

Pastor Vyacheslav Horypnchuk, bishop of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church, describes challenges and blessings in wartime Ukraine

Thank you for your prayers, encouragement and support. They have been crucial for us during these years of the war.

Currently we have fourteen congregations and four mission congregations. We currently have twelve pastors and five deacons. The ULC has 655 members.

Three ULC congregations have been forced to temporarily cease worshipping because of the war: Bereznehuvate, Tokmak and Kherson. Bereznehuvate is located very close to the front line. As soon as Ukrainian troops drove the Russians from the right bank of the Dnipro River, Pastor Yuriy Tytski renewed worship services in Bereznehuvate; he also started a new mission congregation in Snihurivka. Kherson had been occupied by Russians. As soon as the city was liberated and access to the city was granted, Pastor Serhiy Somin renewed worship services in Kherson. Lately, however, Kherson has been under very heavy Russian artillery fire as well as under Russian missile and kamikaze drones' attacks. Russians also bomb the city from their planes. The city is partially ruined. And it is dangerous to be there. This is why we have our worship services on a periodical basis trying to find a safe time both for pastors, deacons and laypeople. Tokmak is still under Russian occupation. Our pastor left the city after Russians began to arrest and torture Protestant pastors. Most members of the ULC left Tokmak as well.

From the very first day of the war, WELS began to send us help and we began to help both ULC members and non-members with food, medicine and fuel. With the beginning of the war there was a shortage of food in Kyiv and other places. Prices for food also skyrocketed. Our pastors and deacons were trying to find places where food would be cheaper, buy it there, and deliver to the congregations and distribute the food on Sundays after worship services. Our laypeople also brought that food to people who could not physically attend the church but were hungry, had nothing to eat, and had no place to buy food. Thousands of people received bread, flour, pasta, cooking oil, butter, sugar, potatoes, rice, honey and other produce. We also helped thousands of people with soap, shampoos, and detergents.

The same thing was true with fuel. At the beginning of the war Russians destroyed all our refineries and oil bases. Fuel for cars and trucks was in shortage. We were able to purchase some fuel from people who were bringing it from the European Union, and we shared it with our members. Then in about a half a year the situation somewhat stabilized, but fuel is still very expensive.

As Russians destroyed our coal and natural gas power stations, we got into a terrible energy crisis with a very cold winter and electricity supply often for a few hours a day. We are grateful to WELS for helping us to buy electric generators, charging stations, electric invertors and lots

of firewood. During three war winters we have light in our churches, in most of our homes, and we are warm. Thank you also for the warm clothes and winter shoes!

After each Russian attack we call our members and sometimes find out that their homes are totally or partially destroyed. Sometimes only with windows and doors broken, and we help them to fix them. And many people thank the Lord for your help! Thank you very much!

Medicine is another type of help. Many people, especially older people, said they would die if the ULC would not come and help them with medicine. We continue to do it on a regular basis.

As people in our cities see these works of love, many of them want to join our church. In Kyiv, for example about ninety people have joined our church and more than thirty people are enlisted into a new Catechism class. We hope and pray they will be confirmed next Pentecost. A new congregation was started in Snihurivka in the southern Ukraine. As war refugees from that town fled to Kremenets in the western Ukraine, some of them stopped to get some help from our church in Kremenets, and they began to visit our worship services with local Pastor Roman Andruntsiv, Deacon Vasyl Andreychuk, and Pastor Yuri Tytski, who was a war refugee himself. The Word of the Lord never returns empty. Two families from Snihurivka became ULC members and when Snihurivka was liberated from Russians, they returned to Snihurivka and wanted to have worship services in their hometown. Pastor Tytski began to visit them and today we have about thirty communicant members there and about one hundred in average attendance. The city is in a very poor condition after the Russian occupation. There are many land mines in the area, especially in the fields. People suffer and we continue to help them. We have about 150 new communicant members because of our humanitarian efforts and about one hundred more people are currently studying Luther's Small Catechism. In addition, several hundred new people attend the church every Sunday without enrolling in Catechism classes. We hope and pray the Word will not return empty in their case as well. As WELS Pastor Roger Neumann often says, "Never underestimate the power of the Word". We are looking forward for having confirmation of about one hundred new people, God willing, on Pentecost of 2025. Thank you for your love and care very much!

Most ULC members have been affected by the war as we live under constant Russian missile, kamikaze drones, bomb and artillery fire attacks. Explosions, fire, smoke, ruined houses and human lives, lots of tears - this is a typical picture of our country now. Several families have lost their homes, friends, and family members. Several dozen of our members fight Russians in the trenches. Several people were wounded and suffer from their wounds even now. Quite a number of our people, especially women and children have developed some illnesses because of the constant life under the Russian terror and fear of losing their family members and friends in the war. But we also have a lot of prayers, a lot of preaching of the Word, and a lot of encouragement and support from our brothers and sisters in WELS.

We continue to have great need in food for the needy, medicine, firewood, warm clothes, gasoline, all kinds of spare parts, supplies, and repair materials as Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians, our homes, hospitals and schools continue every day.

I would like to share a story of two women Iryna and Liudmyla who came to Kyiv as war refugees from Bakhmut. They left their homes in the ruined Bakhmut and needed everything from a piece of bread to a piece of soap, to medicine, as they were already retired people. They found a shelter, but they needed basic food, hygienic supplies, and some medicine, since both suffered from illnesses and terrible stress. They were brought to church by other people who received some help in our church earlier. Soon they were in a Catechism class and became communicant members on Pentecost of 2023. Since then, they not only worship the Lord with us almost every Sunday but also invite others to come. They also help people in distress. For example, one Sunday Russians launched their ballistic missiles onto Kyiv. We had explosions near the church and the church building shook; only then air raid alarms sounded. Some people panicked. Sisters Iryna and Liudmyla came to their help quickly to comfort those people and to provide necessary medicine for people under terrible stress. But the most important thing is they know their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that they are saved by their faith alone in the Crucified and Risen Christ. They are active in the Bible classes and in reaching out other people who do not know Christ yet. We have many similar stories in our church in Kyiv.

It would be impossible to survive all the horrors of this war without the Word of God. When Russians were murdering civilians around Kyiv, and as we learned in many other places. All over Ukraine, in whatever places they occupied, they did the same things, but God's Word provided us comfort and strength to live, resist the Russian invasion, and help thousands of suffering people around us. As pastors we had our weekly Concordia (Book of Concord) studies and gatherings online, shared the news, prayed and encouraged each other to stay faithful to the Lord and our call to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, help the needy, and reach out lost and needy souls with the Gospel. I would like to thank Pastor Roger Neumann from Grace Lutheran Church, Oskaloosa, Iowa, for his almost daily encouragement with the Word, for his monthly Bible studies with ULC pastors and his weekly studies at our Seminary program of deacons' training. He has been a very faithful representative of WELS leadership and members. I would also like to thank President Mark Schroeder for his continuous prayers, encouragement and support. It is a tremendous blessing to have such true and faithful brothers in the Word and deed. Thank you very much! Please continue to pray for us and help us in time of our dire need. We grateful to all WELS members and to the United States of America. God bless WELS! God bless America! Please pray that this war is finished soon!

Thank you very much for this opportunity to share this information with you and with brothers and sisters in WELS.