

Addressing Social and Theological Challenges Faced by the Ukrainian Evangelical Church during the Current Geopolitical Conflict: A Perspective from UETS

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Abstract

Since 2013, Ukraine's political unrest and ongoing military conflict have presented unique challenges to the country's evangelical churches and seminaries. This essay presents suggestions for the Church – and especially the seminary – in the midst of these ongoing crises. First, the essay gives an overview of events of previous decades in Ukraine, followed by a brief analysis of the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests and the resulting military conflict in eastern Ukraine. Then, the essay considers several broad theological and practical areas of concern resulting from these new realities: the relationship between Church and politics, social justice, identity, challenges to leadership, and war. As it offers a case study from the Ukrainian context, this essay illustrates how the seminary can offer wisdom for the Church in tense socio-political contexts.

Background

The recent Euromaidan protests and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea have resulted in a long-term military conflict in eastern Ukraine. "Euromaidan" and "Maidan" are the names of the protests that took place from November 21, 2013 to February 23, 2014. The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation were portrayed as the causes of Maidan. But this does not seem to be accurate. Mostly, the protests were a reaction to former president Viktor Yanukovich's move towards totalitarian rule with pro-Russian politics; he caused a rise in state corruption. An analysis by Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park summarizes the reasons for these protests: "(1) indignation of citizens toward the unprecedented rise in corruption, (2) failure to

sign the Association Agreement with the EU for the prospects of rapprochement with Russia, and (3) the brutal violence that the police used on those who dared to express dissatisfaction with Yanukovich's policies" (Shveda and Park 2016, 85-91). As a result of these protests, Ukraine turned toward the EU and enacted a series of reforms with varying levels of success, but nevertheless overall slowly overcoming corruption and the challenge of slipping back into totalitarianism. In this situation, the evangelical Church of Ukraine has faced a reality for which it is largely unprepared because of its post-Soviet history.

In the years following the Soviet Union's collapse, people looked for all kinds of spiritual experiences as they searched for new and meaningful worldviews. Popular TV shows and local theaters featured extra-sensory and parapsychology practitioners. This pursuit of meaning and spiritual experience also brought new people to the Church, as belief – in all kinds of unseen phenomena – increased. Ukraine's difficult financial situation also contributed to a cultural search for purpose and hope. At the same time, many churches (of all kinds of denominations), whose property had been confiscated by Soviet officials, received their property back, and many received financial and personnel support from abroad. In the context of these cultural and economic pressures and new freedoms, churches grew rapidly in the 1990s.

Because of these trends, many people considered the 1990s to be a new period of evangelical revival. Yet that revival began to wane by the beginning of the new millennium. Most evangelical churches had been happy with the successes they had enjoyed in the early years of independence, which were expressed in numerical growth and in more active participation. However, at that time too few people thought about where society was moving. Therefore, the early 2000s brought new challenges to the Church's identity. For the most part, evangelicals were using methods they had learned from Western missionaries in the 1990s and were relying on Western support as a panacea for any new societal challenges. During this period, Ukraine experienced two political crises in one decade: the Orange Revolution of 2004 that overturned a fraudulent election, which the evangelical Church for the most part seemed to overlook; and the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014 that resulted in the "Revolution of Dignity", Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the breakout of ongoing war in the Ukrainian Donbass – events which are now impossible to overlook.

Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary (UETS) has been greatly influenced by this history. UETS was founded in 1992 to train pastors and missionaries. Missions at that time was mostly perceived as conversion of local people to accept Christ as their personal Savior. Christians needed a better understanding of the Bible and practical skills to help plant new churches. They needed guidance regarding basic

pastoral care. The Church's rapid growth made this need urgent. However, the new socio-political realities created by the challenges of the early 2000s meant that basic pastoral and missional training was no longer sufficient for the Church's needs. Ukraine had begun to grow economically, and spiritual curiosity had decreased. Furthermore, political turbulence (mentioned above – starting with the Orange Revolution in 2004 and culminating with the more significant events of 2013-2014) forced UETS leadership to reconsider how the seminary could meet the needs of the contemporary evangelical Church within Ukraine.

In this volatile social reality, the seminary can guide the Church to act wisely. In Ukraine (and elsewhere), the seminary can help the Church find concrete ways to address people grappling with nationalism, alienation, inequality, domineering leadership, and war trauma.

