians who are sincere believers.

The first Ukrainian Week was held two or three weeks before the full-scale invasion. It was a joint project organized by Ukrainians from Ukraine, Ukrainians resident in the United States, and Americans who understood its importance. At that time, of course, we didn't plan to speak much about the war, although the media were already talking about a possible invasion. While we discussed and prayed about the situation, we wanted to emphasize Christian values that can influence society for the better, not the war.



At Washington, DC's memorial to victims of the 1932-33 Holodomor famine, Pastor Vitaliy Orlov (right, in front of US flag) stands alongside fellow pastors during this year's Ukrainian Week. (G. FAGAN)

Evangelical Christians in American have traditionally supported the Republican Party, but the current Republican administration has treated Russia's President Putin favorably, as demonstrated by his visit to Alaska last summer, for example. When you encounter American Christians, do you find it challenging to discuss the war in Ukraine with them?

While Christians in America mainly support Ukraine, we do see some influence of Russian propaganda over them, unfortunately. I can give an example. In Arizona I met an American pastor of a large church with several thousand members—a missionary who travels a lot. Almost the first thing he said to me was, "Your Zelenskyy is banning churches." This isn't true!

Did his view change once you had spoken with him?

Yes. He was a very sincere person. He had no dislike of Ukraine—he had just heard this and believed it. He knew no alternative. When we spoke further, he understood. After some weeks he had to travel to Washington to meet someone close to the White House. I thought to myself, "What if he, going there, had started to speak about churches in Ukraine,

repeating distorted information?" There is a famous American journalist, Tucker Carlson. Since he criticized Israel he is no longer as accepted among American Christians as he used to be, but very many people listened to him nearer to the time of the full-scale invasion. [Editor's note: Carlson and some other prominent Republicans publicly assessed the Ukrainian government's attempts to restrict the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as religious persecution while failing to mention Russia's severe persecution of believers in occupied Ukraine, particularly Evangelicals.]

There are also Russian Protestants who have tried to convince the American Christian elite that Russia is the bulwark of traditional values—against LGBT and so on. There is a whole mechanism at work. People are also poorly informed. They don't entirely understand what is going on in Russia—that the causes of this war are mainly spiritual. There is no logic to Putin's aggression—there is a vast amount of land in Russia and the Kremlin used to have lucrative contracts with the West. Given the amount of oil and other resources that Russia has, people there could have the same standard of living as in Dubai, but an insatiable imperialist appetite motivates Putin and his team.

Another spiritual component is that, more than a decade ago, Ukraine outlawed Communist ideology. All Communist statues were removed and all Communist names of towns and streets were changed. That is, according to Christian—biblical—understanding, we were liberated from idols that used to be worshipped, with their names constantly being repeated. In Russia the opposite is the case—they are once again erecting statues of Stalin. When the Russians occupied the Ukrainian town of Henichesk [port north of Crimea], for example, one of the first things that they did was to reinstate a statue of Lenin.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, freedom came equally to Russia and Ukraine. Yet in Russia now, freedom to preach the Gospel does not exist. That is, churches are told they can operate, but only inside their houses of worship. Russia is working on a law that would make it illegal for house groups to gather for prayer in private homes. [Editor's note: Consideration of draft legislation that would ban worship services and other religious gatherings on residential premises was initiated in Russia's parliament in mid-February 2026.] Several Christian organizations have been called extremist, while the Jehovah's Witnesses are already banned as an extremist organization. While I don't support their beliefs, this is a question of freedom.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, there is total freedom to preach the Gospel. The largest Prayer Breakfast in Europe takes place in Ukraine. Prayers and Bible readings take place in 90 offices of regional governors and mayors, as well as the Verkhovna Rada [Ukrainian national parliament]. That is the level of freedom that we have.

These are all spiritual causes of the war. Beyond the visible world lies the spiritual world. It may be little known to us, but the Bible speaks about it very clearly. ♦

A testimony excerpted from Pastor Vitaliy Orlov's recent book, *Great God in the Terrible War in Ukraine* (Intercissors for Ukraine, January 2026, p. 65). Reprinted by permission of the author.

The Lord Led Us Out of Occupied Kherson, November 2022

“For the rest of my life, I will remember our departure from Kherson on Easter. I thank God for all the ways He has led us. We passed 52 checkpoints at that time. At each of them, we were surrounded by Russian soldiers with machine guns. And between the posts on the way, we saw them everywhere—they were like locusts: in the field, by the road, in trenches, in forests, in military vehicles that overtook us at high speed. And we barely had time to turn to the side of the road so as not to get hit by an armored personnel carrier. When we reached one of the settlements, there was already a 5-kilometer (3-mile) convoy of cars with small children, the elderly, the disabled, and pregnant women. And everyone felt a huge fear. From 5 p.m. to 9 a.m., we stayed in a mined field. And at night, Grads flew over the convoy. I remember that night as a nightmare! In the car at night, I began to suffocate as I was attacked by panic fear. My heart was beating at breakneck speed, and there were ‘fireworks’ in the field. I thought that this night would be the last for our family, and it seemed to last forever. We did not close our eyes for a second — we constantly prayed not only for ourselves, but also for the entire convoy, that God would give us the strength to go through all this and save everyone.

“God saved and remained faithful to His word which He gave me in prayer before leaving Kherson: ‘But you will not go out in haste; ye shall not flee as they flee, for the Lord shall go before you; He, the God of Israel, will protect you behind.’ (Isaiah 52:12)

“We met the dawn in the field with tears in our eyes with joy that everyone was alive. We praised God and gave thanks for His mercy and faithfulness to His word. Passing the checkpoint at 9 a.m., where our Ukrainian soldiers met us, hugging and comforting us, we could not yet come to our senses after the terrible night that we experienced in the field. We were fed, given hot tea and coffee, and each soldier heartily ministered to us with love and compassion (understanding that we went through a fire that did not burn us). And for them, it was also a miracle.” ♦



“If a sin is not repented of, it will continue”:

An Interview with Pastor Valentyn Syniy



Pastor Valentyn Syniy
(Source: V. SYNIY)

From the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine, Pastor Valentyn Syniy is the director of Tavriski Christian Institute (TCI). Founded in 1997 to train pastors in response to rapid growth in Ukrainian Protestant churches following the Soviet collapse, TCI acquired a residential campus on the outskirts of Kherson in 2003, overlooking the Dnieper River. TCI was accredited as an educational institution by the Ukrainian authorities in 2019.

*When Russian forces seized Kherson city in the wake of their full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, they also occupied TCI's campus. The city was liberated by Ukraine's military in November 2022, but the campus had been ruined by the occupiers and remains closed. Within hours of the invasion, its personnel had evacuated to western Ukraine. Pastor Valentyn narrates this experience in a compelling recent book, translated into English as *Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2025).*

Now living in Kyiv, Pastor Valentyn attends and sometimes preaches at Transformation, a local Baptist church. His team is working to re-establish TCI in the Ukrainian capital.

In late February 2026 the editor of the East-West Church Report spoke with Valentyn in his Kyiv office via Zoom. Electricity had just been restored there after a three-week outage due to Russian bombing. For the same reason, his family home in the capital remained without heating, even as temperatures hovered around freezing. The interview took place in Russian.

We are speaking on 25 February, the day after the fourth anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Back then, your home city of Kherson was occupied within a week. Did you find the severity of the invasion surprising? Or did you have an earlier sense of what would occur?

Around November 2021 our partners in America began to call us saying that there was discussion in the American news about the possibility of an attack on Ukraine. Our family received proposals to relocate to Colorado, Nebraska, or Turkey. While we turned those down, this led us to consult with an American military intelligence expert friend at the start of January 2022—in my book, he appears as “Ethan Norton.” So we were thinking about preparations in response to an attack, but no one thought that it would happen so fast.

We were probably one of the first seminaries to start evacuating people. It all happened in a matter of days—others quickly joined the effort, and many organizations became involved in helping people. “Ethan” flew in within days of the invasion and began training our and other teams in methods of evacuation in Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi, and other cities.

Did you decide to evacuate to Ivano-Frankivsk because you had connections there?

We did have some links. Around late January or early February 2022 we wrote to some of our partners saying that, in case of war, we would move to Ivano-Frankivsk, and giving the name of a local person there whom they could contact in case something happened to us. So we knew where we would go, which meant that our colleagues were initially all in one place. As the war continued, those who had the right to leave the country did so.

