

**UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA  
GENERAL SYNOD**

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**16 May 2022**

**Pastoral Letter to URCSA Congregations on the War in Ukraine  
May 2022**

**1. Background and Developments**

The Russian Federation invaded Ukraine on the 24 February 2022, thereby escalating the conflict that began already in 2014. At that time, Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula in the south and backed separatist rebels in the industrial heartland of the Donbas in the east.

At the end of 2021 Russia build up a large military force of 190,000 troops in the north while the Russian president Putin, in televised addresses, questioned the right to statehood of the Ukrainian people. He also claimed that the Ukrainians were ruled by Neo-Nazis that are bent on persecuting the Russian minority in the east of Ukraine. The Russian president further claimed that NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), constituted a threat to Russia's security and demanded that Ukraine will never join the Alliance.

The Russian president assumed that he will encounter little resistance due to internal divisions in Ukraine and the overwhelming military might of the Russians. The reality is that the president of the Ukraine Zelensky, mobilised a united people that stopped the invasion both at the capital and at Kharkiv despite the onslaught of missile attacks and tanks. In the southern city of Mariupol, a well-fortified battalion held out against a severe onslaught that destroyed 85 percent of the city and trapped civilians and soldiers in underground tunnels. By the 7<sup>th</sup> of May the remaining civilians were evacuated.

**2. Impact**

The immediate impact of the war was the mobilization of the able Ukrainian men to resist the invasion and the flood of refugees from the north and east towards central Europe. By the end of April 2022 more than 5.8 million Ukrainians have left the country, settling mostly in Poland, Moldova, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. Internally, more than six million Ukrainians have been displaced. The greater price paid by Ukraine and Russia, was the deaths of thousands of soldiers and for Ukraine, many civilians. On the Russian side, it is reported that more than four million Russians have also left the country.

Since Ukraine is a major exporter of wheat and other grains, the war is impacting on more than 30 low-income countries that depend on both Ukraine and Russia for their supplies. Those affected include North Africa and Central Asia.

### **3. Responses of International role-players**

The invasion was condemned internationally as an act of aggression. The UN demanded on 2 March 2022 a full withdrawal of Russian forces while the International Court of Justice ordered Russia to suspend operations. The Council of Europe expelled Russia from their ranks.

The South African government together with China, India and many other African countries abstained from condemning the invasion. The SA government argued that it does not want to become embroiled in the politics of confrontation and aggression. It reaffirmed its support for the UN Charter that oppose violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states but it still refused to condemn the violation and integrity of the Ukraine.

### **4. Response of the Churches**

The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, urged the SA government to condemn the invasion unequivocally. He took up the position of the UN Secretary General, that all members of the UN ‘shall refrain... from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...’

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Ukraine, called for an end to the war, for support for the people of Ukraine and for a just peace where the victims are heard and the perpetrators identified.

The WCC organised an ecumenical roundtable where the participants expressed their rejection of war and military force to resolve disputes. They denounced the military aggression of the Russian Federation leadership as outrageously immoral and affirmed the right of the Ukrainians to defend themselves. The participants also expressed their grief for all the lives lost on both sides and praised the care and support of Ukrainian refugees by other countries.

### **5. The Response of URCSA**

5.1 The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa takes its point of departure from the Gospel mandate to be peacemakers. The Gospel does not encourage war as a solution to conflict but require us to seek just solutions that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of everyone. This applies not only to the situation in Ukraine but everywhere where war is destroying lives and livelihoods including Palestine, Myanmar, the DRC and Yemen.

5.2 The church is one of God’s vehicles to shine the light of the Gospel on all areas of life. As such we cannot be silent in the face of aggression and the destruction of human life. The Russian invasion must be named for what it is – an immoral attempt to grab territory and violate the rights of the Ukrainians in service of a power-elite in Russia.

5.3 The invasion has dislocated millions of people and led to the death of many. The claimed objectives of the Russian leadership have been exposed as false for it started as an alleged attempt at denazification and ended in territorial domination.

- 5.4 URCSA recognizes the right of the people of Ukraine and its president to defend their integrity with all their might and commends those countries that have received the thousands of refugees.
- 5.5 We add our voices to the many who calls for negotiated solutions to disputes of security and other socio-cultural needs.
- 5.6 URCSA further expresses the hope that the victims in this war will be recognized and that their rights will triumph ultimately.
- 5.7 We therefore pray that God will transform this attempt at domination of a nation long subjugated by its more powerful neighbour, into an opportunity for the Ukraine to emerge as a truly democratic and free member of the commonwealth of nations.
- 5.8 We call on all congregations in URCSA to dedicate a time for prayer and commitment to justice on behalf of the nation of Ukraine.

This statement is from URCSA General Synod Executive members on behalf of URCSA General Synod.

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***16 May 2022.***