

FAITH-BASED ACTORS IN UKRAINE: MAPPING CONTRIBUTIONS, NEEDS, DIVIDES, AND GROWTH AREAS IN WARTIME

WHY FAITH-BASED ACTORS ARE IMPORTANT IN UKRAINE



Developed by Dialogue in Action research team (July-August 2025) and supported by ADRA Denmark and partners DanchurchAid-Norwegian ChurchAid Joint Country Programme (JCPUA)

*This short-term research aims to map **the roles of faith-based actors** in Ukraine during the active phase of full-scale invasion, their perspectives and needs for future strategic partnering and development.*

WHY FAITH-BASED ACTORS ARE IMPORTANT IN UKRAINE



Trusted civil society actors: Faith-based organizations are active civil society members and enjoy high levels of public trust in Ukraine, enabling them to co-create social values and inclusive narratives.



Significant social and spiritual roles: They provide moral guidance, address trauma and existential issues, and access international networks to advocate for peace.



Wide grassroots reach: Their long-term presence across urban, rural, frontline, and newly de-occupied areas allows them to support vulnerable groups where other actors struggle to operate. Women and youth members play effective roles.



Safe spaces for dialogue: Religious communities foster inclusive environments where diverse groups, including non-believers, can come together - contributing to peacebuilding and social cohesion.



Adaptive humanitarian response: Since the full-scale war, faith actors have expanded and systematized their social services, building partnerships with civil society and humanitarian organizations to meet urgent needs despite resource constraints.

“Our goal is to inform a more intentional, value-driven engagement with faith actors in the domains of humanitarian response, social cohesion, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, public theology and rights-based public advocacy”.

Faith-based organizations in Ukraine are active members of civil society and horizontal networks of cooperation in all regions. They may not always realize how powerful their involvement is, and yet retain [high level of trust](#) from Ukrainian society during the period of independence (**from 72,5% to 62,5%**).

One of the **unique aspects of faith-based communities**, for instance in small territorial communities, is their ability to create a safe space for different social groups that could not come together in other circumstances. However, all those functions require their own readiness to step in and to contribute in an ecological way.



WHAT NEEDS ADDRESSING TO STRENGTHEN FBOS CONTRIBUTION IN UKRAINE

Social service as mainly crisis response (evacuation, shelters, humanitarian aid, basic crisis support etc.) was [well-organized and rapidly developed](#) in all faith-based organizations in Ukraine.

1. Humanitarian aid provision

Religious communities have become key humanitarian providers in Ukraine, yet their expanding role risks overstressing capacity, weakening strategic direction, and shifting their identity from spiritual leaders to primarily service contractors. Without clearer coordination and safeguards, churches may inadvertently substitute state responsibilities, undermining both public accountability and their own theological mission.

2. Peacebuilding and social cohesion

Peacebuilding in Ukraine is increasingly centered on fostering internal cohesion and managing social tensions, with churches playing key roles in integration, dialogue, and youth leadership. However, many topics like reconciliation, memorialization, and attitudes toward military service remain taboo or are avoided by religious leaders. To empower them, there is a need for strategic vision, recognition of women's leadership, engagement with national trauma and transitional justice, else faith-based actors may miss vital opportunities to contribute to long-term societal healing and post-war transformation.

3. Mental health and psychological support

Religious communities have embraced mental health support and are met with and responding to high demands in this field, especially amid war-induced trauma. In addition, they need more sufficient training, systemic frameworks, and personnel capacity to meet growing psychological demands—often forcing clergy into roles of informal psychologists without adequate preparation. This imbalance, compounded by burnout, underinvestment in chaplaincy services, and the marginalization of clergy trauma, risks undermining both the quality and sustainability of faith-based MHPSS efforts in Ukraine.

4. Public theology

The previously dominant theological framework during Soviet times, that church and religion was confined to the margins of society is now replaced by an understanding that church and religion is part of and engages in society. Yet Ukrainian churches remain trapped in outdated frameworks and avoid engaging substantially with war-related moral challenges, often limiting themselves to prayer without coordinated action or strategic public messaging. The war has triggered shifts in language use and spiritual life, but unless churches undergo a deeper theological transformation and better embrace reconciliation and peacebuilding as part of their national mission, they risk post-war disengagement and diminishing public relevance.

5. Advocacy

Ukrainian religious organizations lack coordinated international advocacy, which weakens their influence and leads to fragmented messaging that fails to convey the full complexity of Ukraine's spiritual and social landscape. Evangelical communities face additional dilemmas due to political affiliations of foreign funders. A shared challenge for all remains insufficient recognition of legitimizing faith-based actors among secular donors – despite their high compliance with international humanitarian standards.



HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE FBOS IN UKRAINE

1. Strategic changes in the programming

The current humanitarian programming model is proving inefficient in wartime conditions, prompting experts to call for more flexible, partnership-based, and long-term project structures that emphasize adaptability and local ownership. Sustainable cooperation with international partners and systemic localization are essential for building trust, transforming rigid hierarchical cultures, and shifting from emergency response to integrated psychosocial and strategic development, including interfaith collaboration and reconciliation work.

2. Possible changes in public theology and advocacy

Ukrainian religious institutions face the dual challenge of theological stagnation and fragmented advocacy, as they struggle to shift from reactive, oppositional identities toward constructive engagement with societal issues like military ethics, alternative service, and legal clarity. The absence of a unified vision and reluctance to address sensitive topics publicly undermines both internal cohesion and external legitimacy, hindering the potential of faith actors to influence Ukraine's post-war recovery and state-confessional relations.

3. Opportunities in peacebuilding and social cohesion

Intra-Orthodox tensions in Ukraine have evolved into broader cultural and national identity divides, revealing a critical gap in the country's strategic approach to peacebuilding. Religious actors are uniquely positioned to foster a culture of dialogue, embed restorative practices, and mainstream conflict-sensitive analysis into humanitarian and social programming, thereby transforming faith-based engagement into a durable platform for national reconciliation and postwar resilience.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PROGRAMMING

01 Institutional support for localization: Assistance to Ukrainian faith-based organizations in developing a common strategy for working in the region and long-term development plans. There is the need for joint strategizing, investing in organizational development, and then in the support of projects to continue and their joint design with international partners, but based on the ideas of Ukrainian organizations. There is a need to re-consider partnership as well as to empower planning and implementation cycle by context sensitive analysis and high level of flexibility.

02 Educational programs in MHPSS: Respondents mentioned a huge need in adult training for ministers and FBOs staff in psychological aid, trauma work, burnout prevention, and peacebuilding. Still, those programs should not be as one-time action but more as coaching process with supporting changes and developments in recent projects of participants. This complex educational support will create real long-term changes and will not be taken as something “as if it was imposed from above”.

03 Support for networking: Creation of re-designed coordination platforms between territorial communities and interfaith working groups for main help providers. There are already a lot of working groups so the design of those precise working groups should be careful and locally-led, so participants could feel the difference because of them. There should not be internationally only or locally only led groups – a mix of them would get the best results.

04 Funding for transition: There is a need for support for transitional programs for FBOs from mass humanitarian aid to deeper spiritual and psychosocial work, as well as co-designing programs with Ukrainian partners in a context-sensitive way and monitoring/evaluation system. Organizational development and mental health recovery for experts should be also included.

05 Work with memory and reconciliation: As an existentially-based topic, it require system work on different tracks, including local dialogues, art projects, theological developments and international advocacy. Working with memory should not be considered as artificial addendum but rather lived practices and rituals that help to keep the focus in life routine and overcome loss of people.

06 Advocacy for involvement on programmatic level: Donors and INGOs should involve religious actors in the projects of international donors, lifting artificial restrictions on their participation in humanitarian and other programs. International actors should play a crucial role for networking and helping Ukrainian experts in the process of advocacy.

07 Youth engagement: On programmatic level: To utilise the potential in Ukrainian youth as agents for change, the following is needed. To develop systemic and constructive approaches to working with youth, including creating safe spaces for dialogue where they can openly discuss topics like identity, resilience, trauma, respectful engagement across differences and their future role in Ukraine. Establish mentorship programs that connect young people with experienced religious and community leaders for guidance. To put a special focus of international youth exchange, at least on European level.

On project level: Support youth-led projects focused on volunteering and community restoration to empower them as active participants in rebuilding their country. Fund creative and cultural initiatives that help youth process wartime experiences and express their vision for the future. Strengthen youth solidarity networks across religious and regional lines, providing a platform for them to make their voices heard, advocate for their needs, and strengthen their sense of hope for the future.

08 Change to proactive position for Ukrainian ministers: As all experts mentioned, there is a deep need for a proactive position of religious communities and especially leaders instead of reactionism and for positioning themselves as part of civil society. That would allow to gain full responsibility and change worldview of faith-based leaders into more social engagement and theological responses at the same time. That could lead to transformation of their own identity in a positive way to consolidate efforts and adequately respond to external and internal challenges (theologically and practically).

09 Peacebuilding component integration into HDP projects: Integration of a peacebuilding component into the humanitarian activities of churches should be a part of almost all interventions (primarily social cohesion and comprehensive case management instead of simple distribution). That would allow to widen the focus of the support programs as well as to re-think the identity of the church's, mission and how it can be realized in a practical way.



- desk research
- 10 in-depth expert interviews
- international and Ukrainian religious communities representatives
- July-August 2025

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