

REPORT TO THE ELS CHURCHES ON THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE **(Where our fellow confessional Lutherans in the Ukrainian Lutheran Church live)**

Compiled by Pastor Jerry Gernander from personal correspondence and news reports

[Note: An “oblast” in Ukraine is roughly equivalent to a state in the United States of America.]

The November 20-21 presidential election in Ukraine has caused strife that threatens the freedom the Ukrainians have had since 1991. We do not depend only on news reports for this information. We listen to our friends living through it, who include Rev. David Jay Webber, ELS pastor and rector of St. Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Lutheran Seminary in Ternopil; and Rev. V’yacheslav (Slavik) Horpynchuk, Bishop of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE ELECTION

President Leonid Kuchma is leaving office. The contest is between current Ukraine Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych and opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko. Yanukovych officially was declared the winner. But it was a “victory” obtained through fraud and corruption.

“The election was clearly stolen from the pro-freedom and pro-west presidential candidate through massive election fraud. The evidence for this fraud is overwhelming” (Rector Webber). Writing one day after the election, Bishop Horpynchuk said: “The results announced by the Central Election Commission were frustrating for millions of Ukrainians as they discovered about massive falsifications taking place during the elections. Most observers were even illegally forbidden to see the voting process and be present at the local counting processes.”

WHO THE CANDIDATES ARE

Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych (who officially won the election): “If the pro-Russia candidate wins, it is likely that the Ukrainian Lutheran Church and other minority confessions will begin gradually to be suppressed in favor of the Russian Orthodox Church, as is the case in Russia, and that foreign missionaries will have a hard time working here” (Rector Webber).

Opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko: “Mr. Yushchenko has always been a trustworthy politician,” Bishop Horpynchuk said. “He is Christian, and he is in favor of religious freedom in Ukraine.” Rector Webber: “The pro-freedom candidate will probably make things easier and better for us and everyone. His wife was born in the U.S. to parents who fled from Ukraine in the 1940s. He completely understands the principles of liberty, the free market, freedom of the press and freedom of conscience, etc. He has the potential perhaps to be a combination of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Eliot Ness. Ukraine could use someone like that.”

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THE ELECTION

Individuals began to protest. “It is 10:25 p.m. now, and around 350,000 citizens have gathered on the central square of Kyiv,” Rev. Horpynchuk wrote one day after the election. “More and more people are coming from Kyiv and from other parts of the country.”

Also, official governing bodies in Ukraine began to reject the official results. Oblasts of western Ukraine and their major cities declared they recognized Yushchenko, not Yanukovych, as the legitimate president, Rev. Webber said. “These are official resolutions of oblast and city councils ... overwhelmingly supported by the population of each of these oblasts. Since we live in one of those oblasts we feel safe at present, but it is still possible that civil war will break out.”

The Supreme Court of Ukraine suspended the inauguration, to hold hearings (which began November 29). Also the Parliament declared the election results fraudulent – “at odds with the will of the people” – and passed a vote of no confidence in the election commission.

However, these decisions are not permanent or binding. Also, subjugation by force is a real possibility. For example, Yanukovych supporters arrived at a scheduled Yushchenko rally in the eastern part of Ukraine and beat people with bats while police watched and did nothing.

WHAT ABOUT THE UKRAINIAN LUTHERANS?

The Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) is neither remaining silent nor overstepping the boundary between the spiritual and secular kingdoms. Our fellow confessional Lutherans in Ukraine are supporting attempts to preserve the nation by lawful means. Also, in Christian love ULC members have given out hot tea and coffee to the protestors, regardless of denomination.

The St. Sophia Lutheran Seminary website now begins with this quotation by American Lutheran theologian Joseph Stump: “The duty of obedience to the State is enjoined in Scripture. Insurrection and rebellion are forbidden. Changes in the forms and methods of government are to be obtained by legal means. Resistance is justifiable only when those in authority persist in violating the basic principles of the State, and when resistance therefore is really **a defense of the State against those who are seeking to revolutionize it from above.**”

Bishop Horpynchuk has joined leaders of five other churches in Ukraine, in signing his name to “Appeal of Leaders of the Christian Churches to the People of Ukraine Concerning the Results of the Presidential Election.” This is not an example of uniting with heterodox churches to worship, but of permissible cooperation in external matters.

You can read the entire letter at the ULC website (www.ukrlc.org/eng.htm). It says, in part: “We first of all turn to believers with a call to fast and pray for peace in our state and for implementation of the just results of the Presidential elections. We call upon our congregations and all the people of Ukraine to stand for the truth, to maintain unity and peace, to keep the Constitution and the laws of Ukraine without violence. We turn to authorities with an appeal to remember their responsibilities before God ...”

In his November 22 letter, Bishop Horpynchuk said: “Please keep our Ukrainian Lutheran Church, our pastors, professors, teachers, and laymen in your prayers. Please also pray that the Lord will keep Ukraine and strengthen it as a free country. Please pray for us!”

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Following last year’s Christmas service in Ternopil, Rector Webber wrote a letter which shows how “the free course of the Gospel being preached” has borne fruit:

“Several [traditional Ukrainian Christmas] songs were sung during the service, with much joyful gusto. During Soviet times singing these songs would have gotten somebody in big trouble. But the Christian families of Ukraine kept them alive in the secrecy of their home worship on Christmas ... for several decades, as they waited for the day of God’s deliverance. That day came in 1991 [when the Soviet Union came to an end]. As I looked around the congregation this morning, I also thought about the backgrounds of some of the people there. In the old days some of them were card-carrying Bolsheviks [who] were the persecutors of the others. The believers were keeping these songs alive not just for themselves and their families, but FOR THOSE BOLSHEVIKS, who have now been converted by the Savior who is praised in the songs, and who have now been embraced as brothers and sisters in the fellowship of the church by the forgiving guardians of those songs. They were also keeping these songs alive for the many indifferent and dreamless people who learned during Soviet times to survive by not believing in anything too strongly. And now all of them – the former guardians of these songs, the former silencers of these songs, and those who were formerly indifferent to these songs – are singing them together and are teaching them to the rising generation. ... It’s a great time to be alive!”

We should be actively interested in the current crisis in Ukraine, especially for the sake of our fellow confessional Lutherans there and all “who *will* believe in [Christ] through their word” (John 17:20) – in prayer that Christ’s church there “may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:2).