Was the reaction of the wider population of Kherson to the invasion similar to your own?

Yes. The road from Kherson to the city of Mykolaiv [approximately 45 miles or 70 kilometers northwest of Kherson] has two lanes in either direction. When we left, however, three or four lanes—if we include the emergency lane—were moving in the same direction. Only one lane remained empty, except for passing Ukrainian military. Otherwise, there was just this huge column of vehicles moving out of Kherson. Naturally, not everyone was able to leave. Some people did not have a car or were too sick to move, while many others were slow to decide.

Here, my and my father’s perspectives on mission were different. My father, Sergei Syniy, is pastor of a Baptist

church that he founded in Kherson in 1995. He understood that his church was tied to the people living nearby and that he had to serve them. We understood that our aim as an educational institution was to teach new pastors, meaning that we could and should move. When we discussed this before the full-scale invasion, we also understood that we could organize humanitarian aid if we left, which other pastors in Kherson probably could not have done. It was a very complicated question emotionally—whether to leave our home, our church. When we consider it now, however, we think it was probably the right decision.

Is your father still in Kherson?

Yes, he remains there to this day. It is very difficult for him to be there, as his health is poor. I am able to visit, but not as often as I would like.

Does your family have a Protestant background?

Yes. My grandfather on my father’s side was a prisoner of war in Germany. Soon after his return he came to faith. My grandmother was already a devout Protestant, and they encountered very intense persecution under the Communists—they were fired from their jobs and attempts



Worship at Tavriski Christian Institute in November 2021, prior to Russian occupation (Source: V. SYNIY)

were made to jail them. The situation was similar on my mother’s side of the family. My maternal grandmother moved to Kherson from Syzran [Samara Region, Russia] before marrying my grandfather, who was already in Kherson Region. They both came to faith there. That grandfather was already a believer—he came from a very God-fearing

Orthodox family and quickly assimilated into the Baptist church. All this meant that both my parents were believers from childhood and experienced intense Communist persecution. I was also raised in the church.

Returning to February 2022, did the personnel of Tavriski Christian Institute take the decision to leave collectively?

Most of us decided to leave. Three or four families decided to stay, mostly because they had sick relatives or could not leave for some other reason. There were two families who joined in all our discussions but were still afraid to go—they did leave later on. Prior to the full-scale invasion, we had around seven discussions during which we suggested leaving. Naturally, people don’t make the decision the first time.

How long did it take you to evacuate your team from Kherson?

We began to call each other at 5 a.m. on 24 February.

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Syniy Interview *(continued from page 5)*

The last car left eight hours after that. We were in the last car. We were more or less ready. We had already looked to see what we could and could not take from the TCI campus. We came to the conclusion that there was no point in taking cheaper items, such as plates and dishes. Our main concern was to save people's lives, and after that important documents and financial resources. We had different people each take care of children, documents, vehicles, and so on. This meant that we were able to leave more or less by 1 p.m. on the day of the invasion.

Did it take long for you to reach Ivano-Frankivsk?

Yes. Due to this great flow of people in three or four columns of vehicles, our car did not head towards Nova Odesa [some 70 miles or 110 kilometers northwest of Kherson], which is where the rest of our group went. We headed further north, to the city of Kropyvnytskyi [formerly Kirovohrad, still the administrative center of Kirovohrad region]. Our family spent the night there, while the rest of the team spent the first night in Nova Odesa, at a horse breeding farm run by Christians. On the second day we all met near Uman [100 miles or 165 kilometers west of Kropyvnytskyi] and traveled together to the city of Chernivtsi. We stayed in a village near Chernivtsi called Vitryanka. We reached Ivano-Frankivsk towards evening on the third day, 26 February. Prior to the invasion, the same journey would have taken 10 or 11 hours.

Did you see indications of warfare on the way?

We were under fire as we left Kherson—the shooting had started at 5 a.m. We saw Kherson's airport burning. As we were leaving we also saw Russian and Ukrainian helicopters firing at one another. While we were further away that night in Kropyvnytskyi, there was bombing in that area the following day. We did not directly experience military activity in Ivano-Frankivsk. There was some bombing in western Ukraine at the time, but significantly less.

After we arrived in Ivano-Frankivsk it took a long time for everyone to get settled. A lot of people from different parts of Ukraine were already there—Sumy, Kharkiv, Kyiv. Many were trying to reach the border. Due to our prior evacuation arrangements, we were not—we had organized hostel accommodation. We had bought a bus shortly before leaving Kherson and we bought a second one within days of arriving in Ivano-Frankivsk. Soon after that we began to organize further evacuations from Kherson. The two buses were able to reach the city very quickly, of course, but the

return journey was much more difficult, partly because there was a curfew every night. Travel was later permitted if you were evacuating people, and so we quickly had documents drawn up that allowed our volunteers to travel by night.

You previously did not know western Ukraine very well?

I had been to Ivano-Frankivsk only once in my whole life!

Your book contains fascinating reflections on cultural differences within Ukraine, even between Protestant churches.

I describe this in a chapter called “Cross-Pollination” [Ukrainian: *Pereopylennya*]. I probably edited it ten times! I did not want to be overcritical of Ivano-Frankivsk—the city that

received us is also Ukrainian, after all. But the Protestant churches there follow different practices and we found them challenging. They insisted that women cover their heads in church, for example, and one of our guys was reproached for having a shaved head. I grew up in a culture of partnership. In southern Ukraine, I had no problem conversing with Pentecostals, Charismatics, Orthodox or Catholics. But when I visited Catholics once in western Ukraine, a senior Baptist summoned me and spoke to me at length about how Baptists have no right to talk to them.

I was also anxious for my book not to come across as messianic—during periods of suffering, people can present themselves as very strong: “I can do everything—I know everything.” We

now have some theologians in Ukraine who look down upon American and European theologians: “We have gone through suffering; we will teach you. You don't have the right to say anything to us.” I am wary of that, because I do think that Christians in other countries have the right to speak to us. They read the Bible just like we do. We are in one Holy Spirit.

Might something positive have come from all these encounters?

A great deal of good came out of it. In Kherson we had a tradition of Baptist pastors meeting once a month for supper, for example. They would just meet, without talking about religious matters. This tradition took root in Ivano-Frankivsk after our arrival, and it has been going on for these past four years—local pastors meet for supper once a month. In the same way, some things we saw our brothers do in Ivano-Frankivsk influenced us. This is what I mean by “cross-pollination.”

Could the contrasting church practices in Ivano-Frankivsk derive from its distinctive history? The city lies in the far western portion of Ukraine that belonged to the



Cover illustration for the Ukrainian version of *Serving God Under Siege* (Source: V. SYNIY)

Habsburg Empire and then independent Poland prior to the Second World War.

Yes, they are connected. If we look at the history of the Protestant movement in Ukraine, there are a minimum of three tendencies. Indigenous Protestants first appeared in 1861 with the Stundist movement in southern Ukraine. The Stundists were influenced by Mennonites and Lutherans who had come from Germany and established farms. In Zaporizhzhia Region—to the east of Kherson Region—Mennonites predominated. They were more likely to form closed communities who did not speak to Orthodox or anyone else. Westwards, from Kherson along the coast of the Black Sea, Lutheran influence was greater. The indigenous Protestant movement there consisted of two groups—Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Prior to the Second World War, Evangelical Christian and Baptist churches had somewhat different cultures. [Editor’s note: In 1944, under Soviet pressure, the two groups merged as the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.] Evangelical Christian churches usually had collegiate administration—a collective—consisting of several pastors. Baptist churches usually had a single pastor. Historically, Baptist churches typically organized new churches in villages, whereas Evangelical Christian churches organized new churches in towns and were more directed towards cultured society.

In the west of Ukraine, Protestant churches typically appeared due to re-immigration—that is, migrants who went to America or Canada and became believers there sometimes returned as missionaries. They founded purely Baptist, hierarchical churches. In Volyn Region [far northwestern Ukraine] another subculture exists, while Transcarpathia [bordering Hungary and Slovakia] has a different history altogether. In Chernivtsi—part of Bukovina [a region belonging to the Habsburg Empire and then independent Romania prior to the Second World War]—they are very open to diversity. Chernivtsi and Ivano-Frankivsk are right



next to each other, but in Chernivtsi no one will bother you if you speak Romanian or Russian in public, whereas speaking Russian on a bus in Ivano-Frankivsk would not be acceptable, as language is perceived there not as a communication tool but as the primary criterion of identity.