The Church and Politics

First, the seminary can counsel the Church in Ukraine as it seeks new ways to relate to politics. The Church today faces a significant challenge in how to address societal problems nationwide – whether alongside, in opposition to, or entirely separate from the government. In the 1990s, evangelicals focused on the periphery: care for addicts, the homeless, orphans, and other marginalized groups. While there is still much work to be done, local churches saw these problems and developed approaches to address them. They even developed ministries that organized projects on a national scale to help the afflicted. Both government officials and many evangelical Church leaders accepted the role of the evangelical Church as a solution to social problems. In essence, the Church helped the government deal with its own shortcomings. Youth ministries were not as successful (though work with orphanages resulted in changes on a national scale), but, with that exception, the Church's approaches remained largely unchanged for a decade.

Today, it is clear that the Church must not only be socially active, but also have its own voice in politics – on the central, powerful members of society as well as on its peripheral, weak members. Too often, other secular players define the political and social trends in Ukrainian society. When national tension around the Orange Revolution arose in the early 2000s, many churches did not know how to react. Most church members prayed for peace and tried to avoid public events. However, by 2013 some Christians were becoming more active, participating in Euromaidan events and even in clashes with police. Because of this split response, more and more evangelicals started to ask: What is the proper way of relating to our government, and should there be limits to our participation? What is the core responsibility of the Church in such times of upheaval?

Under the current political pressures, the evangelical Church is learning how to be a prophetic voice in Ukraine. It is trying to have a public perspective not only on religious aspects of life but on social and political challenges as well. Until recently, we have not seen Christians take an active public role in society (though some individual Christians had been involved in political life, public social initiatives, and NGOs on their own initiative). The Church is beginning to understand that political engagement does not equal support of a certain political party or politician. Rather, the Church's engagement presents a challenge to our government. The Ukrainian government has allowed religious people to become active in society while still maintaining a suspicion of what it considers religious propaganda. In this context, it is important to develop a vision for the Church that will allow cooperation between the Church, government institutions, and social initiatives without mixing responsibilities and crossing lines of mutual trust.

In light of this new calling, theology in today's Ukrainian Church must offer a new approach to how believers read and preach the Gospel. Theology needs to move away from the gnostic, outlandish terms it has used – terms that represent Christianity as salvation from the world and getting to Heaven primarily through personal conviction in a closed group – that the Church used during Soviet persecution. It needs to move toward narratives of holistic transformation that take the resurrection of Christ and his dominion over all the powers seriously (meaning that we can't escape the question of political power and our responsibility as Christians). Christ did not create any national or state theology, certainly – but Ukrainian churches are used to ignoring all political themes in the Gospel entirely and to perceiving them as completely alien to the Good News. Thus, the active presence of God in implementing His will in all areas of society – including politics – is still a new idea for many Ukrainian evangelicals. The seminary needs to guide the Church to apply the Gospel to socio-political realities.

The Church and Social Justice

In addition to addressing how the Church interacts with politics, the seminary can address how believers interact within society – particularly by working through questions of social justice and alienation among young people. The most active participants in recent political uprisings have been young adults, many of whom work for big companies and make enough money to live comfortably and independently. How does the evangelical Church engage these young people who do not have pressing social needs or require assistance, but who are concerned about justice, transforming the social order, and improving both state and society? How do we reach out to people who consider themselves global citizens but who also have a strong national identity? The evangelical Church needs a new contextual perspective on its role as a cultural influencer. To engage young adults,

local churches must address the topics of social justice and public success in the context of a globalized society.

The new approach to the Gospel mentioned in the section above could add another necessary facet: a reinforcement of the interpersonal aspects of salvation (in contrast to the individualistic and mostly forensic Western perspective that seems to dominate currently). The Church must see society as a sphere where the Spirit is at work in individuals of diverse backgrounds in relationship with one another. Too often, churches limit God's work only to the salvation of individual souls. Having focused primarily on the mission of bringing people to heaven through conversion, many Ukrainian churches do not know how to address questions of wealth, work, social equality, or justice. Yet these questions have become more and more pressing as rural areas are experiencing mass emigration due to lack of employment, as internally displaced people migrate as a result of war, and as ongoing social stratification segregates different elements of society. A deep reappraisal of the resurrection of Christ (as the King that overpowers death and violence) and its application to society could address these challenges. The Church's understanding of salvation must grow to include a holistic theology of interpersonal social reconciliation.

