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# A Conversation with Gregory Gibson, Co-Founder and Global Team Leader for SALT

Interview conducted and edited by Karie Riddle

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In this conversation with Gregory Gibson, the co-founder of SALT, we learn about how his organization was upended by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. SALT is, and has remained, a network of pastors in pursuit of leadership development, but many of its members' day-to-day tasks have shifted. Pastors in Ukraine and other parts of Europe began caring for refugee families and bringing supplies to the front line, and the global network paused their regular operations to raise funds and provide logistical, emotional, and social support to this work. While they continued meeting online to discuss church planting and leadership development, the organization also pursued a "ministry of presence" to physically walk alongside those whose lives had been disrupted by the conflict. This ministry is inspired by the incarnational Jesus, who showed up to dwell among us.

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*“SALT exists to train pastors to plant churches that serve the nations through gospel-driven leadership” (SALT Movement 2025). Its primary area of interest is Ukraine. According to its co-founder, Gregory Gibson, the organization is “Protestant and loosely ecumenical.”*

*SALT’s work, while never wavering from its original mission, took a sharp turn following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022. In the conversation that follows, we learn about SALT’s work before and after the invasion, the principles and practices that have helped them to thrive even in the midst of war, and their advice for other organizations trying to serve communities that face violent disruption. Karie Riddle asks the questions, and Gregory Gibson provides the responses.*

## Can you tell me about how you got started in this line of work?

In 2019, I was invited to visit Ukraine for the first time by Timofe Dovgalyuk to participate in church planting work and training efforts for the church there. Timofe had been working in Ukraine, serving families who have children with disabilities for decades, and because of his work there he was building partnerships with organizations and local churches.

When I returned [to the United States (US)], there was a pebble in my shoe that I couldn’t shake, and I really felt a desire to engage more with the work and with the people in Ukraine as I built relationships there. And as I saw the need for leadership development training, I saw how my skill set and my passions

overlapped with this particular part of the world. In 2020, Timofe and I partnered together to launch SALT.

## How would you describe your organization’s goals?

Our mission from the beginning has always been to train pastors to plant churches. We do this through what we call gospel-driven leadership development. So we’re coming alongside pastors all over Ukraine, and our strategy is what we call our SALT DNA. We really have four quadrants we work in when we come alongside the church (SALT Movement 2025).



The first quadrant is healthy leader. We want to see all leaders, whether they are pastors or church planters, or businesses with a mission, or those who are

in the non-profit space, we want to see them healthy. The second quadrant is healthy teams. Very rarely across the world have I seen healthy teams led by an unhealthy leader; it's usually a one-to-one correlation. So our whole goal is to come alongside a leader to define health, in a principle that really can be trans-local. We're not defining a healthy leader in our context vs. a different context, such as America or Ukraine, but looking at leadership through the lens of universal leadership principles, and really doing the hard work of creating these irreducible minimums that define healthy leadership regardless of context. We're bringing that into teamwork, how high functioning teams work well regardless of context. Is there nuance? Absolutely! Is language creating different barriers and hurdles to overcome? Yes, but I would say that those two principles are universals.

Then from our teams, in quadrant three, we build healthy culture; not just one person, but many people, creating a healthy culture for their organization, whether a church, a non-profit, or a business, and we work together to define what a healthy culture is. The last quadrant is healthy systems. Systems become the trellis that support the rest of the vine work of culture. For us, we take that process and infuse it into the leader.

### **Did you get into the leadership development space within church planting because you felt like that was a gap, or a need within the church?**

That is exactly right. From my understanding it's common across mission organizations that the reason people leave the vocation of pastor or leave the mission field is not necessarily because they stop believing in the work; a high percentage leave because they are not healthy. Clearly, there is greater impact if the leader and the team are healthy.

That's a little bit how we got into it. When I visited Ukraine for the first time, my question as I was building relationships with pastors was for them to tell me how things were going, not what they needed. By no means did I want to present our work as the answer; it was just, "How are things?" "Tell me about your ministry"; "Tell me about your church." And the gap that we kept seeing revolved around leadership development principles, in regard to healthy leadership, teams, culture, and systems.