Historically, southern Ukraine was influenced by the Cossacks—Ukrainians distinguished by their desire for freedom and willingness to defend it with arms. The south is also influenced by the proximity of Greeks and Crimean Tatars, later by German colonists, and by seafarers. Trade, food exchange, and visits to coastal resorts create a completely different atmosphere. From Odesa to Melitopol the local culture is therefore generally more open. Further east, in the Donbas, there are many mines and prisons—and so church culture there differs as well.

In your book there are rich insights into all this diversity. There you also describe your complex interactions with Russian Protestants in the wake of the full-scale invasion.

During the first phase of the war most Russian Evangelicals did not want to speak with us. They said everything that was happening was fake, and that we should pay attention only to the kingdom of heaven, not to what was going on on earth. We became isolated from one another. These events had a great effect upon me personally. At some point before the liberation of Kherson [November 2022] one of our local church families was taken to Russia—a husband, wife, and two children.

Taken by force?

It turned out that the husband very much wanted to go to Russia and so he took his wife and children, who didn’t want to go. Some people were afraid to leave occupation because the Russians started insisting prior to Kherson’s liberation that the Ukrainians would destroy the city. The wife managed to get a message to us that she wanted to leave Russia. We worked with Russian people who were able to get her out. A famous volunteer from Russia who helped her leave, Aleksandr Demidenko, was later murdered in a Russian

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Above and top right: Photos from an exhibition by Pastor Valentyn’s sister, Tetiana, *The Story of One Kitchen*. They show displaced TCI youth during curfew in Ivano-Frankivsk in the weeks following evacuation from Kherson. (T. SYNIA)

jail. He saved many Ukrainians [see www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/13/a-russian-pacifist-helped-ukrainians-flee-the-country-then-the-kremlin-caught-him.]

When Aleksandr Demidenko was killed, I realized that I wanted to compile a personal list of righteous people from Russia, similar to the one introduced by Israel. [Editor's note: After the Second World War, Israel awarded the honorific title "Righteous Among the Nations" to non-Jews who had risked their lives saving Jews from the Holocaust.] There are now four people on my list. It is important to me that, instead of making sweeping statements, I recognize those who have spoken out against Putin and taken action, such as Pastor Nikolai Romanyuk. The problem is that there are very few such believers in Russia.

[Editor's note: In September 2025 the Russian authorities sentenced Nikolai Romanyuk, pastor of Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church near Moscow, to four years in a general-regime labor camp for a pacifist sermon in which he remarked, "This is not our war." See https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=3000.]

Have you personally encountered any change in attitude among Russian Protestants since the war began?

At an international Christian conference in 2024 I was approached by three people from Russian Protestant seminaries. They began by asking, "How are things?" In my understanding, there is a distinction between personal relationships and official ones—those in which

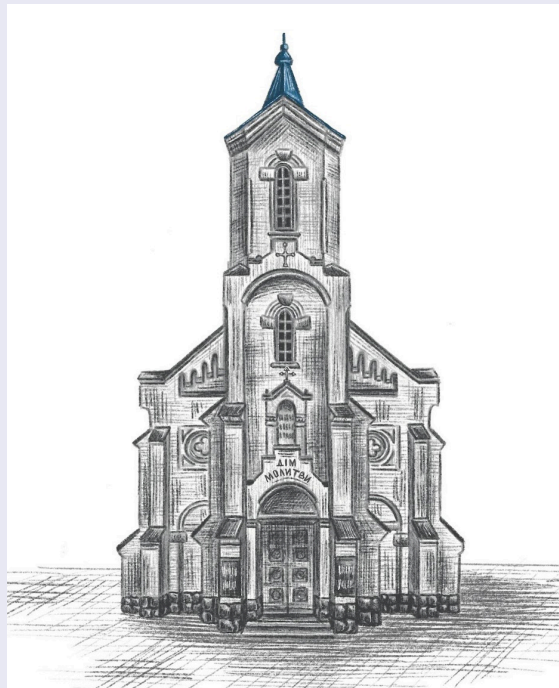
we represent an organization, a people, or a church and speak from a broader, representative position. If someone approaches me on a purely personal level, I won't withdraw, even if the situation feels a bit uncomfortable. I don't feel guilty, nor do I feel the need to hide or apologize. So we continued the conversation. However, at a certain point, they began introducing various political comments.

To me, that shifts the conversation into a different category—one where we are no longer speaking merely as individuals, but as representatives of a people, a church, or an organization. So my response was, "Listen, if you want to speak about something on a political level, then you should give your opinion. Are you for or against Putin? State your position, and then we can continue this conversation, otherwise I don't wish to continue it. Do you now agree that Putin and the Russian military and the Russian people are killing Ukrainians? In that case we will continue the conversation."

These three then said, "This is politics, we can't talk about it." I answered, "It is you who approached me—you know that we are all being destroyed and that I have lost everything. You switched from a conversation about personal matters to a political one. If you want to continue, I will not record you or post about it on Facebook. Only tell me your personal position." But they broke off the conversation, saying, "This is politics, we don't wish to talk about it." After that I came to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of Russians must support Putin if those three spoke like that, even while sitting abroad in a cafe where nobody was recording or filming them. Perhaps some opponents have fled the country, but I think they are very few—as was the case in Hitler's Germany in Bonhoeffer's time. For Christians, this is a betrayal of values, not betrayal of the state. My conviction

is that very many Russian Christians have chosen loyalty to Putin over loyalty to Christ.

As I was traveling to another international conference in 2025 I met a senior Russian Baptist. We ended up speaking—very calmly—for two hours. Even in confidence, he said, "I sympathize with you, but it is my understanding that Ukrainians are also to blame. You were very aggressive towards us." When I asked for some evidence of this, he could not offer any. Basically, I see that Russian Christians who made statements at the start of the war along the lines of, "Well, I don't know anything about whether you are being bombed or not," by 2025 were able to travel abroad and access the internet freely. Yet they have still chosen loyalty to Putin. I can say that about the ones I have met, at least.



Baptist church in Ivano-Frankivsk—one of the chapter illustrations by Maryna Polegenko in *Serving God Under Siege* (Source: V. SYNIY)

After the Soviet regime fell, many observers focused on its ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. Largely forgotten is that, when the central KGB archives were briefly opened in the early 1990s and details emerged of collaboration between prominent religious leaders and the regime, they included agent code names of Protestant leaders as well as Orthodox bishops. Does it seem to you that Soviet influence is more deeply ingrained in the general outlook of Russian Protestants?

Yes. During his 1970 visit to Poland, West German chancellor Willy Brandt fell on his knees in apology for the crimes of the previous period. In Russia there has never been a similar condemnation of the Communist regime. In Russia nobody came out and said, "You know, we killed millions of people. We caused the Holodomor famine. We invaded many countries." In particular, nobody from the Christian community has made a statement like that. My point here is

that, if a sin is not repented of, it will continue.

There is a second point in relation to Soviet religious policy, at least with respect to Ukraine—I am not sure about Armenia, Georgia, or the countries of Central Asia. Whenever there were popular protests in Ukraine, whether the Orange Revolution [2004-5], Maidan [2013-14] or the Revolution on Granite before them [1990], the churches came out on the side of the people. They put up tents, made tea, and prayed. The churches chose to walk with the people. If we look at protests in Russia, the religious leaders came out in support of the politicians and reprimanded the people, saying, “Why are you rising up against the tsar?” This difference in mindset—whether the churches supported the people or the state—has now led to the formation of the “Russian World” theology.

In your book you relate some astonishing examples of Russian Protestant soldiers with similar attitudes.

Yes, this shocked me greatly. One case was a Baptist, the other a Pentecostal. The Pentecostal soldier was one of those who occupied our campus. He stole a bible from my office and used it to preach to our security guards. He had passed through a rehabilitation center—he was a former drug addict who then became head of the center and led some form of ministry. Then he volunteered to fight in Ukraine. No one forced him to go—he didn’t receive call-up papers. He went because of the money.

