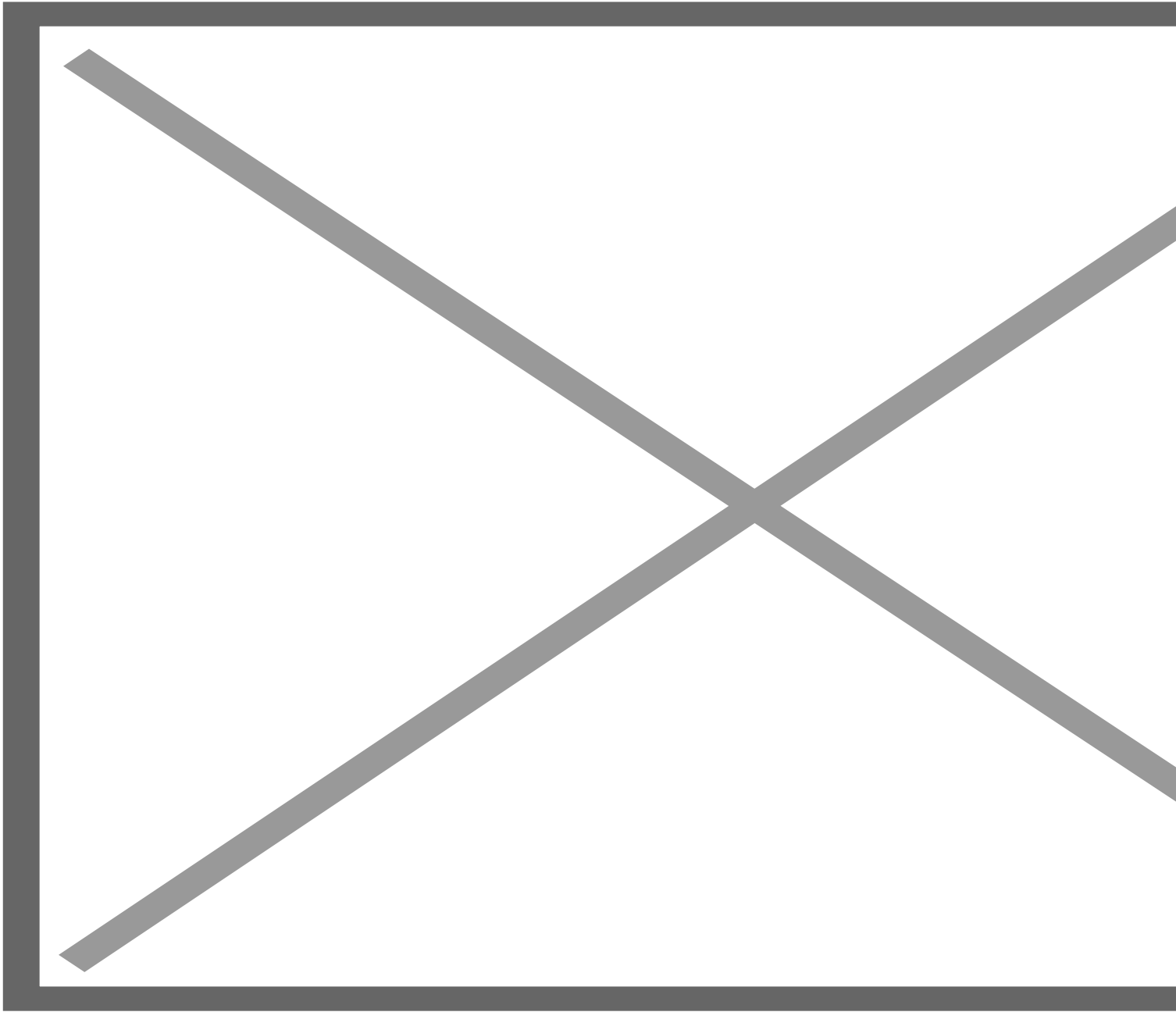


Pastors in exile

Clergy who have fled Russian-occupied Ukraine are finding new ways to provide pastoral care for parishioners who are still there.

by [Marc Roscoe Loustau](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue
Published on November 12, 2025



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Jovial, gravel-voiced pastor Eduard Fedirko once founded and led a large Baptist church in the Donetsk province, Ukraine. The first time I met him, he talked enthusiastically and at length about this start-up ministry; it was clear he'd given deeply of himself to this work. But when we met again this June, this was all in the past. Fedirko had not set foot in Donetsk in three years because his former church is behind the front lines in Russian-occupied territory.

