

**Belarus Ukraine Russia Mission (BURM)
Annual Network Conference Highlights
October 28-30, 2021**

First Presbyterian Church-Charlotte has a mission partnership with Hope Baptist Church in Ryazan, Russia. This partnership has existed for over 20 years, and our church members have visited them many times, and our Russian brothers & sisters have visited us too, over the years, in Charlotte. For this reason, First Presbyterian Church is a member of the PCUSA's Belarus Ukraine Russia Mission Network (BURM network for short), and once a year the BURM network gathers together to connect and hear from each other. In years past, the annual conference has met alternating between the U.S. and the Russian region; but in 2020 and again this year, the conference met virtually. With about 40 participants over the 3 days, from at least five different time zones, we learned and shared insights into Christians living their faith under sometimes hostile environments. Your church member, Barb Neidinger, will share the highlights of that conference, and welcomes your questions.

Opening Devotion

Ralph Clingan, pastor of Good Shepard Presbyterian Church, St. George, Utah, gave the opening devotion, centering on Psalm 133 – “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” and the reminder that the kingdom of God has no boundaries in the world. In I Thess. 5:16 – “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. He told the story of German pastor, Martin Rinkart, who in 1636 wrote the familiar words of the hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God,” for his children, after the 30 Years’ War, disease and economic hardship, in which he had buried over 5,000 of his parishioners. Stay focused on the hope we have in Christ Jesus!

Updates around the World

In some cases, the names of speakers have been omitted, as there is fear of persecution and intimidation.

Overture to Presbyterian General Assembly

The Presbytery of Utah, and joined by other presbyteries, produced a video showing the work of U.S. Presbyterian churches (in Utah, Nebraska, Michigan, North Carolina, etc.) in the BURM region, and is asking the General Assembly for recognition of that work throughout the PCUSA. The video was very well done.

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)

Luciano Kovacs with the WSCF explained that it was the oldest student ecumenical movement, started in 1895 in Sweden. Its founders, John Mott (of Iowa) and Karl Fries (of Sweden) trained

students to be prophetic voices of truth to power. Alumni of the WSCF started the World Council of Churches; John Mott was a Nobel Prize recipient; and one of many notable WSCF alumni was Martin Luther King, Jr. Today, WSCF is grappling with connecting international ecumenical youth with youth in the BURM network, and working to promote social and gender justice.

Unrest in Belarus

A Belarusian lawyer and theologian, currently living in Germany, spoke to us about the current situation in Belarus, a country of 10 million residents. There was an election on August 9, 2020, which was considered invalid by most in Belarus and in the west, which led to a “regime” takeover. The regime imprisoned over 800 people, many clergy, who are still imprisoned; and silenced other voices by taking away all electronic devices (computers, cell phones, etc.) with which they could communicate with the outside. The regime closed newspapers and independent radio & TV stations. The regime acted cruelly against religion; they beat and humiliated pastors and priests (showing nude photos of them and of parishioners). There are no legal protections. For more stories about the persecutions in Belarus, see <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring/>. Our speaker is part of a “Christian Vision” network of pastors that support each other with theological arguments to present to parishioners, and to promote justice, peace, and human rights’ issues. The network also helps hide vulnerable people from the regime. When asked what we in the U.S. can do, our speaker asked for prayer.

Difficult Times in Poland

A Polish pastor from Warsaw, explained the militant and apathetic responses to the Belarus’ immigrants at their southern border. Poland is in a Catch-22, being members of the European Union since 2004 and seeing a rising humanitarian crisis on its border with Belarus. The pastor has been to the border numerous times, trying to bring food and blankets to the refugees. He is appalled at the Polish soldiers who eat and drink, and do nothing to help the refugees who are dying of starvation. Most in the Polish community do nothing or simply say “push back” the immigrants to the border; the Polish plan to build a wall; yet there are a growing number of Polish who are getting angry and want to turn this situation around. There is a new Polish anti-LGBT law that says it is a criminal and religious offense. He sees parallels to the 1930’s which led to the Nazi regime in Poland. His mantra in this moment, is “All tyrannies fall eventually.” His question is “What will shake the foundation of society, to bring about change?” When asked what we in the U.S. can do, our speaker said the U.S. can stop “exporting” our divisive ways to other countries. (The Polish government says look the U.S. does it; we can too.) He encouraged us, like those in Poland, to check facts, challenge propaganda, speak the truth, and foster empathy.

Trauma of Children in Migration

On the last day of our conference, we focused on the plight of trauma in children. I think many of the issues that the children of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia face, can also be said of children in the U.S. who have underlying social and personal trauma that may go back several generations, and also the trauma of children at our border with Mexico.