A similar situation occurred elsewhere in occupied Kherson Region. Two Russian soldiers approached the pastor of a Baptist church one evening and said, “We would like to join your communion service somehow. Please give us communion.” The pastor was appalled. “On the one hand, you come with weapons, you steal food, you threaten our people. On the other, you come and say, “I’m a believer, a Baptist. I would like to receive communion, but in such a way that your church doesn’t know about it.”



There was also a third case, not in my book. The Russians who seized our campus found a copy of the King James Bible in our library and deliberately placed it in a puddle on a pathway so that soldiers would step on it as they passed by. This profoundly shocked us.

They put it there because it was in English?

Yes. Their concepts of spirituality are blurred. They have an understanding of spirituality as the absence of homosexuality, but that is all. You can even kill someone, as long as you are “fighting the West.”

Prior to the full-scale invasion, the Russian-backed Luhansk People’s Republic in eastern Ukraine banned a 2015 edition of St. John’s Gospel as “extremist,” even though it was the same Synodal Russian translation made and used by the Russian Orthodox Church (see the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 29 [2021], no. 3, 7-10). Are you familiar with the present situation for Protestant churches in the portion of Kherson Region that remains under Russian occupation?

I know that the Russian authorities are insisting that all churches there re-register. They are simply categorical about this. They collect people’s passports in order to register churches, even threatening pastors with jail if they don’t comply. They have also simply seized some church buildings for military use. For example, they seized a large new church building in Novotroitske [approximately 30 miles or 45 kilometers north of Crimea]. A Russian officer lived there and forced the women in the settlement to take care of the vegetable garden—they grew food for him while he lived in the church.

Many churches have also been ruined. Today there are far fewer people in Kherson Region than before the invasion—the Baptist community has decreased by around 80 percent. Before the war there were around 80 Protestant churches in Kherson Region, while now we hear that there are 20. That is the same number as under the Communists, who permitted only one Protestant church per city or major town.

(continued on page 10)



Above and top right: The devastated site of Tavriski Christian Institute, seen following liberation from Russian occupation in November 2022 (Source: V. SYNIY)

Syniy Interview *(continued from page 9)*

Essentially, we saw all these horrors under the Communists. In the ongoing Russian war we are seeing even harsher things. They have jailed pastors in cellars and murdered people.

In your book you describe the harsh experience in Russian detention of your former student, Pastor Yuriy Birzov, as well as even more severe abuse suffered by the son of the Ukrainian Bible Society's executive director. Both are now free, and Kherson has been liberated, yet the city is far from safe (see "Hunted from Above," *Human Rights Watch*, 3 June 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/06/03/hunted-from-above/russia-use-of-drones-to-attack-civilians-in-kherson-ukraine>).

Very much so. Kherson is one of the most dangerous

cities in Ukraine right now. As you enter there are nets above the roads to protect from the many drones carrying bombs. Yet no defence is effective because the Russian artillery is also firing from just across the Dnieper River. The launch, flash, and bang of each shell occur simultaneously, meaning that it is impossible to hide. The population of Kherson has decreased so greatly because it is under such heavy attack.

Do you therefore intend to continue the work of Tavriski Christian Institute in Kyiv?

Yes. Our main challenge now is to restore the educational process, as our tuition is currently mostly informal. We are also trying to restore the library—the Russian occupiers destroyed its 30,000 volumes—and to raise funds to purchase a building. Without infrastructure, retaining an educational institution is impossible. ♦

An excerpt (pp. 198-200) from Pastor Valentyn Syniy's book *Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2025). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

This dull rainy day resonated even stronger in my soul this time because I will soon be traveling to the United States. For two weeks I will have to immerse myself in the American culture, face many bright and polite smiles, and I will have to smile back, talk about our ministry here... but what to do when on the inside there is absolutely no incentive or reason for joy. The war has taken its toll on us Ukrainians.

I don't know what tools professional therapists use to help those who experienced the hardships of war firsthand. We did not have the opportunity to dispatch a psychologist to everyone we bring from occupied territories. I can only state one thing: our people recovered on their own, as much as they could. A fair objection can be raised here: Did they really? Maybe under the constant stress of the war they just have to hide their emotions deeper. I don't know. We Ukrainians still have to live with it and deal with it. Maybe in the future we will have to train rehabilitation specialists and mental trauma therapists, but that is still in the future. Today we are what we are. That is why we need to have patience with one another, because everyone has had their own share of traumatic experiences, and they continue to live with it.

"I jumped up in horror!" says Vitaliy, a resettler from Kharkiv. "Are they really shelling us again?!"

It turned out that the utility workers had just dropped a heavy garbage bin outside. Even now, the man still suffers from panic attacks and insomnia. He's a law professor. He and his wife were forced to spend a week in a bomb shelter in their hometown of Saltivka (the largest residential neighborhood in Kharkiv), under artillery fire. At the first opportunity, they left, taking with them just their cat, leaving everything else behind.

"My mom stepped out of her house to visit her friends, and it saved her." Oleksandr, our student from Kherson, shares his painful memories. "A shell hit our apartment. Everything we've accumulated over the years was destroyed in a second."

These were the many horrific manifestations of the Russian World for many Ukrainians. Its influence is monstrously traumatizing, even if you observe it from a distance. The war taught me a lesson—people do break down and are much harder to fix than cars. I observed this in the lives of our students, whom we evacuated on the first day of the war. They lost their ability to rest. They could not read books, watch movies, or simply relax. Some could even do inappropriate things. War has a way of driving people crazy, literally. It is not something you want to get more of.

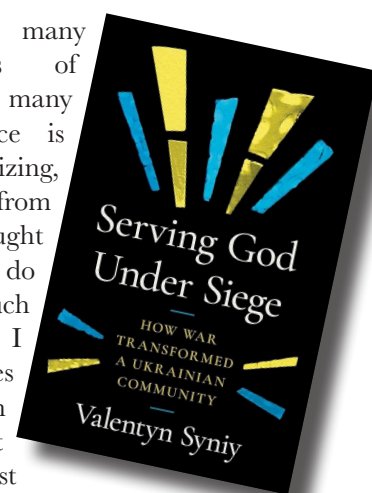
And yet there were those who were able to overcome their personal trauma, such as our student Nika.

"My dad died in a tank," she says calmly.

We didn't believe Nika would be able to recover from the loss of a loved one. But after a while she immersed herself in theology and hardly ever left the library. Studying became her coping mechanism.

When we were able to evacuate Maryna, my sister-in-law, from Nova Kakhovka, she walked in a bent position for two weeks—she was afraid of gunshots and explosions. It was impossible to look at her without sympathy. One would think that in a safe city, in a safe place, people would loosen up, shake off the oppressive experience. Maryna had to relearn to speak in full voice and walk with a straight back. It was the stamp of war. Maryna lived five kilometers away from the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, which the Russians captured on the first day of the full-scale invasion. Not far from her home the Russians stationed multiple rocket launchers spewing thousands of deadly rounds.

How can something like this leave your soul unscathed? ♦



“My husband said God would give me a better thing. We cannot see around the corner”: An Interview with Tetiana Chumakova



Tetiana Chumakova is director of the International Alliance for the Development of Christian Education, headquartered in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. She was born in Donetsk in southeastern Ukraine, since 2014 controlled by Russia. Tetiana holds two master’s degrees: one in primary school education and music earned from the Pedagogical University in Ternopil, western Ukraine, in 1995; the second in geographical economics, awarded by the Institute of Social Education, Donetsk, in 2007.

Mark R. Elliott, editor emeritus of the East-West Church Report, interviewed Tetiana at Chisinau Christian University in the Moldovan capital, Chisinau, in late October 2025. The occasion was a summit of Evangelical pastors sponsored by School Without Walls, a training program of US-based Mission Eurasia. The conversation took place in English.

Tetiana Chumakova
(Source: T. CHUMAKOVA)

Can you share something of your personal background?

My mother is from a family of Greeks from the Azov region and my father is Ukrainian. As a child I attended a Catholic church with a priest who told stories of Jesus that I really loved. When I was 15 I thought to myself that I am about the age of Mary when Jesus was born. At first I wanted to be like Mary, but in time I saw that above all I wanted to be like Jesus. God led me to an Evangelical church where at age 17 I accepted Jesus as my savior. I was baptized in a Baptist church in Donetsk on the day after my eighteenth birthday.

I met my husband in our Baptist church on New Year’s Day in 1995. My husband graduated from Odesa Baptist Seminary in 1997, the same year that we married. It was then a difficult time in the economic life of Donetsk. [Editor’s note: Many factories closed in the Donbas Region in the economic downturn of the 1990s.]