"It must be hard for your parishioners to live under military occupation," I said at one point.

For just a moment, I saw Fedirko's smile fade. "I stay in touch with the current minister and a few leaders," he replied, "but no one else, because many church members have become KGB agents."

Since 2022, Russian forces have controlled about a fifth of Ukraine's territory, located in the east and along the southern Black Sea coast. Approximately 3.5 million people remain in the region called "temporarily occupied Ukraine"—400,000 of them in Mariupol, made famous by the eponymous Oscar-winning documentary, but also hundreds of thousands in lesser-known urban centers like Melitopol and Berdyansk, as well as in the cities of Fedirko's native Donetsk province.

The territory's Christian population is majority Orthodox; they belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. (The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is allied with Kyiv, is outlawed in occupied territory.) The occupying administration has supported the Russian Orthodox Church since 2022, when the church's Moscow leadership endorsed the full-scale invasion.

Last year, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting released a video smuggled out of an evangelical church in occupied Melitopol: Armed Russian soldiers interrupted a pastor's sermon and forced worshipers into the basement, where they waited hours to be interrogated. Russian forces have destroyed, vandalized, or locked congregations out of their churches and confiscated the property. "Tens of thousands of [Protestant] believers have been forced to flee," Ukrainian investigative journalist Simon Ostrovsky told *PBS NewsHour*.

Congregations from international traditions, like Fedirko's Baptist church, are viewed with suspicion by Russian authorities. Fedirko fled after an official with the Russian government department overseeing religious groups called him in for questioning. According to Fedirko, "They told me bluntly, 'We don't want you to stay in touch with any Western or Ukrainian churches.'"

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, a branch of the global Catholic Church, has also suffered under occupation. Many Ukrainian Greek Catholic clergy tried to stay in occupied territory after Russian forces overran the region. Then in November 2022, Russian forces arrested two priests in occupied Berdyansk. The arrests sent a clear signal to other Greek Catholic clergy that they were also at risk. A month later, Russian-installed authorities in Zaporizhzhia banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church as an "extremist organization." In 2024, the head of Ukraine's Greek Catholic Church gave his final assessment: "There is not a single Catholic priest in the occupied territories today."

Stories of Christian persecution are not new in Ukraine. In the early 20th century, the Soviet state outlawed church groups during its campaign to create a secular atheist culture. Today, the Russian government is not persecuting *all* churches; after all, the Russian Orthodox Church works in concert with the occupying administration. Instead, what's happening in the occupied territory is more like an anti-heresy campaign. The occupation is best understood as Christians punishing Christians who refuse to say the invasion is divinely sanctioned.

The ethical dilemmas of life under authoritarianism are felt in relationships of care as much as in prophetic witness or community organizing.

Encrypted messaging apps are reshaping the experience of occupation, on both sides of the front. News stories about drones have shown us that off-the-shelf technology is changing combat. And off the battlefield, consumer communications technology is giving clergy unprecedented regular access to their faithful in occupied territory.

Over four months, I interviewed eight Ukrainian clergy who fled occupied territory but have maintained contact with former parishioners. I met two priests stationed in the city of Zaporizhzhia, just 12 miles from the front. Five reached out to me from various parts of western Ukraine. Three others called me from Canada. Each reported that they regularly offer pastoral care to people behind enemy lines, using a variety of apps and programs. Catholics, for example, pray the rosary on Google Meet. Evangelicals send Bible passages by text. WhatsApp, Signal, Viber, and Telegram are preferred media, but some of the clergy I interviewed declined to name which apps they use, fearing that Russian authorities would monitor their conversations.

I interviewed Oleksandr, a Greek Catholic priest who had served in the coastal city of Melitopol, on the Feast of the Assumption. Oleksandr, who asked that I use only his first name, had just gotten off the phone with a parishioner in Melitopol.

When I asked about their conversation, Oleksandr replied, “Mostly, I just listened to him. He called me. He wanted to say he remembered our liturgy [of the Feast of the Assumption] and the time when we were together. He wanted to tell me that he hopes the priests will come back to his parish.”

