

Wartime faith: What I learned at Ukraine's National Prayer Breakfast



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COMMENTARY

By Gary Marx
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OPINION:

Last month, I traveled to Kyiv with a group of American colleagues and friends to participate in Ukraine's National Prayer Breakfast on June 29. I came away with a renewed sense of the importance of supporting our brothers and sisters in Christ there, speaking out against the atrocities committed by the Russian armed forces and defending religious freedom in Ukraine. The following four ideas have remained with me since returning to the United States.

Ukraine's National Prayer Breakfast is rooted in a foundational American value. On the world stage, the United States is synonymous with religious freedom. It's the core principle that inspired our Founding Fathers to step out in faith and launch the American experiment in the first place.

In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke at America's first National Prayer Breakfast, where he called faith the "cornerstone of democracy." That event, which has been held annually in Washington ever since, inspired several members of Ukraine's Parliament to start their own National Prayer Breakfast in 2011. It is now the most well-attended government-hosted prayer breakfast in all of Europe. The tradition of coming together across the political divide to break bread and join hands in prayer as legislators, pastors, business leaders and citizens have been enormously impactful for the Kingdom of God in both Ukraine and the United States.

Ukraine has religious freedom. Russia has a state-controlled religion. In Russia, the Kremlin controls the Russian Orthodox Church and uses it as an arm of its propaganda. Patriarch Kiril of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate has called Russia's attack on Ukraine a "holy war," which is synonymous with the Muslim concept of jihad.

Ukrainian Christians simply want to live in a free society and worship God as they see fit, just like American evangelicals. They want to be able to sing hymns, pray in public, hold Bible study groups and preach the gospel, all of which are illegal now in the Russian-occupied territory of Ukraine. The National Prayer Breakfast in Kyiv served as a reminder of the stark difference

between Ukraine and Russia. It was a truly ecumenical, interdenominational event, where people from various Christian denominations came together to pray in the spirit of Jesus for peace.

Russian-occupied Ukraine is a land of modern martyrs. In Ukraine, as we speak, the Russian military is imprisoning evangelical pastors, bombing churches, arresting people for praying in public and threatening innocent Ukrainian Christians for their faith. I was blessed to sit at the prayer breakfast with two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Ivan Levitsky and Bohdan Geleta, who had just been released after over a year of captivity in Russia.

The priests were serving in the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Russian-occupied Berdyansk, when they were captured by the Russians, who accused them of committing “subversive” and “guerrilla” activities. Knowing that they could be arrested in their Russian-occupied city, the priests remained in their parish and served their flock anyway to give believers hope in the face of persecution. At the breakfast, I also spent time with Igor Bandura, Mark Sergeyev, Katya Semenyuk, Oleksandr Zaiets and many other Ukrainian evangelicals who shared stories of the persecution, torture and murder of their evangelical friends at the hands of the Russian military.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus. I was inspired by spending time with Ukrainian citizens, civic leaders, members of the military, pastors and business leaders at the events around the prayer breakfast, all of whom showed such resolve and commitment to victory in the face of the deadly aggression of their Russian attackers.

I was humbled to bear witness to their faith, hope and love in the midst of persecution. In the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, right after the Beatitudes, Jesus said: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

As American evangelicals, we are blessed to live in the greatest nation in the history of the world — a nation that was built on the idea of religious freedom. As children of God, we are also citizens of God’s kingdom. I am grateful for my Ukrainian brothers and sisters in Christ who reminded me of that shared citizenship at Ukraine’s National Prayer Breakfast. Please join me in praying for peace in Ukraine.

• Gary Marx is the president of Defenders of Faith and Religious Freedom in Ukraine and the former executive director of the Faith and Freedom Coalition. These materials are distributed by DCI Group on behalf of Kyiv Global Outreach, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice in Washington.

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