What has been your work in public and private school education?

For five years [1995—99] I taught music in a public school in Donetsk. Then in March 1999 I attended a conference in St. Petersburg that changed my life. It was sponsored by the Association of Christian Schools International [ACSI] based in the United States. It was at this conference that I met Ray and Cindy LeClair, who led the ACSI ministry in the independent countries of the former Soviet Union and who motivated me to start a private Christian school. Four of us from Donetsk at the conference returned home to launch Gloria Christian School in 1999. I served as a primary school teacher in this school from 1999 to 2007, and then I served as the principal from 2007 to 2014, while also teaching geography and economics. For years I attended every conference that the LeClairs organized through ACSI.

What are some of the basic principles that underpin your approach to private Christian education?

It is not Sunday school. Every subject is part of God’s creation. The lectures by American educators were interesting, but I wanted to adapt their ideas for the Ukrainian curriculum. I changed everything to fit our culture and situation. Ray LeClair told me that ours was one of the best schools in Ukraine. It was his opinion, not my words.

Did the present war begin for you in 2014, after the Revolution of Dignity centered on Kyiv’s Maidan Square?

Yes, our school was closed in 2014. Russian soldiers came to our school and said we had 20 minutes to leave. It was

(continued on page 12)



Tetiana (right) co-ordinating a group of science teachers as part of Christian Teaching 4+, a biblically integrated teaching program. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of February 2022, this program has been conducted online due to security concerns. (Source: T. CHUMAKOVA)

Chumakova Interview *(continued from page 11)*

terrible. I could not stop crying. My husband said God would give me a better thing. We cannot see around the corner. In 2014 my family moved to Kyiv, the same year that the ACSI office moved from Kyiv to Budapest. In Kyiv I worked as a geography teacher at the private Grace Christian School and then as assistant principal in the private Christian school River of Life. These several years were very hard for me. At one point I ended up in the hospital because of the stress of losing my school in Donetsk. But slowly God gave me a new purpose in life. I remember a meeting in the home of Ray and Cindy LeClair with ten principals of Christian schools where we cried a lot. But we also took steps to keep moving forward.

In 2016 we founded the International Alliance for the Development of Christian Education. We have Catholic as well as Evangelical schools as members. We address issues in Christian education from pre-school all the way to university level. For example, we have as members two institutions of higher education: The [Adventist] Ukrainian Institute of Art and Science in Bucha [near Kyiv] and the [Baptist] Tavriski Christian Institute, which moved to Kyiv from Kherson after Russian forces occupied that city in 2022. [Editor's note: For an interview with Valentyn Syniy, rector of Tavriski Christian Institute, see pp. 4-10 in this issue of the *East-West Church Report*.]

Your family life has been radically impacted by the war. Can you share what has happened?

Our son Kiril finished Christian school in Kyiv and then studied in an aviation college. From October 2020 to April 2022 he was required to serve in the army due to his age. He was supposed to leave the army in April 2022, but in February 2022 the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine began. Kiril was stationed in Melitopol [Zaporizhzhia] when the full-scale Russian invasion began and was in the first fighting. For four days I had no knowledge of him. It was a very dangerous time. I didn't eat, sleep, or pray. On the fourth day I heard my cell phone ping. I answered and I heard, "Mom, hello, it's me." It was Kiril. Then I cried for the first time in four days.

When the full-scale invasion began, my husband Yuri and I moved to Zaporizhzhia where we volunteered in a refugee center for the first four months. My husband traveled close to the front lines where he provided humanitarian aid and prayer. He joined the army on 20 May 2023. Our son was sent straight from the front by the military command to study at the National Academy of the National Guard of Ukraine, where he will receive an officer's education until March 2026. [April 2026 update: He has now been awarded the rank of officer and continues to serve in his military unit.] My husband Yuri has been fighting on the Eastern Front.

With your husband and your only child fighting the Russians, how do you survive emotionally?

I absolutely give them into God's hands. I trust God. It is very difficult. Every minute I think about them and pray. I want to be strong. I am very weak, but He is strong.

Can you share any spiritual lessons you have learned through all that you have had to endure?

I can't control everything. My character is that I want to control everything. Before, I did not trust God for everything. Now I know this—He controls everything. And I am very glad that I realized this while going through suffering and difficulties. It's not about me. It's about the amazing work of God in education and in the army. I simply agreed and said "yes" to God when he called me to serve.

How can others pray for you?

Pray for my "boys," my husband and my son. Pray for my son spiritually. He has been in the army five years. It is difficult to be a believer in the army. I am afraid for his spiritual life. He went into the army as a boy, and when he is at home on leave he is a man. He is another person. I want him to be a man of God. And pray for my husband. He prays with soldiers, and he tells them about Jesus. He is not a chaplain now, but he does the work of a chaplain.

I also ask you to pray for the people of Ukraine. We are not just used to living during war, we have learned to survive during war. My prayer is for my people so that Ukrainians in such difficult circumstances would seek God and call out to Him. ♦



Tetiana (center) with her four colleagues at the International Alliance for the Development of Christian Education (Cyrillic acronym MAPXO): Ivan Ivashchenko, Yuliia Bershak, Nadiia Tymoshenko, Nataliia Draga. As well as training Christian educators, the Alliance helps churches open Christian schools in accordance with Ukrainian law. (Source: T. CHUMAKOVA)

“We live to dispel the darkness, if only a little, with our light”:

An Interview with Pastor Petr Dudnik



Pastor Petr Dudnik outside the US Capitol during Ukrainian Week, February 2026 (G.FAGAN)

Petr Dudnik was raised by devout Baptist parents in the town of Oleksandria [Russian: Aleksandriia] in Ukraine’s central Kirovohrad Region. Now in his late 50s, he is among the last generation of Protestants who were barred from higher education in the Soviet Union. He made a personal dedication of his life to God in 1989 before moving east to Sloviansk [Russian: Slaviansk], a small city in Donetsk Region, in 1991. There, he went on to pastor the city’s Good News Church, a Pentecostal congregation now affiliated with the international Church of God movement.

The editor of the East-West Church Report first met Pastor Petr in Sloviansk in late 2018. On that occasion, he described how he had had to flee the city in 2014, when it was occupied by pro-Russian militants for three months. Four members of a neighboring Pentecostal church were abducted and killed during that time [see the East-West Church Report, vol. 27 (2019), no. 2, 6-11 and no. 3, 4-6].

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has forced Pastor Petr to flee Sloviansk once again. Now based near Atlanta, Georgia, he continues to be deeply involved in humanitarian initiatives in Ukraine. He co-organized the Humanitarian Forum within the framework of this year’s Ukrainian Week, a major gathering of Ukraine supporters—including many Ukrainian Evangelicals—held in Washington, DC, every February since 2022. In the visitor center beneath the US Capitol, the editor of the East-West Church Report was thus able to reconnect with Pastor Petr and to hear directly about his experience since the full-scale invasion. The interview was conducted in Russian.

We last met in late 2018 at your church in Sloviansk. For three months in 2014 the city—including your church—was occupied by pro-Russian militants. After liberation, you revived your church’s ministry, including humanitarian assistance to displaced persons, orphans, and residents along the then front line. You felt that Sloviansk had become a “city of refuge” [Joshua 20].

While Sloviansk remains free, it is now only around 15 miles (25km) from the front line. Militarily, it is regarded as part of Ukraine’s “fortress belt” of cities in northwestern Donetsk Region, which the Kremlin is demanding be given up without a fight. What has been the impact on your church of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022?

After 2018 we continued an active phase of missionary work called “Frontline Mission.” We trained teams of missionaries, each consisting of five people, whose focus was the settlements along the front line [Editor’s note: Then around 50 miles or 80 km away from Sloviansk.] They brought the Gospel there and helped to reduce people’s level of hatred. In this way churches were formed—by the time of the full-scale invasion in 2022, around 60 churches had been established all along the front line. There was no settlement or village that did not have a small church or house group.

Unfortunately, with the full-scale invasion all these territories were captured and all those missionary centers were closed. We had purchased church buildings, in some cases large buildings like former [Soviet] houses of culture. In Toretsk [approximately 40 miles or 70 km south of Sloviansk, occupied late 2024] we bought an entire market hall because it was not expensive. We were helping people in every way possible. All of that is destroyed now—a great pain in my heart.