This Child Here – a Ministry in Ukraine (<https://www.thischildhere.org/>)

A psychologist in Ukraine explained how their ministry, This Child Here helps displaced children (due to war, immigration, COVID-19, etc.) and their families work through the trauma in their lives. They are also working with teachers who work with these children, while having trauma issues of their own.

She explained the physiological aspects of trauma. A child at birth has a part of their brain fully developed – called “First Part” (such as, how to eat, sleep, breathe, hear, regulate their body) – these are reactive responses, concentrating on survival functions, an alertness to preserve life. Then, there are parts of the brain that develop after birth – called “Second Part” (such as complex thinking, information processing, memory, speech, ability to regulate behavior, ability to manage emotions, understanding of self and others).

She explained that a child in trauma moves into the First Part of their brain, and if they have no feeling of safety (which usually comes from their parents) then their behavior is either freeze (or withdraw), fight, or run away (or avoid). Because there is a chemical imbalance in their brain, their brain will stay in the First Part in a cycle of negative effects, and experience being lonely, hungry, cold and fearful. But the brain is flexible and able to change, although it is not a fast process, it is possible. So, to move children to the Second Part of their brain, where they experience care, companionship, nourishment and safety, the ministry creates a “safe place.”

In the “safe place,” there is no need to talk about the trauma. Just create a special atmosphere; change the child’s focus; crafts and games are very effective. The ministry works with parents for them to provide that safe place and engage the child in collaborative games and play, through weeklong summer camps. The children make presents for themselves. Create an atmosphere of creativity and fantasy, and the experiences of the satisfied brain, will develop confidence.

Childrens’ Ministry at Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy (MPC)-an international, interdenominational English-speaking Christian church in Moscow

Jessica Derise and Daniel Ekot of MPC explained trauma in immigrant children in Moscow. Jessica is a certified trauma chaplain, and prior to Moscow, served on a North Dakota Native American reservation where trauma runs deep. If parents cannot care for their children, it produces children with language skill problems, loss of hope and loss of a safe environment.

She says that there is such a thing as generational trauma – if the parent or grandparent has had trauma (such as the Native Americans driven from their lands, or forced to go to Native American schools), the next generation has secondary trauma. In Moscow, they see immigrant children living among many nationalities of children, and therefore have trouble with learning one language, namely Russian. MPC is hoping to expand its reach to the immigrant children of Moscow, partnering with another organization. They need seed money of \$1,000 to get started. For more information, see www.mpcrussia.org.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance of PCUSA

Susan Krehbiel of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance spoke to the group about their mission to not only provide disaster assistance, but to also give aid to refugees. She has over 30 years working with refugees, and talked specifically about Unaccompanied Children. She said that Unaccompanied Children are not eligible for adoption (as there may be a parent or family member somewhere in the world); but only eligible for a foster home. The U.S. immigration law says that the children should be placed in the least restrictive setting (like a home with foster parents). And when she sees children placed in camps and detention centers and referred to as a number, rather than a name, this law of “least restrictive setting” is not being met. For the U.S. government’s last fiscal year ended Sept. 30, 2021, out of the 1.7 million people at the U.S. border with Mexico, 147,000 were unaccompanied children. Their trauma is caused by family separation, a long arduous journey to get to the border, language barriers, etc. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is working to provide separate training for foster families of these children, as the traditional foster family system does not recognize and account for their special immigrant situation. Susan mentioned that there is a new Lifetime movie on Netflix, called “Torn from her Arms” about a mother separated from her child at the U.S./Mexico border. For more information on the agency, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance see <https://pda.pcusa.org/>.

Lutheran Family Services

Marni Newell of Lutheran Family Services, formerly of Nebraska, now in Council Bluffs, Iowa, is focused on Refugee Resettlement in the U.S. She described the number of refugees that are allowed in the U.S. each year (2019=15,000; 2021=140,000) plus the resettlement of Afghanistan refugees into the U.S. and how the process works. Essentially, their organization is notified 30 days in advance that a refugee family will be arriving (and to where); and the organization has 90 days to resettle (or get settled), which is not much time. If you want to learn more about U.S. migration issues, she suggested <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/>.

Conclusion

All participants agreed that this conference was informative, inspiring, and engaging. Any First Presbyterian Church-Charlotte questions about the conference can be addressed to Barb Neidinger (barbneidinger@gmail.com), and she can forward your questions to our mission partner, Ellen Smith, who was the organizer of this conference.