

March 22, 2022

Friends -

As we are all thinking of and praying for our partners in Russia and Ukraine, I imagine that you are wondering what the future holds for those individuals for whom we care so much and for the Lutheran Church and our partnership with our Companion Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia. As Archbishop Dietrich Bauer said in the following interview, there are more questions than answers.

Please also remember in prayer our friend Bradn Buerkle and his family. We have been informed that they have fled to Istanbul. Bradn is a U.S. citizen.

What follows is informational material. May it help us to get greater insight, empathy, and love.

Bless you all-

Eva Mader

NWWA Synod Team Russia Member

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Watch this YouTube video link to a prayer service for Ukraine at the Lutheran Cathedral in Berlin last Friday. You will see Archbishop Dietrich Brauer participating, also the priest from the Russian Orthodox Church in Berlin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B92xA6NfhPg>

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Read this interview with the ELC of Wuerttemberg, member of the ELC of Germany.

This interview is in German, but you may wish to click it on to see the photo of Dietrich Brauer.

https://www.elk-wue.de/news/2022/17032022-ein-krieg-gegen-die-menschlichkeit?fbclid=IwAR2Gg_fDeMxoScemmHXi3q6Z2rGqypejKrgDd1AWmTtAtynlfVAi563hsMA

A War Against Humanity (Translation from German article above)

The Russian Lutheran Bishop Dietrich Brauer in an interview – conducted by Magdalena Smetana

Dietrich Brauer has been Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia (ELKER) since 2011 and Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia (ELCR) since 2014. The 39-year-old fled to Germany from Russia with his family a few days ago. In an interview with Magdalena Smetana, media representative of the Reutlingen prelatore, he talks about the war in Ukraine and the situation and role of the churches in this situation.

Magdalena Smetana: When we talked to each other via zoom shortly after the outbreak of the Ukraine war, you said: "Now the line has been crossed, now I can no longer remain silent." What exactly was the moment that made you change your mind?

Dietrich Brauer: On February 24th at 6 a.m. I woke up in a new world. Two days earlier we would have been willing to talk and adapt or reorient. But this morning I felt this is no longer possible. I hoped it's a fake. But then I got in touch with my colleagues in the Ukraine and with the brothers and sisters in the partner churches and it was clear: now there is no longer a BUT.

Magdalena Smetana: Which BUT do you mean?

Dietrich Brauer: Our church has always looked for solutions. In my position, I tried to build bridges, to mediate and to show understanding for both sides. I was wary of Crimea's annexation to Russia and what was happening in Donbas. Here, too, we focused on dialogue and considered together how we could support the communities.

Magdalena Smetana: But now the limit had been reached.

Dietrich Brauer: Yes, it got even worse. This is unimaginable. We were not allowed to talk about the war, pray for peace and contact our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

Magdalena Smetana: You found clear words in the service on Sunday after the outbreak of war. How were the reactions?

Dietrich Brauer: I was afraid that people would either not believe it, or downplay it, or blame both parties. But I was pleasantly surprised at how well the sermon was received. I wasn't political, but I was clear. I spoke of the war and the feeling of powerlessness that many felt but had no words for. It's like a tight space from which there is no escape. Many cried, talked about their fears and there was great gratitude.

Magdalena Smetana: What happened next?

Dietrich Brauer: The Office of the President made a clear request to all religious leaders to speak out and support the war. Most did. The Catholic colleague refers to the Vatican and is silent, the Jewish chief rabbi, who also has American citizenship, found clever words. He called on everyone to work for peace. We could have joined that. I wanted to write a joint statement with all religious communities, but the others didn't agree. Together we could have made a difference.

Magdalena Smetana: In 2015 you were appointed as a member of the "Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations" at the President of the Russian Federation.

Dietrich Brauer: All traditional religious communities are represented there. Our Lutheran church was not represented for many years because up to now there have only been German bishops. They were not appointed to the council. So it was progress. We were able to voice our concerns, network and build bridges. For me it was also the opportunity to communicate directly with those responsible.

Magdalena Smetana: At the time you said it was a positive sign and a social recognition of a small minority church. From today's perspective: How serious were the steps taken by the Orthodox majority church and the state towards the Lutheran church?

Dietrich Brauer: We will probably only be able to judge that in retrospect. On the part of the state, there are no theologians on the council. Nevertheless, we hoped for rapprochement. I approached people, made contacts, carried out projects. For example, in 2020 we were able to transfer a copy of the Stalingrad Madonna from Berlin to Moscow, where it now has a permanent home in the Peter and Paul Cathedral. We have these contacts to thank for that.

Magdalena Smetana: The Moscow Cathedral was also returned to the Church after three attempts. What hopes did you attach to this step?

Dietrich Brauer: That's another example. We only had the right to use it, even though we actually owned the church. The state was the owner. We were subjected to all sorts of harassment and there was always a risk of our contract being terminated. It was a total addiction. I took the Reformation anniversary as an opportunity to speed up this process. The contacts were important for that. And those responsible were impressed that Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier actually took part. At the ceremony, he spoke about the fact that this cathedral can become a meeting place for all denominations.