What happened to the members of those new churches?

Most people left. Some were killed, and practically all the church buildings were destroyed. It is simply a war zone—wherever the Russian boot treads becomes scorched, blackened earth. For example, there is nothing left of that market hall in Toretsk that we bought—it was flattened by a tank. The church buildings in Rubizhne and Siverskodonetsk [adjacent towns approximately 50 miles or 80 km east of Sloviansk, occupied in 2022] are destroyed. It is just a terrible situation.

People were forced to leave—for example, the pastor in Zolote [65 miles or 105 km east of Sloviansk] had to flee. So there are now no churches or missionary teams in these places, especially since the Russians have declared open season on volunteers. They thought that volunteers were supporting the Ukrainian army as well as civilians, and that if they killed the volunteers then support for both civilians and the army would fall, making it easier for them to seize Ukrainian territory. We are therefore the Russians’ number one enemy.

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Evacuation outside Good News Church in Sloviansk, April 2022
(Source: P. DUDNIK)

Was there any war damage to your church in Sloviansk?

There was shelling twice—bombs exploded on either side of the building. The church was not damaged—the windows were shattered, but they were repaired. However, we also have five daughter churches in our town. A couple of weeks ago one of those daughter churches was totally bombed out—a large church, with 300 members. Everything is actually very difficult—but that’s just reality. People still gather for worship, and we still try to help people. Three times a week, for example, we buy bread and take it to frontline villages where there is no longer anything at all. There it is very dangerous, with drones constantly overhead.

Were you also in danger personally?

Prior to the full-scale invasion I had a meeting with representatives of the SBU, the Security Service of Ukraine. They warned me that, if a full-scale invasion took place, I would have less than two hours to flee Sloviansk because I was on a list of people they would eliminate first of all. An SRG or sabotage reconnaissance group [Russian: *DRG* or *diversionno-razvedyvatel'naia grupp*a] would enter the city and literally eliminate people who held influential positions in society, such as pastors.

As far as we were concerned, people are most important. We told our church that, having received this warning about sabotage reconnaissance groups, we pastors would have to leave first—we did not want them to think that we had abandoned them. We also told our members that we wanted the whole church to evacuate in the case of a full-scale invasion, and that we would organize the process. We decided not to remove church equipment because, unlike in 2014, there was nowhere to take it—the war was everywhere.

The situation actually turned out like this. A son of mine who was studying in the US state of Georgia decided to get married there on 6 February 2022. My wife and I flew to America for the wedding along with our two eldest children. I have ten children in all, two biological and eight adopted. One of my elder sons and the two youngest children remained at home in Sloviansk. We had return tickets for 3 March 2022, but



Good News Church in Sloviansk, 2011 (Source: P. DUDNIK)

the war started on 24 February. I immediately understood that I had to find a safe place for my family but could return after that. I therefore set about evacuating my children. At first I thought about taking them to western Ukraine, but it was also bombed in the early days of the war, so I understood that it was not safe there. With difficulty I managed to get my elder son and the younger children to Chisinau, the capital of Moldova—it took me two months to gather the family together. I then returned to Sloviansk, where we were organizing evacuations—not just of our church members, but from the war zone in general. While we evacuated 16,000 people back in 2014, in that early phase of the full-scale invasion we evacuated 20,000 people.

The process was assigned to four groups. The first group arrived at the front line, collected people who had been sheltering in cellars, and evacuated them. Sometimes our buses were shot at—once a driver was injured. It was truly dangerous. We drove the people to our large church building in Sloviansk—between 150 and 600 people would arrive every day. A second group then set about calming these people down, feeding them, giving them an opportunity to take a shower and change their clothes. After a night’s sleep they were then taken to the railway station. Mothers with young children, the elderly, and the sick were driven to the city of Dnipro—a third group took care of that, because the first was already returning to the front line to evacuate new people. During that time the second group was cleaning the church hall, so that everything was made sanitary for the next group’s arrival in the afternoon.

The fourth group drove buses to western Ukraine to collect food, clothing, and other sorts of humanitarian aid, which they brought to Dnipro. They swapped this for the evacuees who had arrived in Dnipro and took them to Ternopil [a major city in western Ukraine], where they were sent on to churches throughout western Ukraine. The aid they had brought to Dnipro was then taken by the third group back to Sloviansk, and so on day after day, week after week, month after month. I was one of the organizers of all these logistics—we needed to find buses, groceries, finances, and devise a system of accounting.

For as long as I had a US visa, I would spend a month or six weeks in Ukraine, then a month with my family in [the US state of] Georgia, alternating in this way seven times. During these trips, as I was traveling through western Ukraine on my way to Sloviansk, I might post on Facebook, for example, “Tomorrow I will be in Dnipro. If you are from my church,



Good News members distributing bread, April 2023 (Source: P. DUDNIK)

or if you are just from Sloviansk, I would like to treat you to some pizza.” I would rent a pizzeria, buy pizza, and 15, 20 or 40 people would gather. I would just ask them, “How did you manage to evacuate? Who helped you? What are your worries? Have you found a place to stay?” People opened up. I would also ask, “If you were to compare yourself to a plant, what would that be?” I spoke about myself: “I feel like a green oak that has been uprooted. While its roots are out of the ground, it still has green leaves—but it is only a matter of a few weeks or months before its leaves will fall, unless it is replanted.” That is how I felt. People spoke about their experiences and wept. I tried to help as best as I could. In this way I obtained pastoral experience of how to serve people who were fleeing and had lost everything.

We evacuated our whole church except for 10-15 people. They continued to pray every day and to gather for services in the church every Sunday. In 2022 Russian forces came within seven kilometers [approximately four miles] of Sloviansk, so I suggested that this core team also leave. But God granted a miracle—there was a counterattack, and the Russians were forced back. The front line moved to 70 km [approximately 40 miles] away. Around 30 or 40 people returned to the church, and new people began to come to receive humanitarian aid. First 50, then 50 more, until there were 250. Then the number began to fall again—right now, we have between 150 and 200 there every Sunday. Of course, these are new people—it is not the same church as it was.

How have you been able to deal with the loss of your church community?

This war has brought me four great losses in all. On the first day of the war I was made homeless. I could not remain in Sloviansk. I also lost all means of supporting my family. As pastors, we did not live off the church—I always had some kind of small business in order to earn a living. Everything stopped on the first day of the war.

It is possible to live with those two losses. There are 10 million Ukrainians who were displaced or had to move abroad, not just me. But the other two losses are very painful. First, the loss of people in the church with whom you have lived your life, children whom you blessed, reared, married. These people are precious, and you understand that you will never gather in the same way ever again. People have left—obviously some



Aftermath of Russian attack on Sloviansk, April 2023
(Source: P. DUDNIK)

will return, but most will not. This sense of discontinuity, of rupture, is so very painful. It took a year, perhaps, before these stabs of pain began to die down. It was only in that period that I fully understood the meaning of those words in the Epistle to the Ephesians, that we are all “members together of one body” [Ephesians 3:6]. When you break a bone, it is painful, but when ligaments—close relationships with other people—are sprained, the pain is far worse and takes much longer to heal. This was the case not just for me as a pastor, but for everyone in our church—we were like family.

The fourth and greatest loss is the loss of vision. We always lived by the revelation of an awakening in eastern Ukraine. That was the purpose we served. I could have moved to America in the 1990s. We did not leave, not because we did not like America, but because we were called to serve in eastern Ukraine. But when you have lost everything you served—your mission is taken away, your churches have been destroyed; when you have lost your vision, you ask, “What should I do now?” I woke up every morning with the question, “What more is there to live for?”

Jesus said, “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives... is worse than an unbeliever” [1 Timothy 5:8]. By default we need to ensure that there is food to eat, something to wear, a place to live. That is normal, but we do not live for the sake of that—just in order to eat or to get clothes. We live to dispel the darkness, if only a little, with our light. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are all “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” When we discover that we are able to do that, we find inner contentment. It may be in different spheres—you find your own.