### **Were your original goals, related to leadership development for church planting, disrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine?**

Now, the war was already happening as I went for the first time in 2019, and as we started an organization with headquarters in Ukraine, but the effects of the war weren't quite like they were after February of 2022.

Because of that, our organization pivoted [in 2022] from training and leadership development to awareness for the work that was happening: pastors that were caring for their communities, pastors who cared for refugee families, pastors who were already working in areas now even more affected by the war. That really put us front and center in this conversation. We didn't plan to engage in areas that were directly impacted by this particular crisis, but because of unfolding events we found ourselves there. And just by conscience and conviction, we continued into this space, because we thought it was the right thing to do.

But the mission itself never changed. When February 2022 came about, our measurements and lag goals, or lag impact, began to change. For a couple months, we paused everything. It's hard to come alongside the leader of a non-profit or a church when the tyranny of the urgent is just survival, to talk about how to build a healthy team. We thought to ourselves, "Let's pause and do what we can do, and we began to focus on bringing awareness to the plight of what's happening here. Let's begin to ask a lot of questions, "what do you need," "how can we close the gap on your fleeting resources during this season?"

But because we're a training organization, leadership training soon continued. We began to see pastors, business leaders, and non-profit leaders in Ukraine lean into what we were talking about even more, because now there's even more weight to the work they are doing. Now they are not only pastoring their local congregations, but also caring for refugee families, sending medical teams to the front lines, officiating funerals, and serving families who have lost loved ones because of those crises. When I say it definitely flavored our leadership development training, it began to flavor it in ways that I personally never imagined. Now everything is affected and colored by what Ukrainians are currently experiencing in their day-to-day lives.

We are now having active conversations along the lines of: How do we train pastors to plant churches in a healthy way, let's say in Lutsk, Ukraine, on the western side of the country, that's not necessarily affected by the frontlines, although the whole country is seeing the effects of the violence? But how does this church and this team now work to create healthy workplaces closer to the front lines? That requires both meeting intentional needs and working towards sustainability.

### **Can you say more about SALT's processes and how some of those shifted after February 2022?**

Because of the impact of February 2022, there is a Ukrainian diaspora all over the world, especially throughout Europe. We were surprised to find that we were working with pastors and leaders who were

working with Ukrainians in Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, France, really all over Europe! The primary headquarters is kind of from Warsaw to Kyiv in our work, but we're starting to see spokes extend all over Europe. Practically, what this looks like is what we call the SALT Hub. Every Thursday morning we have a meeting of about 100 pastors and leaders, at 6 am Eastern time. That hits some good time zone marks in the places where we work. It is amazing to see that 45-minute Zoom meeting happen and grow. Again, we are talking about leadership development principles. And people keep showing up and bringing more people.

We then have what we call SALT labs, which are less lecture and more laboratory environment, and this is also hybrid. We have pastors in Poland and Ukraine right now who create these gatherings in real time, and who bring pastors, non-profit, and business leaders together. I keep saying those three categories on purpose because leadership development is cross-industry. It seems like these are the groups who are kind of leaning into what we are doing. And they are forming these different groups all over both Ukraine and Poland, working through these things in real time.

We have many churches who partner together to send mission teams or medical teams to the same place, for example the Donetsk region, or Luhansk, and they are sending teams to the exact same place over and over again. They are serving both the military men and women who are there, but also civilians who decided to stay regardless of the conflict. What we have seen is these churches who can come together and go to the same place over and over again, and we are starting to see the ultimate win of our organization, training pastors to plant churches. It might not look like a church in a traditional sense, but what's happening is that these communities are beginning to be formed in these areas that are on or near the frontlines; these communities have become life-giving communities to people who live there.

To me, as a pastor, I see what's happening, ... and I'm like whoa, there is not a lot of difference here between what's happening in the book of Acts in the early church, and how these communities are forming in a non-traditional kind of church planting sense, right? We are seeing a lot of celebration, if we can call it that, and wins for partnerships.