In the most practical terms, this newly-considered soteriology might reveal itself in new worship practices. We need to answer questions such as: Is God at work in all areas of society, or is God only active at Christian gatherings? What is Christian worship, and what could worship look like in Ukraine if the Church accepted historical and cultural spheres as places where God works? If God is not only at work in the Christian sphere, then new forms of worship are needed. Worship should be seen as a form of witness in communal life, not only as a form of communication with God. The way we worship could reveal to us and demonstrate to society what is most important: a model of grace-based love. The fact that reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace are given, not created, is a theme vitally important for the Church to develop. In addition, worship needs to be contextualized culturally, becoming sensitive to people's experiences of stress and social anxiety. Worship should include a therapeutic dimension that provides space for social healing at Church gatherings, because cognitive apologetics has proven unable to reach the hearts of suffering people.

The Church and Identity

Another major concern is the question of how society forms identity. The seminary can guide believers as they consider what results from the interplay between politics and individual relationships – i.e., identity. Processes that drive social life in Ukraine seem to correlate with the movement toward developing a national

identity. And yet, no single narrative guides society. Despite the ongoing international conflict, significant social and ideological divisions remain within Ukraine itself. Recent economic hardships have only reinforced these internal tensions, which include growth of economic inequality and continuous discussion on whether a pro-Russian or pro-EU political vector should prevail and what the main causes of state corruption are. The Church needs to speak to people who hunger for a new identity that differs from the identity of those responsible for leading Ukraine into this international crisis, and that provides hope for the possibility of peace both outside of and within Ukraine.

In this final area especially, churches need to develop a theology for influencing national identity so that it is not built upon historical trauma or in contrast to other nations. (Such negative options include the influence of the Russian Empire and later the USSR on Ukrainian state independence, especially the de-Ukrainization of language and culture; the *Holodomor*, the state-manipulated famine of 1932-1933; and the political and ethnic persecution and displacement under the USSR.) Ukrainian national identity has mostly been influenced by different political parties and secular organizations. As a result, Christians are sometimes carried away with nationalistic ideas that do not correlate with Christian values. On the other hand, imperialist or separatist political ideologies lead some Christians to reject the idea of patriotism. Evangelicals do tend to be more cosmopolitan in their perception of the role of the Church for the Ukrainian nation, since they often value personal salvation and “heavenly citizenship” more than local social identities (often criticizing patriotism as being too secular). They often seem to minimize the value of an independent state in favor of globalization (thinking of the global body of Christ and cross-cultural mission), which carries its own values, ethical burdens, and practical questions (one of these is whether we can contextualize our mission efforts without taking into account our own historical and national context). At the same time, a painful ideology of isolationism has recently gained popularity in Ukrainian society, an ideology that has influenced some Christians who are active in current public life.

Therefore, the Church must consider if it is possible to develop a theology based on love for Ukraine that does not embrace hate for others (i.e., patriotic without being nationalistic). To do so may be difficult in times of continuous conflict, but the Church must find a peaceful identity that creates space for other groups. This theology could begin with the appreciation of what we already have in Christ and could see the nation as a servant of God on a larger scale, with its own unique qualities and mission.

Through the Gospel, the Church has something to offer those struggling to address these high-level problems in Ukrainian society and government. The

Gospel has something to offer those who are well-off financially but feel that something is missing in society. Many Ukrainians still see Christianity as a medieval utopia, and they do not realize that Jesus taught down-to-earth principles of everyday life. Justice could be applied in society much more effectively if God were not seen as merely a distant being but as the Savior who is close to our needs and struggles. Justice and authenticity are areas of evangelical theology and practical Christian life that the Church needs to communicate more clearly and that Ukrainians need to understand more deeply.

The Church and Leadership in Crisis

The seminary can help the Church respond to questions of politics, social justice, and identity, but in order to do so, it must teach the church's leaders to model a new kind of leadership. Societal changes resulting from the events of the early 2000s have challenged our view of leadership, especially public leadership. Post-Soviet leadership rested on a tradition of paternalism, so the current grassroots citizen engagement has redefined what leadership means in Ukraine. However, even after Euromaidan, people continue to see institutional power as corrupt. Few people lead with integrity. This means that the current public demand for leadership leaves an opening for the Church to model leadership that is selfless, transparent, and team-oriented (not paternalistic).

In this context, the seminary has a unique calling to help local churches reinforce their practice of Biblical servant leadership. Sometimes, a good pastor may not have communicated care for a newcomer, who instead may have perceived the experience as manipulative or at least not constructive. Pastoral care based on lay submission can scare away more independent, self-sufficient people. This does not mean that these people themselves do not need to change or develop a certain respect toward authority and hierarchical leadership; however, instead of emphasizing authoritarianism, Church leadership could model transformative impact both within the Church community and in society in general. Many leaders are stressed by the high expectations placed on them. Leadership that behaves not as a strict hierarchy but rather as a collaborative effort – where delegation, trust, and care are emphasized – must be developed and promoted. If we have this type of leadership model, then problem-solving or teaching could be an answer for contemporary challenges.

