

Belarus, Ukraine, Russia Mission (“BURM”) Network 2022 Conference Report

First Presbyterian Church-Charlotte has a relationship with a partner church in Russia. Over the past 25 years, members of First Presbyterian Church-Charlotte have travelled to Russia and their members have travelled to Charlotte, some needing medical care. Now, due to the war in Ukraine, travel is not possible, and communication is difficult. They are in a part of Russia that was once “closed” during Soviet times, and their members can be fearful of outside communication with us. We pray for them and their situation. Recently, Rich and Barb Neidinger participated in the PC(USA) BURM Network Conference, October 6-8, via zoom. Here is a report of what was learned.

What can be said about connecting with our partners in Russia, the Christians in Ukraine who are suffering from the war, the refugees in Belarus who are being used as pawns in a political game, the authoritarian regimes that are rising to political power in Europe and elsewhere, and the fact that we’re fighting wars over access to fossil fuels that are also degrading our planet?

Lots can be said, and lots was said – we learned so much at the Belarus, Ukraine, Russia Mission (BURM) Network conference October 6-8. The conference was held in person in Green Bay, WI and virtually via live stream from the First Presbyterian Church in Green Bay. There was a LOT of great information. Here are some highlights. Ellen Smith, our mission co-worker shared her [recent newsletter](#) telling us about how refugees in Belarus are at risk and details about her recent travels.



Our model for engagement has been “pairing” Russian and U.S. congregations. Since we cannot visit Russia now or in the near future, we will want to find other ways to engage. It is important to stay in contact with our Russian friends, but we have to be very generic in our communications – messages that we’re thinking about them are wonderful but we can’t ask questions that could raise their visibility. So, we need to hold them in prayer and make small talk when we communicate with them.



There are programs we can connect with in the region that are making a difference, though, and we can learn more about them and visit them! Ellen Smith, our mission co-worker, invited Marlene Wall, president of [LCC International University](#) in Lithuania to tell us about their very diverse student body and the ways they’re teaching peace-making. All students at LCC have four semesters of theology. The students aren’t all Christians, but they all learn about Christianity. LCC is an inclusive and diverse place. Their [Study Abroad](#) is a 6-week program open to students from anywhere.

The Rev. Marek Kucharski, Chancellor of the [Evangelical School of Theology](#) in Wroclaw, Poland, told us of some of the ways they are helping refugees and seminary students from Ukraine. They are very thoughtful, they listen, and they are working together with all other organizations, regardless of church affiliation, to help the refugees. They have a long view.



Thinking about the reasons this war began and why it continues was a significant topic at the conference. We learned about the history of the region and how the borders have changed through the years. We learned about the political climate and how a poor economy can lead to the election of



Fascists. See the [article](#) from Luciano Kovacs, Presbyterian World Mission area coordinator and speaker at our conference. We learned about how destructive our dependence on fossil fuels is. We fight wars over oil and as we burn it, we contribute to climate change, which is affecting agriculture in Ukraine. All these problems seem insurmountable but discussing them and understanding them helps us move toward

change.

We hope you will be able to engage in this part of the world and learn and grow with us, and be inspired by the Christian actions taking place there. [Ellen Smith](#), our mission co-worker, provides updates and information; for example, she just posted an article on [Energy Transformations for Ukraine to Become a New Green Power-house of Europe](#).



And for face-to-face conversations, please talk to First Presbyterian Church-Charlotte members, Rich and Barb Neidinger.