When I lost everything—church, people, mission—and ended up in America, it was an entirely new situation. I searched for an answer to the question, “What more is there to live for?” It was a difficult search that took perhaps a year. But then, during yet another trip to Ukraine, a pastor prayed for me and said some prophetic words. He said, “I have a sense that God is telling you that you may not see your whole path, but that you will understand what to do as the next step.” I was so moved by those

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Christmas worship at Good News Church, 2022
(Source: P. DUDNIK)

Dudnik Interview *(continued from page 15)*

words—in essence, he was telling me lines from Psalm 119, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” That is, if I can see my next step then I see the whole path. I prayed excitedly, “God, grant me understanding of the next step!”

Right now there are more than 150 young men and women from our church defending Ukraine. We are constantly praying for and supporting them. They have various duties in the military—some on the front line, some further away. In May 2023 one warrior from our church was killed. I knew him well—before it happened, I got together with him during a trip to the Carpathian Mountains. His name was Igor. He came up to me and said, “Pastor, I can’t stay here. I want to be a volunteer and defend Ukraine.” I told him, “Igor, I bless whatever decision you take. If you want to stay, that’s fine: You have a family, small children. If you want to go, I will also grant my blessing, because the situation is such that we need to be defended.” He chose to go and defend Ukraine. He was killed in Bakhmut, a city near Sloviansk. There were very few of our people left in Sloviansk when we buried him in May 2023. As we gave him up to the earth, I saw his widow, Ira, standing by the grave with their two children. She looked thin, and I thought, “God, what will happen to her? Who will look after her? Who will look after her children? What will happen?” And there in the cemetery I felt a strong impulse in my heart. I said, “God, I want to dedicate the next phase of my life to [switches to Ukrainian to complete the sentence] the wives and children of fallen heroes. This impulse was so strong that I understood God was leading me to do that.

I returned to America, gathered my friends, and told them what I had experienced. We began to discuss what we might do. That was when our project, Uniting for Ukrainian



Funeral for Good News Church member Igor, May 2023
(Source: P. DUDNIK)

Kids—or U4U Kids—was born. We direct work helping three categories of children: those with a parent killed fighting in the war, those with a parent who is a prisoner of war, and those with a parent missing in action—there are many such cases. Our vision is to help 3,000 children.

What does this ministry entail?

First of all we activate local churches in Ukraine in the service of those orphaned or widowed by the war. We help them to forge close relationships with groups of around 20 mothers and their children. Either people contact us or they are already known to us. For example, right now in Washington, DC, there is Pastor Denys from Zaporizhzhia. I might say to him, “Denys, would you like us to take children from Zaporizhzhia on our project? If so, you need to sign a memorandum of understanding setting out our responsibilities as Together Ministry and yours as pastor—that you will help widows, organize English-language classes for their children. Then we sign a second memorandum of understanding between Together Ministry and the church and the Ukrainian military authorities. They are open to working with us because we have American partners willing to host the group—we have signed such memoranda with the military authorities in every locality from which children have come.

It is one thing when a church gathers a group of widows, gives them parcels of groceries, and prays for them. But when we are talking about their children going on a trip, preparation of documents, and so on, that means constant communication, sharing difficulties and worries. This is how close relationships are formed. Two people from each church always accompany the group of children on the trip to maintain connection between the children and their mothers, and when the children return to Ukraine, they continue this relationship.

The second aspect is that we seek host families in America—we aim for 18 families per trip. It doesn’t matter what language they speak: Russian, Ukrainian, English, Spanish—it is only very important that they support Ukraine and are prepared to receive the children. The children are aged between 13 and 16—we saw that if they are younger than that, it is just fun. Even though rehabilitation in a safe place is a positive thing, we want to provide more than that—to show that there is another kind of life, not just what they have seen in small Ukrainian towns. Their experience in America greatly



Uniting for Ukrainian Kids participants, Atlanta, Georgia, April 2024 (Source: UNITING FOR UKRAINIAN KIDS)

broadens their horizons and gives them an understanding that things can be different.

Even if the children's parents had a good relationship with them when their father was alive, it wasn't always the case that mother and father had a good relationship with one another. A third aspect is that, when the children experience life in a family where relationships are sound, they learn from that. For example, I asked one girl when her trip was over, "What did you get out of all of this?" She said, "I understood two things. There are other values besides material values—there are spiritual values. Secondly, I would like to build my relationships in my future family in the same way as Sasha and Oksana, who received me." For me, this was the very highest evaluation, because this is about values, and so about changing our children's future and Ukraine's future. It is not about the past.

How long do the trips to America last?

A whole trip lasts a month. It takes three days for the children to travel to America and another three days to return, so it is really around three weeks. The program in America is this: During the first week they just travel to the family and adapt. They need to explore their new location, and the host families also need to get used to the situation because it will also be a new experience for them. During the second week we organize different trips for the children—we ask local churches each to take responsibility for the whole group of children for one day. For example, on Monday one church takes the children around museums, on Tuesday another church does some other activity with them. We generally request that these be American churches [Editor's note: rather than Ukrainian diaspora churches] because we want Americans to make connections with children who have lost a parent in the war and so to understand Ukrainians' pain.

During the third week we organize a camp for the children, either just during the day or else residential. Here, there is a special program for the children where they can talk about values, the future, and see that they have prospects. In this way the children receive everything we can give them over three weeks while also being able to observe relationships in their host family. Of course they often also receive presents, but in most of the feedback I have heard the children say that



Airport welcome, September 2023
(Source: UNITING FOR UKRAINIAN KIDS)

the best times they had were when they just sat together in the evening and drank tea or sang songs. Healing takes place in families. They see that the people with them are people who believe in God, and that we live the way we do because we have this faith.

We also request that the families receiving a child support that child and his or her mother long term once the child returns to Ukraine. Obviously, this relationship has two sides to it—phone calls, messages. The family may wish to receive the child independently the following year or to support his or her education. According to our statistics, around 70 percent of hosts and children maintain some sort of relationship.

Are the children from particular parts of Ukraine?

From many different cities all over Ukraine, including Sloviansk: Ivano-Frankivsk, Sumy, Kryvyi Rih, Odesa, Slutsk, Lviv, Ternopil, and Khmelnytskyi. Right now groups of children are preparing from Cherkassy, Poltava, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv. Since the full-scale invasion we have supported more than 200 children.

And are the trips usually to the state of Georgia?

No, the children have been to other states in America besides Georgia: California, Pennsylvania, Washington, Kentucky. We are always looking for families prepared to receive children. The families can be from any part of America. If people volunteer via our website [<https://www.u4ukids.com/us>] we might then see that we have five families in Washington, DC, for example. If there are at least five, we can think about bringing a group. We contact churches in that area and try to inspire more people. We then start to form a team—that is how it works.

We ask the host families to finance the trip. Some families are able to do so, others can in part—they are prepared to receive the children but cannot afford to pay for their visa, flight, and so on. There are also families who are unable to receive a child but are prepared to support them financially, or else a business gets involved and pays for the flight, visa, and/or accommodation. And so together we make it happen—that is why our organization is called Together Ministry. It is not just one person but truly a project that unites churches, cities, individuals, families, and children. It is about connection.

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Uniting for Ukrainian Kids camp in Atlanta, Georgia, March 2025 (Source: UNITING FOR UKRAINIAN KIDS)

Dudnik Interview (continued from page 17)

When the children return, they meet a pastor from the local church and give their feedback. Of course they say that everything was great. He will tell them that, if they want to live in the way they have experienced, they need two things. Biblical values, upon which the United States was founded and around which their host families build their relationships. Secondly, they need to learn English. Here we can help them further. We have a partnership with the American University in Kyiv—essentially, this is Arizona State University. They are prepared to take between five and seven of our children on a full scholarship of \$8,000 per year. The first children will be enrolled later this year. For a chance at receiving one of these scholarships, the children must pass the English portion of their External Independent Evaluation [Ukrainian: *Zovnishnye Nezalezhne Ocinyuannya* or *ZNO*, Ukrainian examination for admission to university]. If they study well and get good grades, they may study in Arizona the following year.

We are also considering different forms of study, in both Ukraine and in America. A recent group of children came from Sumy Region in northern Ukraine, where there is constant bombardment. The story of one girl, Bohdana, is that her father was killed. She was very close to him. She also has an elder brother who is now 18, while she is 15. When her mother found out that her husband had been killed she developed cancer, now at stage four despite treatment. When I asked Bohdana if she would like to study in America, she said, “No, I want to be with my mother. I understand that she hasn’t got much time left. I want to spend my time with her and study in Ukraine.” The children have such stories—the depth of their pain is very intense.