The Church needs new leadership that is, in a sense, deconstructive, because it is aimed against power. Yet this new leadership should also be constructive, built not only on service but on the formation of a healthy society in which everyone has a sense of responsibility and value. This leadership would help others develop their unique gifts as active participants in the body of Christ. The Church needs to

explore ways it could influence society's definition of true leadership by voicing its concerns and modeling the type of leadership society is looking for.

The Church and War

Overshadowing all these political and social questions is the reality of war, a new reality that churches were not ready to face. Thus, seminaries in Ukraine must help people learn to live in an overarching context of international political strife. After six years of continuous war in Ukraine, many people are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), many are handicapped, many are widows and orphans, and over a million have been internally displaced. Different kinds of social ministries operated before the war, but not many people had experience ministering to those who endured war in their neighborhoods or to soldiers who participated in active combat. As a result, a whole new ministry of military chaplains had to be started almost from scratch. These chaplains require various levels of education and support. On the front lines, they deal with questions coming from soldiers about ethics, depression, and personal devastation. These new experiences require new responses to those affected by the war. In this context, UETS sees possibilities to support the Ukrainian Church through Christian counselling programs and short trainings related to trauma. Also, UETS has recently published books on Christian counseling and trauma healing since it is a new area not only for the Church but also for secular psychologists in Ukraine.

The war has created a whole new set of questions that have challenged the Church. People who experience war struggle to understand where God is in the midst of war. One challenge is understanding how to serve these people without assuming the government's responsibilities. Furthermore, how can Church leaders balance humanitarian aid and the presentation of the Gospel in a way that changes the lives of the afflicted? Finally, what does the process of national healing look like? Though this process has gone on for six years, and some solutions have been found, there is still a long road ahead. One way for UETS to participate is by reinforcing topics of conflict resolution and developing leadership while taking into account contextual social challenges. These challenges are multiplying, and UETS has been making adjustments to courses to reflect the contemporary context, particularly in its Master's programs.

These challenges accentuate the need for a revised theology of suffering, especially a rethinking of the fatalistic view of God that many Ukrainians hold. It is not uncommon for people to respond to the war as "God's will," thereby almost legitimizing violence and death. Theodicy must be approached not only with the expectation of proper answers about suffering but as an opportunity for the Church to grow into new forms of worship and to expand its ability to provide

counseling to those who suffer. There is also a space for a theology of hope and Biblical perspectives on structural social change. The Church may ask what can be done to prevent future wars and how to unite our nation (which hopefully communicates Kingdom values). Theological training has to take into account not only cultural contextualization but also the ongoing expansion of social challenges and structural social problems as well. One of the questions UETS is developing during the last few years is the combination of Christian faith and responsible citizenship without separating our faith from our life as citizens of Ukraine.

The method of Christian counseling in the current situation must be well-considered. The Church needs to define to what extent it should be involved in counseling in state-run programs for troops and veterans and what types of Christian education would be required to be effective in this ministry. And perhaps more importantly, the Church needs to promote a new approach to dealing with stress caused by violence as a result of the war experience. It is important to strive to impact society as a whole since all people are influenced by the experience of the conflict.

Conclusion

This essay has offered a case study for how the seminary can guide the Church as the Church responds to socio-political tensions. Concrete actions are mentioned here as paths to explore and as questions in process, not as proven solutions. In Ukraine, the Euromaidan protests and resulting military conflict have forced the evangelical Church to face many challenges. Some ministries have already adapted to these challenges, but many are still looking for direction. Churches have begun to mature in a holistic attitude and in ministry related to social justice and public opinion on controversial matters. Regarding the practice of worship that seriously takes into account the local context, the Church seems to be making some progress as more and more churches and Christian events address this question. Political crises have led to a more serious analysis of what the Church's role concerning national identity ought to be. Thanks to these societal changes, the Church and seminary must meet new expectations for servant leadership, but they also have new opportunities to reach the young and suffering. The Church has begun to take trauma seriously and to build a foundation that may help to overcome the violence that still defines many movements in Ukraine.

The evangelical Church in Ukraine has a unique opportunity to be a part of a renewed national formation through addressing the needs that plague the country. The seminary will play a key role in this renewal. Demonstrating the Gospel's relevance here and now in our society, the Church needs to preach, worship, lead, and counsel with power to engage today's challenges. These times

are hard for Ukrainians, but they are also a window into new ministries and new roles that evangelical Christians may play in society.

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