Another Greek Catholic priest based in Zaporizhzhia, Roman Vovk, reaches out to parishioners in occupied Donetsk province, where he had his first parish. Vovk described sending a similarly simple message. “Pastoral care is important,” he said, “because we create opportunities, as much as is possible, to show them that we remember them and that we care about them.” Encrypted apps sustain these ties of belonging, despite artificial barriers like front lines.

But pastoral care is also healing for the clergy I spoke with, including Oleksandr, who carries cruel memories from his time under occupation. Before 2022, his ministry was focused on social service, and he had been the driving force behind Caritas, the Catholic NGO, in Melitopol. After the Russians forced Caritas’s closure, he began to doubt. “It was very painful for me,” he said. “I was shouting, shouting at God, ‘Tell me what to do here!’” Amid all the destruction and suffering, he thought to himself, it wouldn’t be enough to take confession and listen to people.

“But in my pain,” Oleksandr told me, “I heard God say, ‘You’re the priest. You have to do your work.’”

Oleksandr noted that some parishioners in occupied territory refuse the Google Meet prayer group “out of fear.” Pastors are scared too—like Fedirko, with his concerns about church members who are Russian agents and might tell the occupation authorities that they’ve had forbidden contact with people in free Ukraine.

A Ukrainian Mennonite pastor, Oleksii Makaiov, disagreed with the idea that surveillance requires cutting off contact. Russian authorities were listening, he reminded me, but so were Roman soldiers in Jesus’ day. “Jesus had no problem talking with the Roman authorities,” he said. “It was only a problem when they wanted to compromise him somehow.”

Even with the help of encryption, clergy still self-censor to avoid danger. “I do my best not to raise the topics that could be compromising for [church leaders],” Fedirko explained. “They do the same for topics that might compromise me.”

Ukraine's online pastoral care providers must also navigate a veritable dictionary of forbidden terms, words that may cause listening Russian authorities to harass or arrest a parishioner. Vladimir Putin's name is off-limits, but they also avoid talking about local political figures like mayors who have been appointed by occupying forces.

"There are some words that are better not to say out loud," said Roman Vovk, a Greek Catholic priest who had served in occupied Donetsk, when I asked him about conversations with former parishioners. Other vague or ambiguous words don't need any clarification. "When we say the word *they*," Vovk says, "everyone knows who we're talking about."

The occupying authorities are trying to Russify the occupied territory, including the inhabitants' language—which is one reason for targeting the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which requires that prayers and the mass be in Ukrainian. For people in the occupied territory, praying out loud in Ukrainian is risky and could be interpreted as a declaration of disloyalty.

But Oleksandr did not hesitate when I asked which language he uses for his rosary prayer group on Google Meet. "We pray in Ukrainian, of course," he said, adding that "it's the only time of freedom that people have under occupation."

Oleksandr, from his station in Zaporizhzhia on the other side of the front line, says it would be a betrayal for the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Catholics to pray the rosary in Russian. But the desire for safety may offer an equally powerful incentive to pray in Russian, even if some would see this as tantamount to conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church.

It's a classic double bind, especially for the provider. On the one hand, Oleksandr is being true to a basic principle of pastoral care: He is accompanying parishioners in their choice to speak Ukrainian. But it's unlikely that he will be able to be present with them if they face negative consequences. Technology can't provide a quick or permanent fix, since Russians have been known to crack encoded channels. Silence, says Vovk, provides the only workable option: "We have learned how to communicate with each other without words."

I met Vovk in the city of Zaporizhzhia, where he is rector of Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish. I was in Zaporizhzhia on a frontline humanitarian aid mission; Russian soldiers are only 12 miles away. Zaporizhzhia's massive steel and aluminum plants are regularly under siege, along with residential areas. Vovk even told me not to bother with bomb shelters. "By the time you hear the air raid siren," he said, "the missiles have already landed."

Zaporizhzhia is a paradox: Its population has grown since the full-scale war began. The newcomers are from the occupied territory. Vovk told me there is a psychological, perhaps even existential logic at work. Displaced people have an urge to be close to the homes they left behind, as well as the family and friends who remained under occupation.

Vovk knows this logic intimately. He was forced from his first parish in Donetsk province in 2014, when Russian soldiers occupied the region. As rector of Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Zaporizhzhia, he serves a broader community that includes many people who, like him, have suffered internal displacement, some even from the same part of Donetsk. Vovk—bearded, ample, with a direct manner—is still serving his former community through the community of internally displaced people in Zaporizhzhia.

