

# Baptists Respond to Crisis Rocking Ukraine

The Easter greeting - "Christ is Risen!" - is said not only on Easter Sunday but also throughout the whole Easter season in Ukraine.

It is used as a greeting of one Christian to another meeting in the street or elsewhere.

The answering response - "He is risen, indeed!" - seems to bring the reality of Christ's resurrection into the midst of ordinary life and especially into Ukraine at a time of continuing crisis and conflict.

The assertion that we make so easily in the West that we are Easter people living in a Good Friday world takes on a much deeper reality in Ukraine.

With leaders from the Baptist Union of Ukraine, European Baptist Federation (EBF) leaders - Helle Liht, Asatur Nahapetyan, Rupen Das and I - traveled 1,000 miles through Ukraine recently.

We did not cross into the occupied zones, but we saw shelled buildings and abandoned homes - evidence of the conflict that has torn this part of Ukraine apart.

We heard of life in the occupied zones, the so-called "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, where the social infrastructure seems to have broken down completely.

We saw a demonstration outside the Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) in Kiev by miners from the occupied zones asking the Ukrainian government to pay for government support for the regions that are now controlled by separatists.

Olga Lishyk, the assistant governor of the Luhansk province, described the many needs of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in her region and expressed

thanks to Baptists and other church groups who were among the first to care for these more than 1 million refugees.

And what of our Baptist churches in the region?

We met pastors from the occupied Luhansk region who had traveled up to nine hours to get to the meeting; they had been turned back at various checkpoints.

We heard from pastors in both Kharkiv and Luhansk about how they were caring for the practical and spiritual needs of the IDPs.

A few spoke of the initial reluctance of the churches to reach out to the refugees, but then of how their hearts became open, attitudes changed and how the whole experience had changed their churches.

Nearly all the pastors testified that as their churches opened their doors and hearts to the refugees, the gaps left in churches by those who had left the region because of the conflict had begun to be replaced by those seeking spiritual help as people traumatized by the crisis.

Back in Kiev, we met with Baptist members of Parliament and also an adviser to the president on religious freedom.

Then, on our final morning, we met with Michael Chernenko and his Mission Eurasia team in their Ukraine offices near the Baptist Centre in Irpin.

Chernenko has written about the way in which some see this conflict as kind of a “holy war” with any who are not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church being open to attack and discrimination and being driven from their homes in the occupied zones.

President Petro Poroshenko’s video Easter message was of various people in different parts of Ukraine declaring, “Christ is risen!”

We have to believe this so far as eastern Ukraine is concerned. There is hope

beyond the current despair, and the possibility of reconciliation beyond the estrangement of people from one another in this current conflict.

Of course, I reflect especially on the strained relations between Russian and Ukrainian Baptists and what the EBF can do to provide a space for coming together - and ultimately healing and reconciliation. That will not be easy and will take time and some truth-telling on both sides.

Upon my return from Ukraine, I was engaged immediately in the April 28 [London Consultation on Ukraine](#), organized by BMS World Mission and Mission Eurasia, where I spoke about possibilities for reconciliation in the current crisis.

On our journey through Ukraine, I was challenged to consider whether we can speak of reconciliation at all at this time.

Sometimes, it may be better to keep silent and wait for a God's "kairos" moment that will surely come.

But I am sure that even now the churches in Ukraine and Russia, and those who serve organizations such as EBF, can be open to God for ways to prepare the way for reconciliation.

If the cross and the resurrection mean anything to us, then surely it is summed up by Paul in Ephesians 2. "Christ is our Peace ... he has broken down the dividing walls at the cross ... He has reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus ending the enmity between them."

✘ [Tony Peck](#) is general secretary of the European Baptist Federation. A [longer version](#) of this column first appeared on his [blog](#), *Europe Matters*, and is used with permission. You can follow him on Twitter [@EBFGS](#).

*Editor's note: An EthicsDaily.com Skype interview was conducted with Peck soon after the crisis began in Ukraine. It can be viewed [here](#).*