Welcome cake, Seattle, August 2025
(Source: UNITING FOR UKRAINIAN KIDS)

So this is not just a one-off trip to America. It is a long-term project concerned with forming a future for the children. A child may live with trauma—he or she is already living with it—and bear a grudge against the whole world: against Russians, against society, against everyone. This will all explode in hatred. Or, we can give them a future and make them leaders on another level, with Biblical values, prospects in life—leaders in our country. That is what the U4U Kids project is all about.

Did your church have any links with churches in Russia before the war?

Well, we had many friends in Russia before 2014. We also asked them to help on the other side of the front line. But I don’t know what has happened to pastors in Russia—instead of truly helping, primarily

they have been concerned with extending their power, saying [to churches in occupied Ukraine], “You belong to us now.” They probably haven’t done even a tenth of what we have in terms of serving people or organizing churches, unfortunately.

Have any of them tried to remain in contact with you?

Practically none of them. I don’t know how they can read the Bible and not understand about the law on sowing and reaping [Galatians 6:7-9]. There will come a time for everything—including harvest time. Well, forget about the Russians. God will sort them out.

What do you hope to do during this year’s Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC?

As one of the organizers, to take part in advocacy and so help Ukrainians, not just with humanitarian aid, but by connecting churches with churches, as well as with businesses and politicians who share Christian values. We are advocating Ukraine in a positive sense. Yes, there are many negative things happening in our country. But we try to help wherever we can. ♦

“We believe that an angel protected us”: An Interview with Pastor Denys Vashchuk

Denys Vashchuk is one of a team of pastors at Source of Life, a Charismatic church in Zaporizhzhia, southern Ukraine, approximately 30 miles (some 50 km) north of the current front line. From a nominal Christian family resident in the city of Zaporizhzhia for exactly a century, he came to faith 20 years ago.

The editor of the East-West Church Report met Pastor Denys during Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC in early February. For this interview, she spoke with him remotely in Zaporizhzhia in late April. The conversation took place in English.

How has community life in your church in Zaporizhzhia changed since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022?

Before then we had around 400 people. After the invasion, more than half left. Right now there are about 600. Many people have joined as our church started to do a lot of work helping to evacuate people in our region who have lost their homes, and to distribute food, water, and medical supplies. We have made many personal contacts—I am sure that I have more than 60 thousand individual contacts now, as I have visited every frontline settlement a couple of times.

Do the new church members differ from those who left?

Yes. They are mostly older people—many families with young children have left the country. A lot of older people, widows and orphans come, and we try to support them.

Do they tend to be Russian speakers?

They speak both Russian and Ukrainian. A lot of people coming to us from eastern Ukraine are from villages, where mostly Ukrainian is spoken. Even now you can hear Ukrainian songs and words in Krasnodar Krai and Rostov-on-Don [parts of southern Russia close to Ukraine]—historically there were many ethnic Ukrainians there.

Before the war we often used Russian when we engaged in ministry, but after the war started I began working on the front line, where it was impossible to come with a message in Russian. For example, if I were to preach about victory and used the Russian word, *pobeda*, that has a different sense than the Ukrainian word, *peremoha*. [Editor's note: The Russian is associated both with Soviet victory in the Second World War and current Kremlin rhetoric about defeating Ukraine.] I then decided to use only Ukrainian when I preach and pray. Many pastors joined me in doing this—it isn't a law, as all of us are able to preach in either Russian or Ukrainian. It is not a problem for me to communicate with Russians or Russian-speaking people but I don't want to create new material in Russian.

Have you found that people fleeing the occupied areas are shocked by Russia's aggression against them? Not long after the full-scale invasion I met an Orthodox refugee who had come to the United States from the occupied port city of Berdiansk. She could not understand "why they attacked us, the Russian speakers."

I remember being in Donetsk Region some time after 2015, in a town called Krasnohorivka [at that time close to the front line, currently under Russian occupation]. The Russians attacked a residential building with artillery and people began to shout that Ukrainian troops were responsible, but this was impossible. [Pastor Denys demonstrates with his hands how a taller, intact building obstructed the pathway that would have been necessary for a Ukrainian artillery attack to have taken place.] But people do not try to use their minds. Even now we have people who don't understand the situation clearly. It is not many, but if you try to find them, you can—it is like a trauma, they are not capable of understanding. But in general, 90 to 95 percent of people understand the situation very clearly because they know who waged the war and who attacked them.

How did you come to be involved in Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC?

Our church has good relations with our local council of religious leaders. They invited me to come to Washington. This was my first time in America!



Pastor Denys Vashchuk in Washington, DC during Ukrainian Week (G. FAGAN)

Do you also have contacts with diaspora Ukrainian churches in America?

Not really. Our senior pastor has a lot of relatives in American churches but I don't have any, so I am building new relationships after my meetings in America during Ukrainian Week.

Evangelical Christians in American have traditionally supported the Republican Party, but the current Republican administration has treated Russia's President Putin favorably, as demonstrated by his visit to Alaska last summer, for example. What is your experience discussing Ukraine with the American Christians you have encountered?

I found it really interesting. There are people there who I know are good Christians—for instance, we built our ministry together with a good woman who kept saying how nice Trump is, and how much he does for the Christians of America. I tried to explain to her—maybe for the Christians of America, but not Ukrainian Christians. He says some crazy things that are not true about Ukraine or Ukrainian Christians. I tried to explain how this is wrong—we don't persecute Russians for their faith. Russia attacked us. The senior pastor of our church, Sergiy Gashchenko, was in Russian prisons three times during this war.

How did that happen?

After the full-scale invasion in 2022 we worked for eight months on the front line trying to evacuate people from Vasylivka, a town south of Zaporizhzhia. The front line there has remained more or less in the same place these past four years. With the help of many drivers and volunteers we evacuated more than 5,000 people. This wasn't an official effort—Pastor Sergiy just went straight to the front line and had conversations with the Russian troops. He was taking a great risk, and the Russians detained him for a few days on

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Vashchuk Interview (continued from page 19)

three occasions because they could not understand who he was and why he was there. I personally went with him once—we were looking for the dead bodies of our soldiers to bring them home. The Russians caught us and held us for four hours, but then—by God’s grace—they gave us the opportunity to leave. We might have been shot but the Russian guys holding their first line of defence were asleep, so we went beyond that line to the second line. The Russians there did not shoot because they thought they would be committing friendly fire if they did. It was very scary.

By September 2022 we stopped doing that work because it became impossible. At that time the Russians didn’t use so many drones. Now, if you drive even 10 kilometres [approximately six miles] from the front line, you are taking a great risk because the Russians could damage your car or kill you.

Have you been able to change the mind of any American Christians predisposed against Ukraine?

We try to influence them, but it is really difficult because they believe their news more than my personal witness. I also want to preserve relationships — maybe on some questions I should be more radical. I realize that people don’t have a clear understanding of the situation. They don’t have enough information, while we don’t have enough time to spend on this type of communication. I can’t sit around calling my friends every day. I have my job, my ministry, my family. I can’t also do a special job of explaining what is happening.

You brought a remarkable copy of the New Testament to Ukrainian Week. Could you tell the story behind it?



Ukrainian New Testament pierced by a bullet brought by Pastor Denys Vashchuk to this year’s Ukrainian Week in Washington, DC (G. FAGAN)

Testaments to troops there. After a couple of weeks a soldier was in his position and felt that he had been shot. He fell to the ground thinking he was hurt, but after 15 minutes he understood that he was fine. The bullet went through his armor but there was a New Testament under his armor and this stopped the bullet.

I have another story where I was a personal witness. We went to Orihiv [an unoccupied city in Zaporizhzhia Region currently 5 miles or 8 km from the front line] with food and water and to help evacuate people. We were sitting in the house of a believer’s family when the Russians began an artillery attack. When the Russians use artillery you hear two blows in succession. The first one is the shot, the second is the artillery shell arriving and exploding. So we could hear these pairs of blows—Boom! Boom!... Boom! Boom!... They got closer and closer and then we heard a whistling over our heads followed by silence. We all lay down, but nothing happened. Then we heard the blows continue some distance away. We believe that an angel protected us. ♦

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- church-state, interchurch, and interfaith relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
- innovative Christian charitable projects and mission
- the latest academic research into Christian history and culture in the region

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