Yet Vovk demurred when I asked him if he keeps in touch with former parishioners. He does call them occasionally, but he doesn't put much stock in these relationships. "You're asking about people in occupied territory," he said, "but to be truthful, there are only a few left from my old parish."

While clergy from occupied territory have some shared experiences, this is a crucial difference between the eastern areas occupied since 2014 and the areas in the south that fell in 2022. In Donetsk and Luhansk, many people stayed after the initial incursion, thinking that the occupation would be temporary. But the full-scale invasion convinced many holdouts to flee when it became clear that Russia had no intention of leaving.

Vovk confessed that he feels differently about his parishioners who remained behind enemy lines this whole time. Ten years of watching Russian news and war propaganda, he said, has changed their psyche and entire worldview. It is an alien place, not the Donetsk he left. To return, he says, “will be like a Christopher Columbus arriving in North America for the first time.”

He does feel a sense of pastoral obligation. “I would like to see the people I know there and talk to them and give them a hug,” he says. “The day the war ends, I’m certain the Greek Catholic Church will return to Donetsk and Luhansk.” But he says he wouldn’t accept an invitation to go back to Donetsk: “Probably someone new should be set there, because I myself, I would not be able to communicate with them, knowing what has happened to them under occupation and the choice they made to stay.”

If Vovk is realistic about the limitations of his pastoral reach, Fedirko takes solace in a theory of ministerial authority. He has half a foot in Ukraine’s Pentecostal movement, and he relies heavily on guidance from divine visions. After planting his congregation in the 1990s, the church’s new building acquisition coincided with what he described as an out-of-body experience. “That’s when I really knew what the building meant,” he explained. “I saw myself *ministering* in that building. The room was full, and I was preaching and ministering there.”

A second, later vision, which he received when Russians had already occupied the area, was a message to start looking for a replacement. Fedirko expressed confidence in his successor’s authority. “I believe that the church’s spiritual DNA has remained the same, because I believe in my apostolic calling,” he said. There is no sign of Vovk’s anxiety, his description of parishioners made into unfamiliar beings by Russian propaganda. Fedirko expressed confidence rather than resignation.

Fedirko admitted how difficult it was to give up his former church and his ministry in Donetsk, but the transition gave him a new understanding of his calling. He was not meant to plant one new church, now in occupied territory, but rather new *churches*. Since 2022, from his base in western Ukraine, he has been gathering congregations for people who have left occupied territory.

These Ukrainian pastors are doing pastoral care under an occupying regime that is solidifying its power through a military-backed emphasis on heresy. But this isn’t only happening in Ukraine. It’s also happening in the United States.

Since the first Trump administration, experts on this region have been warning about an authoritarian takeover of the US federal government as well as media, cultural, and educational institutions. Based on examples in Hungary (where I currently live), Poland, Slovakia, and Russia, they have warned of powerful factions planning to break constitutions and norms. They have journalists ready with propaganda. They have loyal judges to sanction their actions.

“State capture” is the term historian Anne Applebaum uses to describe this procedure in her books *Twilight of Democracy* and *Autocracy, Inc.* But Applebaum’s approach has outlived its usefulness. Her method for forming and educating an antiauthoritarian public—analyzing how institutions work and describing the bureaucratic and administrative procedures for capturing them—was apt for the pre-2024 Biden era. But now we’re in a Project 2025 era.

As right-wing shock troops march through our institutions, Applebaum sounds increasingly like postexilic Jeremiah. After the catastrophe predicted by the prophet has come to pass, God commands him to go back to the people and declare, “Can you not learn a lesson and obey my words?” (Jer. 35:13). Last month on *Bulwark* editor Charlie Sykes’s podcast, Applebaum declared, “It is what I feared would happen!” Applebaum sounds less righteous than Jeremiah, but she prompts the same response. You were right; now what?

I do not intend to give a checklist to show how Trump is doing just what Putin has done in Donetsk, Luhansk, or Crimea. But comparing the United States to occupied Ukraine draws our attention to what may be a neglected area of Christian response to authoritarianism: pastoral care. From my conversations with Ukrainian clergy pastoring across the front line, I learned that the ethical dilemmas of and resistances to authoritarianism are felt in relationships of care as much as they are felt in prophetic witness or community organizing. So far, progressive Christianity in the United States has placed an emphasis on these other faithful responses to Trumpism. But it will take all kinds of Christian practice to understand and fight against the ongoing militarized occupation of our homes, religious centers, and public spaces.