

Ukrainian pastors aid neighbors on both sides of front line

by [Julie Bell](#) in the [July 5, 2017](#) issue

When armed men arrived at a Light of the Gospel church in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, they searched the basement for weapons. There were no weapons; instead one of the men found a file with the names of people the church is assisting.

“He saw that we help veterans, disabled people, and large families,” said Pavel (whose last name is withheld for security reasons), bishop of the Light of the Gospel, a group of about 20 Baptist churches. “I think that touched the hearts of these fighters.”

In summer 2014, a conflict that began in Kyiv spread eastward to Donetsk. Pavel said it was a “scary time,” as criminals and people with weapons roamed the streets. Many residents fled. But Pavel and many other church leaders stayed.

“I felt God’s quiet voice saying you have to stay for the Christians and the citizens,” he said. “You had the feeling that your life could end at any time, but there’s also a feeling that God protects and is near.”

About half of the Light of the Gospel churches are now in territory under Ukrainian government control. The other half are in a self-declared independent republic. That’s where Pavel lives; he said the armed groups controlling the area often send people in need to his churches.

“They say, go to the Baptist churches if you are hungry,” Pavel said. “Those people know that we are peacebuilders, people of nonviolence.”

As a young man Pavel refused to carry a weapon during his mandatory service with the Soviet Army. More recently, he has taken part in peacebuilding training sessions organized by Mennonite Central Committee, a Christian relief, development, and peacebuilding organization.

Andrew Geddert, MCC’s representative in Ukraine, values Pavel’s participation in the training.

“He brings firsthand experience of living and ministering in non-government-controlled territory,” Geddert said. “This has been essential to maintain unity between churches on both sides of the front line.”

Another participant in the peacebuilding training was Fedir, whose last name is also withheld for security reasons, pastor of a Light of the Gospel church on the other side of the front line. That government-controlled territory is home to thousands of people fleeing the conflict. Fedir’s church provides food, clothing, and other necessities to them.

“We believe in nonviolence; this is our understanding of our faith, and we hold to that,” Fedir said. “We are testimony that believers don’t hide in the bushes.”

Fedir and Pavel believe that testimony will outlast the current conflict.

“The fighters haven’t destroyed us because they see we are a peaceful people,” Pavel said. “This is a critically important message. We pray that God will have mercy and give grace to Ukraine so we can resolve this conflict.” —[Mennonite Central Committee](#)