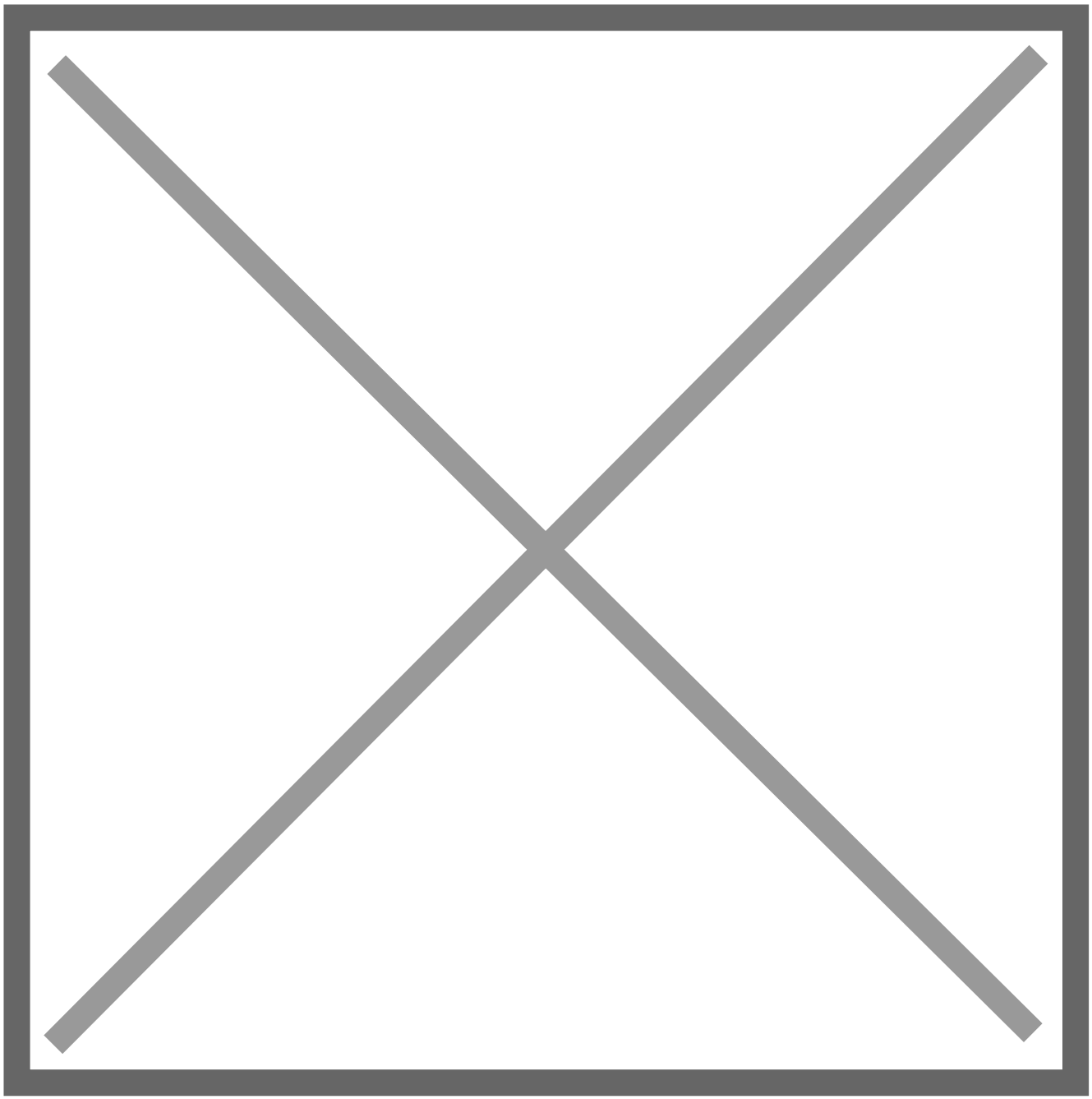
News



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow leads a cathedral consecration service in Moscow April 10, 2022. (CNS photo/Oleg Varaov, Patriarchal Press Service handout via Reuters)

Jack Jenkins

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 18, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The World Council of Churches is under pressure to oust the Russian Orthodox Church from its ranks, with detractors arguing the church's leader, Patriarch Kirill, invalidated its membership by backing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and involving the church in the global political machinations of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The debate garnered a response on Monday (April 11) from the Rev. Ioan Sauca, acting general secretary of the WCC, which claims 352 member churches representing roughly 580 million Christians around the world.

Sauca, a priest in the Romanian Orthodox Church who has visited Ukrainian refugees and publicly criticized Kirill's response to the invasion, pushed back on the suggestion of expelling the ROC, arguing doing so would deviate from the WCC's historic mission to enhance ecumenical dialogue.

"It is easy to exclude, excommunicate, demonize; but we are called as WCC to use a free and safe platform of encounter and dialogue, to meet and listen to one another even if and when we disagree," Sauca said in a lengthy series of statements posted to the WCC website.

"This has always been the WCC, and I would suffer greatly if during my time this vocation will be lost and the nature of the WCC changes."

But Sauca may be facing increasing headwinds as the WCC, a global Christian ecumenical group founded in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II, prepares for a major meeting of its central committee in June. With the war continuing to rage in Ukraine, where Russian forces have been accused of committing war crimes against civilians, a growing chorus of Christian voices is questioning whether the WCC should cut ties with what is seen as a complicit ROC.

In late March, Czech theologian, pastor and ecumenical leader Pavel Cerný published an editorial insisting the ROC has long sought to use the WCC for its own purposes. In the wake of Kirill's support for the Ukraine invasion, Cerný said that "the ROC should not be permitted to continue as a WCC member until it turns away from this false path of religious nationalism."