**You have these weekly online meetings and also these face-to-face collaborations that are happening with your team in Eastern Europe. Can you say more about what you and others in the US have been doing in terms of traveling to some of these war-torn places? I know you really want to be there with the people you partner with if you're an**

**international organization, but you also have concerns for your own safety, and if something happens to you, the organization fails at its mission. How do you balance those things?**

That is a challenging question, which really gets to the heart of any organization working in these areas disrupted by conflict and violence. As a new organization, we do not have a lot of overhead, and when February 2022 occurred, we found ourselves not only stewarding all these old relationships that we have had for several years up to this point, but now we're stewarding hundreds of thousands of dollars being given to our organization for this relief work. Now, suddenly, Ukraine is front and center all around the world, and SALT has been given an opportunity to steward these resources.

We thus committed as an organization to giving as liberally as we possibly could, and to meeting the needs that are currently arising, regardless of whether our giving leads to sustainability. In this moment, we're giving to the current need. We are also asking about what happens to our in-person work. When the war ramped up, we moved our headquarters from Kyiv to Warsaw and started flying to Warsaw and driving across the border in Ukraine. The invasion happened in February, and the first time I was in-country was April. We decided then as an organization to continue to go. We're going to use both faith and wisdom at the same time. Every time we entered into the country, we made a decision the day-of, but we decided from the beginning to continue to engage relationally.

Engaging relationally is one principle that has kept our work going. SALT could have ended when the conflict ramped up, but because we committed as a young, new, and growing non-profit during this time, there's a handful of us who decided to continue to engage, and that's what we have done. We have now gone dozens of times; I can't even give you a number, from myself to the other leaders of SALT. Our whole goal during that time was to practice what we call a ministry of presence.

It's one thing to show up on Zoom; it's quite another when your sister or your brother is experiencing suffering and you show up alongside. When we committed to that, it created a whole different kind of trust for those that we partnered with on the ground.

We have kept that same principle, even though it was not a core value we started with. But you can see the growth of our organization through this time, and we have kept that principle that we are going to practice a ministry of presence as much as we possibly can. We have gone all over Ukraine—to the front lines, to citizens impacted by the war, Kyiv, and to cities that have become refugee hubs. That kind of relationship, that

kind of presence, created a deeper relationship with our partners over the last couple of years.

### **Can you tease out more how religious values guide your work?**

Our organization is very much shaped by our statement of faith, or what we call our gospel statement. It drives who we are, and there is so much to that that creates what is behind our motivations for the work, for myself personally, for our team. I mentioned this idea of a ministry of presence, which is an incarnational principle we see modeled by Jesus. In John chapter 1, he came and dwelt among us. This principle of presence is a biblical principle we practice as an organization.

When it comes to the driving engine of our organization, it is Jesus's command in Matthew 28 to go and make disciples of all nations. For us, the Greek term "ethny" means countries without borders. It's literally people all over the world. And I think it's a beautiful partnership when an organization centered in the United States and pastors and non-profit leaders and businesses throughout Eastern Europe come together and commit to Jesus' command for the Church, to make disciples.

The impact of that is what we are talking about here; the impact is that it's Christians, regardless of their occupation, who care for their neighbor, who care for the needs of their community, who try to live their life the best way they know how, as salt and light, regardless of context. You are seeing the impact of that. Whether it is churches and pastors coming together to serve in places impacted largely through conflict and violence, or medical teams serving, or pastors putting on chaplain hats because there are men and women serving in our country's military, I feel compelled to serve them, because I was first served by Christ. I hope all the action of our organization is driven by people who are first changed by Jesus to live in such a way that it makes a difference in whatever context they find themselves in.

**I want to pick up on that idea of context, because that is a huge challenge for a lot of international organizations, particularly if your headquarters is in the US and you are trying to work cross-culturally or cross-nationally. Many organizations think so much about this, but still struggle with it. I hear you saying, yes there is nuance from context to context, but there are still these universal principles, and there is still the universal love of Christ that can inspire everyone regardless of where you are. Have you encountered cross-cultural,**

### **cross-national kinds of challenges, and how have you worked through those?**

Context is going to create a chasm in whatever partnership you're trying to develop until trust is built. It can be context from Washington, DC to New York City; it can be context from Washington, DC to Rivne, Ukraine. One of the things we have learned is that, going back to this idea of being incarnational and working on being as present as possible, when you do those things in a consistent way—you continue to show up, and continue to let your yes be yes—what you begin to find is that, over time, trust gradually builds. That's what I have found in this work. In the beginning you learn from one another, you learn a new language and a context that's created largely by language. You learn a way that another person or group views the world. Yet when you begin to partner on mission, that common mission begins to create a bond, and over time it strengthens into trust. It is not perfect, by any means. But we're trying to come in with a learning posture as much as we are in a training posture. When we do that, it is amazing to see the trust that builds, and then the fruit that comes from a relationship that is built on trust.

