

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



Emergency personnel examine the area around a building that was hit by a Russian missile strike in Lviv, Ukraine, July 6, 2023. The attack killed at least four people, injured 37 and destroyed hundreds of buildings. It struck within some 600 feet of Ukrainian Catholic University. No one on campus was injured. (OSV News/Reuters/Roman Baluk)



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In the architecturally gorgeous city of Lviv in western Ukraine sits Ukrainian Catholic University. After several name and affiliation [changes](#), in 2002 it became the first Catholic university to open on the land of the former Soviet Union. The university is small, but its reputation is large. Visiting in April, I repeatedly heard it called "one of our best universities."

War forces those in power to rethink the future. UCU has adjusted its strategic plan to the reality of the war and the role it is now playing in the war effort and the aftermath as the nation begins to slowly prepare for rebuilding. The university will continue to help veterans and civilians deal with physical trauma and mental health issues, and provide services to the country's many war veterans.

The Ukrainian Catholic University was reconstituted after the fall of communism in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. [Bishop Borys Gudziak](#) — American-born, from Syracuse New York — was a leader in establishing UCU, serving as its first rector and now as president. But his long-term plans for the university shifted when [Russia invaded Ukraine](#) Feb. 24, 2022, and the entire UCU community quickly became engaged in the war effort.

In 2019 Pope Francis appointed Gudziak metropolitan archbishop of the [Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia](#). Yet even with this appointment, he has kept a guiding hand at UCU. An influential scholar and writer, Gudziak has been in the vanguard, leading UCU and Ukraine in their battle for survival.

I first heard Bishop Gudziak [speak](#) in 2022 at the University of Notre Dame's commencement. Students and faculty waved blue and gold Ukrainian flags in support of Ukraine and their commencement speaker. Gudziak was there to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree.*

As a boy growing up in Syracuse, Gudziak dreamed of playing for the Fighting Irish. So, he began his address by lofting a football about 30 yards into the crowd of

students — a perfect spiral. The students went wild.

Gudziak opened his speech with “How are you doing today?” It is a question that Olena Zelenska, first lady of Ukraine, uses in her crusade to address her country's mental health crisis. He went on to say, "To be an authentic person, to live a good life is not a theoretical exercise. It is just not academic. It takes practice. It is not easy. It takes heart. It is about heart that I would like to speak to you, (my) heart to your heart."



Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, papal nuncio to Ukraine, addresses graduates of Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv during a Divine Liturgy and commencement exercises July 2, 2023, at the school's Church of St. Sophia, Wisdom of God. (OSV News/Ukrainian Catholic University)

He asked the audience "to pause to feel your neighbor's pulse. That's right! Ask for a hand and feel the heartbeat of the person next to you. Just do it!

“Be still and listen. Touch — with permission — and feel. Yes, even those of my age the throb is still there.

“Wow! The life of another. A life to respect and enhance, celebrate, and protect. Imagine friends, there are 8 billion pulsing hearts on this planet. Full of hope, promise, love and life.”

It is impossible to listen to Bishop Gudziak and not be moved. This was very true of the Notre Dame community: They have [partnered](#) with UCU in its struggle to save Ukraine one heart at a time.

On this trip in April to Lviv, three other American Ukrainian activists joined me. Leading us one day on campus was [Professor Jeffrey Wills](#), one of UCU's best assets. He and Gudziak are close friends and were classmates at Harvard. Wills has been helping support UCU and nonprofits in Ukraine.

"Visionary leaders are focused on where the puck is going, not where it is now," he said of his friend. "So, part of Bishop Borys' gift is to speak prophetically in the days to come, which is a voice many students as well as Ukrainians at large need to hear."

Wills set up appointments for our group with the school's top educators, including Rector Taras Dubko, a 20-year veteran of UCU; and Orest Sulvado, the executive director of UCU's [Mental Health Institute](#). All three have made mental health and veterans issues a focus of the university.

The World Health Organization in 2021 [designated](#) Ukraine as a Special Initiative for Mental Health country. The organization [estimates](#) at least 9.6 million people are now at risk of or living with a mental health condition in Ukraine.

Dubko talked about the pressing need for more trained people. He pointed out that in the 1930s there were 3,000 priests in what is now Ukraine. After 50 years of war, then persecutions in the mid-1980s, there were 300, mostly elderly priests. Today, however, there are more than 3,000 priests in and from Ukraine, including priests that are serving abroad — more than 100 in the U.S. There has been a tenfold increase in the last 35 years.**

UCU is now training 30 priests in psychology, a big step for a religious institution. It recognizes that priests need to understand the fundamentals of psychology in order to refer their parishioners/patients to mental health professionals.



Artem Dymyd, a 27-year-old Ukrainian Catholic University graduate who was killed in battle in June 2022, lies buried at the military cemetery in Lviv, Ukraine. (OSV News Gina Christian)

At UCU, if students have depression due to stress, they can take part in group therapy run by graduate students in psychology. Veterans can get services free of charge. Students also can take meditation classes.