Two days later, the Rev. Rob Schenck, an evangelical Christian and president of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute in Washington, D.C., published his own editorial at Religion News Service calling on the WCC to sanction Kirill and referring to him as "a propaganda tool for Putin."

"Supporters of the effort to oust Kirill from the WCC believe he has disqualified the ecclesial entity he embodies by effectively endorsing Putin's military campaign to annex Ukraine and failing to oppose the attendant mass violence against a peaceful nation," Schenck wrote. "Not only does Putin's bloody and mostly Christian-on-Christian conflict subvert the WCC's mission statement, but it stands in stark contradiction to and rejection of Jesus' high priestly prayer to his heavenly Father, 'that they may be one as we are one' (John 17:11b)."

Schenck was echoed shortly thereafter by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, onetime head of the Anglican Communion, who told the BBC there is a "strong case" for removing the Russian church from the WCC.

"When a church is actively supporting a war of aggression, failing to condemn nakedly obvious breaches in any kind of ethical conduct in wartime, then other churches do have the right to raise the question and challenge the church and to say, 'Unless you can say … something recognizably Christian about this, we have to look again at your membership,'" Williams said.

The pushback is part of a broader wave of criticism directed at Kirill, who has long aided Putin's political ambitions and laid the spiritual groundwork to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. His rhetoric since the invasion began — such as

referring to Russia's enemies in Ukraine as "evil forces" and suggesting the war is part of a larger "metaphysical" battle against the West and "gay parades" — stoked outrage among religious leaders the world over, including Sauca himself.

"I write to Your Holiness as acting general secretary of the WCC but also as an Orthodox priest," Sauca wrote in an open letter to Kirill in March. "Please, raise up your voice and speak on behalf of the suffering brothers and sisters, most of whom are also faithful members of our Orthodox Church."

Kirill, who has otherwise said little about the criticism lodged against him, responded to Sauca a few days later — but appeared unmoved by his arguments. Instead, Kirill doubled down: The patriarch claimed blame for the war lies not with Russia but "in the relationships between the West and Russia."

Advertisement

The dialogue was in keeping with a sometimes fraught relationship between the ROC and the WCC that dates back decades. In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church once threatened to pull out of the WCC in 1997: the then-ROC representative accused the WCC of moving in too liberal of a direction, decrying "their acceptance of women priests" and "their attitude toward homosexuals."

Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, an expert on the Russian Orthodox Church and a postdoctoral fellow at Arizona State University's Recovering Truth: Religion, Journalism, and Democracy in a Post-Truth era project, noted the "ecumenical, egalitarian, and often progressive politics of the WCC has been at odds with the ROC's strident social politics and moral worldview."

Even so, recent divisions within the broader Orthodox Christian community — particularly tensions between Kirill and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople of the Eastern Orthodox Church — raise the stakes of leaving the WCC. Many onetime ROC churches in Ukraine declared their independence from the church in 2018, and divisions have deepened since the invasion: Some Russian Orthodox churches in Ukraine have stopped commemorating Kirill during their worship services or discussed breaking away, and at least one ROC church in Amsterdam has begun the process of leaving the tradition.

"The question of leaving or continuing on with the ROC has to do, in part, with the larger question of intra-Orthodox communion," Riccardi-Swartz told RNS. "Leaving the WCC could signal the tightening of the ROC's internal theological mechanisms, gesturing to a potential schism with the larger Orthodox world."

George E. Demacopoulos, a theology professor and director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University, agreed.

The ROC's "desire to stay in the WCC, despite its constant rhetorical protestations that everything Western is evil, is that other Orthodox Churches are active there and it doesn't want to be left out," Demacopoulos said in an email. "It doesn't want the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans, or anyone else to … speak for Orthodoxy, they want to be the spokesmen for Orthodoxy, even though the reality is that they only speak for the institutional shell of the Russian Church."

The WCC convened a special roundtable session on the subject of Ukraine in late March. Although representatives from Ukraine and Russia were unable to attend, the assembled group issued a statement denouncing "military aggression launched by the leadership of the Russian Federation against the people of the sovereign nation of Ukraine" and affirming the right of Ukrainians to "defend themselves against this aggression."

"We share the strong conviction that there is no legitimate way in which this armed aggression and its terrible consequences can be justified or tolerated from the perspective of our most fundamental Christian faith principles," the statement read.

Meanwhile, Kirill continues to face fierce pushback from a wide spectrum of Christian leaders ranging from Pope Francis to some of the patriarch's own Russian Orthodox priests.

As for the question of expulsion, a WCC spokesperson told RNS that only the group's central committee, which meets in Geneva June 15-18, can expel a member denomination. The basis for suspension is outlined in the WCC's constitution: "The central committee may suspend the membership of a church: (i) at the church's request; (ii) because the basis of, or the theological criteria for, membership has not been maintained by that church or; (iii) because the church has persistently neglected its responsibilities of membership."

In his recent statements, Sauca noted expulsions from the WCC are rare. He pointed to past debates, such as when leaders discussed whether to remove the Dutch Reformed Church due to its support for apartheid in South Africa. Ultimately, he said, the church cut ties from the WCC on its own, only to be readmitted later.

He noted there was also fierce debate over the First Gulf War when WCC leaders assembled in 1991, with many criticizing delegations from the Church of England and churches based in the U.S.

"The WCC did not opt for a radical solution, or decide to exclude those churches," Sauca said.

The only church to be removed from the WCC in recent yeas, he noted, is the Kimbanguist Church, a tradition based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that the WCC suspended over disagreements regarding their interpretation of the Trinity, a Christian concept pertaining to the nature of God.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 29-May 12, 2022** print issue under the headline: World Council of Churches faces calls to expel Russian Orthodox Church.