### **It seems the ideas of partnership and learning are really key to your success.**

We definitely come from trying to be as far from *Toxic Charity* or this kind of *Helping Hurts* idea (Lupton 2012; Fikkert and Corbett 2009). It takes intentionality, a mindset that we are not coming to do anything better. When you come in with the idea that our training is through the lens of a relationship, then it truly does become a laboratory where we work it out together, instead of "Come listen to my Ted talk" as it were. That simple posture has really been the ethos of everything we have done. Have we failed? Yes. Have we learned from it? Have there been times when we have apologized? Yes. Have there been periods in our relationships, which we've been building for half a decade now, when we've had to work through tension and conflict together? Yes. But on the other side of those things, there's even deeper trust.

### **I'm also wondering about the US political atmosphere and how American politics is now divided on the war in Ukraine. What has that meant for your organization?**

I have felt that tension, and here's the journey that we've been on:

In February of 2022, Ukraine-Russia was kind of central worldwide news. In several following months, we're raising awareness and stewarding resources that are going to our partners on the ground. Then things begin to shift towards political ideologies. We saw the impact of that, and when you're a largely Christian

organization that has an almost 98% donor base that would also be identifying as Christian, and then you begin to divide your donors based on political ideology, it became a hurdle for us.

But it has not been insurmountable, because as an organization we try to stay above that, by remaining a main issue organization, which for us is how the gospel leads us into this kind of work. It is a struggle to see good organizations and good work in these areas that have been disrupted by US political spaces, and I don't know the answer to that ... Our part to play is that we continue to be faithful to our mission as an organization, regardless of what is happening politically. As we have done that, yes, it ostracizes people who want us to be vocal one way or the other, but that is okay for us. Our goal is not to speak towards any kind of political ideology. Our goal is to come alongside our partners.

### **In closing, could share some advice with other religious organizations working in sensitive areas?**

Three things have worked really well for our organization in responding to violence:

1. Showing up consistently. When you show that you are there, and you're not there for a marketing piece, or a promo piece, or a social media piece, and you keep showing up, that creates those relationships built on trust.
2. Tell, with permission, the stories of others. Tell stories of those you are partnering with and what they are going through. Tell about their successes and about their wins. It allows other people to have awareness of the work.
3. Give others opportunities to engage. This can be as simple as a Zoom prayer night. We did a Zoom prayer night the first week of March [2022] and several thousand people joined. These are people from all over the world who will probably never praying together for the Ukrainian people on Zoom ever again. But it was very powerful.

We also provided tangible ways for people to engage and to give. So, we figured out how much it costs to send a truck from Switzerland all the way to Warsaw, and [we could tell our audience] this donation sends one truck full of supplies. Ways like that have worked well. And the thing that keeps us going is that it helps us to overcome compassion fatigue.

Some organizations probably have mission statements that aim right at areas like this, but when you are a training organization like us, and you happen to be in an area impacted by conflict and violence, you yourself can experience compassion fatigue, but you also see that those around you can experience compassion fatigue. News cycles change; things happen;

there are many situations to engage with, be a part of, and give to, but when you do those three things a lot and often—show up consistently, tell stories, and give opportunities to engage—we see a consistent, steady way that we can partner in a healthy way with those still impacted by conflict and violence in these areas.

In general, be as incarnational as possible, do it with an open hand, and be willing to partner with other organizations. Maybe the skeleton or aim of your organization might have been created differently, but the impact of what you're both looking for may overlap and be very similar. I am a firm believer in this incarnational principle, whether it's through church planting work or non-profit work or whatever it is. It creates a cross-cultural relationship in which the trust and the substance of the relationship are central.

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