

OVT-047: Overture for Engagement and Education with Eastern Europe

The Presbytery of Utah submits this overture to the 225th General Assembly (2022): that World Mission expand its presence in the region of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine to listen deeply and broadly to the many different voices in the region. The people in each of these three nations are struggling under the weight of multiple conflicts and crises, both inside their countries and in their relationships with each other. It is important for the Church to understand these conflicts and to be aware of our own country's participation in them. The purpose of this proposed increased presence in the region is to educate our constituency about the complexities of the situations, enabling Presbyterians to evaluate critically and neutralize the effects of propaganda.

The Matthew 25 vision of PC(USA) encourages us to “actively engage in the world,” challenging us not only to boldly take action in our own communities and nation, but to reach out to others in the world, to hear their pain, to understand their challenges, and to be instruments of peace, love, and justice.

Actions Recommended

Three study trips have already been accomplished during this time of war in Ukraine, two sponsored by The Office of Middle East and Europe and one jointly sponsored with the International Peacemaking Program. In each case, a small group of staff and constituents met with church leaders in Russia and Ukraine to listen and explore their understanding of the conflict and the church's role in it.

These were powerful trips for the small number who participated, but the impact on the broader church's understanding has not been significant.

To expand that impact, we ask the Office of Middle East and Europe in collaboration with the Office of Compassion, Peace and Justice, to include the International Peacemaking Program and the Office of Public Witness, to implement the following actions:

- Conduct annual study tours of 6-8 Presbyterians accompanied by staff,
- Engage in discussions, in-person or virtually, with a diversity of voices from Orthodox and Protestant churches and faith-based Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the three countries,
- Utilize Presbyterian News Service to publish articles that help Presbyterians understand the complexities within the region and our own country's engagement in the region,
- Develop and distribute a toolkit for churches interested in learning more and/or participating in future study tours,
- Develop a reading list for churches who want to understand the conflicts in the region,
- Develop and distribute study guides in cooperation with the Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia Mission (BURM) Network,
- Identify opportunities for youth engagement across the region, that would include youth from the United States.

Rationale:

As observers in the United States, we sometimes find ourselves participating or taking sides in the conflicts of the region, without fully grasping the many different points of view and the historical complexities that influence them.

There is clearly a serious need for reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine, but the need is also great within Ukraine itself among churches, cultures, and language groups. We need reconciliation between the United States and Russia, as well as between the United States and Ukraine; a reconciliation that is only possible when we listen for understanding to the diverse voices within these two countries.

The current conflict in Belarus began between the government and the people, particularly the younger generation, complicated by the regional geo-political context and the threat of Russian interference, and exacerbated by the tension between Russia and the West.

We need to hear what the churches in these countries are (or are not) doing toward reconciliation and peacemaking, and reflect on our own role in the process. The effect of our sanction policies is that ordinary people are being impoverished and are struggling.

There is a pattern of division across the globe, with increasing efforts to separate people. By expanding our awareness and understanding of positive steps toward peacemaking and negative steps that deepen the divides or violate human rights, we are better able to recognize similar patterns in our own context.

The current global trends demand that we, the Church, work intentionally with others to overcome propaganda that fuels divisions by seeking to build bonds of trust. It is only through efforts to understand and appreciate each other that we are able to engage ecumenically and become witnesses for peace and unity in the Body of Christ.

Desired Outcomes

With these focused actions:

- Presbyterians will have the tools they need to evaluate critically what they hear in the media.
- A larger community will develop of Presbyterians committed to peacemaking in this context and globally.
- Local congregations will be better equipped to engage with global partners, enriching both.
- The Church will have a better-educated constituency who are more prepared to be advocates for peace and justice.
- The Church will expand its Matthew 25 vision of eradicating systematic poverty, dismantling racism, and building congregational vitality through dialogue with partners in the region.
- The youth of all four countries do not carry the weight of our history, which propaganda preys on, and therefore will play a meaningful role in dialogue.

Financial Impact

The cost of implementing this overture is relatively small and might include:

- Cost of preparing and distributing information,
- Partial scholarships, particularly for youth engagement, which are a powerful investment in the future.

The cost of study tours for staff will be covered by participants, so the only cost for World Mission is staff time. In order to make this time, we acknowledge the necessity of a shift in priorities, but the critical nature of the situation in this region warrants the investment.

Commonwealth of Independent States - European States



The map on the left (Commonwealth of Independent States – European States) shows the countries of interest, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, for the Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia Mission (BURM) Network.

In the map above, Crimea, annexed in 2014 by Russia is shown in orange. The conflict area between Russia and eastern region of Ukraine is also shown in orange.