

## Georgian Baptist Bishop Says ‘Being a Good Christian Isn’t Enough’

*Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Evangelical Baptist Church of the Republic of Georgia recently gave Chicago Christians lessons on radical solidarity with minority groups in need of compassion. By championing the rights of Chechan Muslims, LGBT citizens, masses of unemployed and female clergy hoping for ordainment, the Baptist Bishop unravelled stereotypes associated with religious practices in the Russian Orthodox world.*

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[http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/news/?p=8572&mc\\_cid=da1cdef677&mc\\_eid=fe98eecf9b](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/news/?p=8572&mc_cid=da1cdef677&mc_eid=fe98eecf9b)

Not only was it unusual for us to encounter a Baptist Bishop but one that was purple-robed and long-bearded, befitting his Eastern Orthodox context. The Bishop shared with us the courageous story of his Evangelical Baptist community and its advocacy work with Chechen Muslim refugees. Being Baptist means standing for the rights of all people, the Bishop said.

“Being a good Christian or a good Church isn’t good enough anymore. We must learn the ways of compassion. Something that we learned in the course of the struggle is that it is very important to have equal rights and equal opportunity for everybody, Songulashvili said.

Ordaining women as leaders, standing in solidarity with the LGBT community, and fasting with Muslims during Ramadan are marks of discipleship. There is clearly a great deal we can learn about justice and peace from Baptists in the Republic of Georgia.

In the context of a state Orthodox Church the people of Georgia longed for a church of and for the people. The Evangelical Baptists of the Republic of Georgia focus not just on high liturgy and sensual worship, but more importantly they do the work of justice and peace in an environment of increasing tensions with Russian government forces occupying foreign lands.

These radical Baptists are not afraid to speak out and stand up where others would not. They ordained women as clergy early in their history. They celebrate women as deacons, presbyters, and currently have one female bishop with another one on the way. They stand for equal treatment of people regardless of their sexual orientation. They are deeply engaged in the work of interfaith advocacy with persecuted Muslims both within Georgia as well as with Russian refugees.



Shanta Premawardhana, the President of SCUPE, Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, and the Bishop’s wife Ala.



The Bishop resides in Tbilisi. The refugee camps were near the Causasus Mountains.

All this work of justice and peacemaking takes place in the economic context where in some villages the unemployment rate is as high as 70 percent. In a time of great economic disparity, how can a church find so much energy and resources to do the ministry of Jesus on the ground? Perhaps it is their liturgical commitments and their spiritual practices of fasting and prayer that undergird the power of their practice of ministry. We have much to learn from the Evangelical Baptists of Georgia.

As the bishop describes it: “Our ecumenical identity was forged by our encounter with Muslims. It happened in the aftermath of the first Russian-Chechen war when there was a huge influx of Chechen refugees into Georgia. Nobody wanted to deal with Chechen refugees out of fear of Russia. Our country was very poor. The government was very poor to do anything about it. So we decided to go forward and deliver some tokens of support to the refugee camp. We did not want to do anything more. We just wanted to affirm that we are Christians. We are so nice and we would like to present you some gifts.

“When we learned that the Chechenian people were coming to Georgia as refugees we did not know how to handle it. Reports were coming on a daily basis of their suffering. They did not have food or clothes. There were mainly children and women. Christmas was drawing nearer and I asked the congregation, “What should we do for the refugees from Chechnia.” There was silence in the congregation and I knew what the silence meant because I felt the same way that they did. If you hear that your traditional enemies are coming here and they are suffering, somewhere in the bottom of your heart you are somewhat delighted. But then we realized that Christmas was drawing nearer and we contemplated the Advent Season. We are fasting during Advent season and we thought we should do something for the refugees because we are Christians.”

“We went to the camp. We had collected whatever we could: tea, chocolates, and blankets. We went to deliver these goods before Christmas and then forget about it. But much to everybody’s amazement we got trapped in the camp. When we met for the first time, we realized that we are humans as they are. Immediately some sort of bond was forged. Before leaving the camp, we said out of politeness, “If there is anything we can possibly do, never hesitate to ask.” Immediately they produced shopping lists. In the lists they needed binding materials for the wounded, medicine, warm clothes for children, blankets, and tea.”