A [study](#) released in April by the International Blast Injury Research Network at the University of Southampton in England demonstrated the mental health crisis. Their findings describe high levels of PTSD and generalized anxiety among both refugees and people displaced within Ukraine.

Since February 2022, at least 13 million people have been displaced from their homes, the report said, noting that the loss of community, housing and economic resources affects mental health. Researchers surveyed more than 8,000 participants — either refugees or people displaced within Ukraine. Nearly 8 out of 10 people surveyed who remained in Ukraine reported blast exposure. More than half the

refugees who fled the country reported exposure to explosives. Almost 70% of all survey participants reported anxiety. People who remained in Ukraine reported higher anxiety and more frequent flashbacks.

The struggle to convince Ukrainians to use psychologists has been scarred by experiences during the Soviet era. At that time, the psychiatric system was used against dissidents. This fueled distrust in therapy among those who associate it with involuntary captivity.

The use of apps and internet technology is common in addressing the mental health challenges facing Ukraine. The app [BAZA](#), for example, uses cognitive behavioral therapy methods to help veterans and civilians in Ukraine unable or hesitant to pursue therapy.

Natalia Klymovska, UCU vice rector told me, "UCU is expanding the menu of services for the community, and giving more attention to healing the wounds of war, through rehabilitation, occupational therapy and psychological support of veterans and those who suffer from military action," she said. "We plan to conduct training for Ukrainian doctors to introduce the newest approaches and technologies in medical practice."

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Ukraine faces a long road in serving its war veterans. The Ministry of Veteran Affairs has in the past been held in low esteem by Ukrainians. In February 2024 the head of the ministry [resigned](#). Hopefully, new leadership will lead to improved performance.

The Ministry of Veteran Affairs [estimated](#) the number of people eligible for veterans' status post war may increase from 1 million to 5 million by the end of the war. A [survey](#) requested by the Ukrainian Veterans Fund found that 52% of vets surveyed needed immediate health care while 63% mentioned health problems returning to civilian life. Most Ukrainian veterans receive a monthly payment of only \$100.

A model for Ukraine is the U.S. GI Bill, enacted into law after World War II.

Veterans' organizations in the U.S. provide examples of using their power to help ensure that when veterans return home, their fellow countrymen stand ready with the benefits needed to help them transition into civilian life.

U.S. veterans' organizations including the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Ukrainian American Veterans should partner now with Ukrainian veterans' associations. I know as a member of both the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Ukrainian American Veterans that now is the time to make those connections.

Recently at the Kennan Institute in Washington D.C., Ukrainians Kateryna Odarchenko and Elena Davlikanova wrote a [report](#) recommending the U.S. model for Ukrainian veterans and their organizations. "The U.S. veterans' affairs system was selected as a blueprint for Ukrainian reform because of its comprehensive approach to policies for veterans," they wrote.

UCU is doing its part to bring attention to the needs of returning veterans. Its [Volunteer Center](#) provides logistical support to military hospitals and to mobile medical units, and a [medical clinic](#) that opened in May will prepare future physicians, occupational therapists and psychologists. UCU also recently opened the [Office for Affairs of Veterans and their Families](#), and students are involved directly in providing services to combatants and their families.



Orysya Masna, 21, (center) a student at Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine, is seen in this undated image as she volunteers as a battlefield emergency paramedic in Ukraine. (OSV News/Orysya Masna)

At Notre Dame in 2022, Bishop Gudziak challenged the graduates to, "Really know yourself for who you are. ... Go love the world person by person, heart by heart. Do not be afraid." A small group of UCU graduates did just that 10 years ago when they created "the Platform." What began with a handful of UCU graduates in Lviv has [grown](#) to 10 other centers throughout Ukraine — serving as an umbrella agency for organizations to leverage their combined resources. The multi-agency Donor Coordination Platform now has over 200 employees.

And it has garnered the support of religious organizations like Caritas, and similar organizations in the Dutch, Finnish and Danish churches.

Mariana Kashchak is the thoughtful and able CEO of the Platform. The organization has found shelter for 100,000 people forced from their homes, implemented more than 670 projects to support orphans and children and constructed more than 700 buildings for families affected by the Russian invasion since 2014, she said.

With the aid of other grant makers in business, religious and government institutions, the Platform is also preparing Ukraine for the time when it will be able to rebuild.

That time is not here yet. Ukraine has had a most difficult year. Because of significant delays in U.S. and EU aid packages, as well as lack of replacements for fighters at the front, they have experienced painful losses. Their spirits may be diminished, but from what I saw myself, those spirits have not been broken. From President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to those on the front lines, to the UCU students in basement bomb shelters assembling aid packages for soldiers, you can never count them out.

**This story has been updated to say that Bishop Borys Gudziak delivered the 2022 University of Notre Dame commencement address and received an honorary degree.*

***This paragraph has been updated to correct the current number of priests.*