Magdalena Smetana: In the Western press we read about Patriarch Cyril I's position on the war. Are there still ways to influence him?

Dietrich Brauer: That's difficult to say. For years we have heard a narrative from the church about the persecution of Christians and genocide in Ukraine. Therefore, his actions are a logical consequence. The sermons we hear are also consistent. But a lot of people expected something from him.

Magdalena Smetana: How do you see the role of the Orthodox Church in general at the moment? Is there a possibility of a protest building up from below?

Dietrich Brauer: Some bishops speak out, but many priests and believers are afraid. Then there is the inner turmoil. Russians and Ukrainians of different denominations lived peacefully together. But now? When they see the dead and tanks. What are you supposed to think?

Magdalena Smetana: You are Bishop of the ELKER and Archbishop of the ELCR and are responsible for 170 parishes and 50 pastors and many parishioners. How are you?

Dietrich Brauer: In every ELCROS church we have a bishop who is responsible. But we live in a close church community and are bound by contract. Hard to say how many people actually stay. The Church is in danger. Our story is painful - we used to be stigmatized as Germans, even I, although I've been living under reprisals for the third generation and only have a Russian passport. We always hoped that this time would not come again. Now we have to start all over again.

Magdalena Smetana: Is it possible for the church to contribute to reconciliation across borders?

Dietrich Brauer: I really hope so. The situation is different from 2014. Now there is more cohesion and people say we must not be dominated by hatred. Now is the time to act and to help, not to blame. I am grateful for that.

Magdalena Smetana: What can we as a church, as GAW, as Christians abroad, do for our fellow believers in Russia?

Dietrich Brauer: A good question. But I have no answer. I try to think of different scenarios. If things get worse, if a major war breaks out, we must try to evacuate people. Another possibility is that everything will take longer, and that means we can't make plans. We are currently discussing with my consistories how to proceed, how life on site can be maintained. But nobody can say what it will look like in two months. My hope is that the situation will de-escalate. That would also be possible.

Magdalena Smetana: What are your long-term plans? Can you return to Russia?

Dietrich Brauer: Not at the moment. Unfortunately, there are now more questions than answers. I clearly and publicly distance myself from this war, which is not just a war against Ukraine, but a war against humanity. It is not held in our name.

Magdalena Smetana: They will take part in the prayer for peace in the Berlin Cathedral on Friday and in the ZDF service on Sunday. What's your message?

Dietrich Brauer: It is a message of peace. I wish us a just peace, which we mean seriously. The word peace is used very often in our services. This peace becomes concrete in the suffering of Christ. In the loneliness and ignorance of what the future holds. In the cup that we must drink for a new beginning to be possible. The closeness of God can be felt in the people who pray for peace with the people in mind - the crying newborns in the bunkers, the young soldiers who are on the front lines and the mothers who receive the news of death. We have no words for this suffering. This is passion story. But even in this hell there is hope for peace.

Magdalena Smetana: What carries you during this time, what gives you strength?

Dietrich Brauer: My family, friends and our partners here on site. But also, the people in Russia who bravely continue. A great source are the Moravian Slogans, which I read every day. I am amazed how the Word of God speaks to us in the current situation. That moves me a lot.

Info:

Dietrich Brauer is a Russian Lutheran theologian. He has been Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia (ELCER) since 2011 and Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia (ELCR) since 2014. The 39-year-old comes from a Russian-German family that moved from Vladivostok to Moscow a few years after his birth. Dietrich Brauer is married to the pastor Tatjana Petrenko and has three children.

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And, finally:

STATEMENT OF THE GENERAL CONSISTORY

A centralized religious organization

"The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia"

In this difficult time for the country and for the whole world, we declare:

1. Our Church is part of Russia's rich spiritual tradition, and we feel united with our country, both in joyful and hard times. We pray for our people, for the well-being, freedom, wisdom and strength of our state.
2. We come from the fact that our parishioners are faithful sons and daughters of our Fatherland, but they may have different beliefs and views. The doors of our churches remain open to all. We see all believers as brothers and sisters. At the same time, we avoid political discussions and divisions in our communities.
3. As Christians, we anxiously perceive any form of violence, we are called to pray for peace and an end to the bloodshed. We follow this call at our services, we deeply regret that now people are suffering and dying in Ukraine, and we call on politicians to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict as soon as possible.
4. Despite all the political divisions in our societies, we feel our spiritual connection with our Ukrainian believers and pray for a speedy invocation of the world and that there will be no hatred, violence and contradiction between our peoples yes.
5. A range of social projects are being carried out in our communities aimed at helping refugees from areas currently affected by armed conflict.
6. This statement should be considered as the official position of the Church on the current situation.

On behalf of and by the Consistory General

Deputy Archbishop of the Centralized Religious Organization

"The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia"