

Ukraine Christmas Mission of Love

December 30, 2004 - January 9, 2005

Team Members: The 12-member team, lead by Anna Goss and Beth Valentine, consisted of both veterans to Ukraine and seven newcomers. Our veterans included Lynne Brenneman, Sue Edris, Anna and Beth, and Woody Wolfe. Our new team members were Darlene Dawes, Megan Ginder (our youth member), Jenny Greene, John Godissart, Alan Hinson, Patty Lacy and Fif (Elizabeth) Kepler. Five churches were represented by this team: Hershey, Grantville, Danville, Elizabethtown, and Renova (John is the Pastor of this four-charge church and Patty and Fif are members). Praise God for who He brings together and the gifts that each one brings to the team. None of which is known beforehand except by Him.

Objective

As in every mission trip we embark on, as Christians, we know God goes before us. He leads us there to do His work and obey His commandment to “love one another.” That was our main emphasis on this trip to share Christ’s love and share our faith with those whom God placed before us.

Our Stay in Kiev

Fri., Dec. 31 - Our Arrival

Our 12-member team descended upon our Ukrainian friends on New Year’s Eve. We were picked up at the airport with a bus which we all fit comfortably and so did the 30+ pieces of luggage. We were delivered to our host families and celebrated the New Year with them.

Our celebration included a meal and toasting, along with singing and watching the events from the Square in Kiev (the “Mydon” sp?) on the television. President-elect Viktor Yushenko addressed the people shortly before midnight. It was quite an experience to share with our Ukrainian friends, especially at this point in Ukraine’s political life. You could see and feel the hope these folks have for the future of their much-loved country. There was also a sense of accomplishment - the unrest was settled peacefully.

Sat., Jan. 1 - Kiev CP children, Walk on the Square in Kiev

We never know what God has in store for us on these trips, do we? Well, we can bet Patty Lacy never thought she would be celebrating New Year’s Day in Kiev dressed as “Father Frost” and presenting cerebral palsy children with gifts! But oh, what a blessing it was.

The team joined the children from the CP center and their guardians at the culture palace for the “New Year” show. The tickets were purchased through UM funds. Dmytro thought it would be a good idea since these children really do not get to go to such events too often.

After the show, Father Frost (aka Patty Lacy) was out by the huge New Year tree handing out the traditional boxed candy to the children and some team members were taking Polaroids for the families.

Afterwards, Dmytro took us to the square where we could see the “Tent City” still in place. *“While walking it began to snow and what a profound experience it was to walk down the center of Kiev - realizing the history that is here and see the people celebrating. It reminded us that maybe we have lost the art of getting out and just walking in the U.S. You could feel the passion of the young people as you walked by the tents and observed them on the streets knowing that they have made a difference in the political situation in their country.”* Patty & Fif’s journal entry.

Sun., Jan. 2 - Worship at Istochnik, Party at CP Center

We were able to worship with the Istochnik congregation. The team was prepared to sing two Ukrainian Christmas carols and we sang “Silent Night” in two languages. The congregation was presented with a wooden cross and flame, handmade by Pastor Jeff Fisher. After the service we were able to have a time of fellowship with tea and sweets. We had bookmarks with pins for the adults and Nativity coloring books and crayons for the children. *“God wowed us again with a wonderful time of fellowship and worship. Our devotion today reminded us of our blessings. Being with these spiritual Christian friends was surely a blessing. To think we’re so far from Pennsylvania and feeling so included and loved by the church was a reminder of the unity of Christian families.”* Jenny’s journal entry.

After another meal, we arrived at the CP center for a big party with the children and their families. It was just delightful. We sang our Christmas carols in English and Ukrainian and the CP children also entertained us. The karaoke, which we had provided funding for was money well spent. The children absolutely love it. We were all singing and dancing together. This was a time spent renewing old friendships and creating new friendships. We also presented a “shower cabinet” to Ludmila, Asst. Director. Money we wired was spent for this shower.

Mon., Jan. 3 - Liubystok Orphanage (Brovary)

When we arrived at Brovary, the director, Victor told us the majority of the children were away at the Carpathian Mountains. We were happy for those who were able to go on a “holiday” and looked forward to spending time with the nine youth that were there. The children sang several songs for us and we sang our Christmas carols and made our acting debut of the Christmas story from Luke 2 which was narrated in Ukrainian. Winter coats were purchased for all the children and presented to each youth by the team members. We had a delightful time interacting with the youth and workers of the orphanage. We did tour the facility and the grounds. We saw the new washing machine housed in the renovated building, and the new showers all made possible through Ukraine Initiative funds. Victor and Dymtro mentioned a new stove was needed. Before we left Kiev, we gave Dymtro \$500 (money raised for this mission trip) toward a new stove for the orphanage.

From the orphanage we were off again to another time of food and fellowship. We shared not only a delicious meal but at least 15 toasts complete with remembering the past, enjoying the present and looking to the future. *“It was indeed a special time of love and laughter.”*

We know the love and laughter will continue not only until Jan. 9th but on and on forever. Praise God! Darlene's journal entry.

Tues., Jan. 4 - Street Children Ministry

Praise God for this ministry and the dedicated individuals who are making a difference in these children's lives. *"Sometimes we go into a place thinking that we will be doing the ministering to others. In God's providential plan we recognize that we are the ones ministered to. The children put on a play for us. One of the boys had on a satan mask. He enjoyed controlling many of the other actors. They were caught up in sinful behavior, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, and glue sniffing. Satan had them right where he wanted them. When Jesus showed up on the scene, they didn't want to listen to him. They nailed him to the cross. He was willing to take their sins away. It was a very powerful presentation. God is good!" John's journal entry.*

We were able to spend about four hours at the center. We sang and danced, played games and shared a meal together. Prior to the meal Sasha (13-year-old girl who was there with her 16-year-old brother) prayed. We were unaware what she was saying. Later Bill Lovelace told us she had prayed for us but also prayed that "no one touch me, let no one beat me, keep me safe." She also prayed for the other children. *"As I write these words, I cannot help but cry out...Lord Jesus help them. Praise God for using Bill and Helen and for giving these children a safe haven from the difficult world of which they are a part."* John's journal entry. They did see this as a safe haven. They were comfortable enough to sleep. Occasionally you would see one of the youth sleeping with their head down on the table. At night, they cannot for fear the police will come by or someone else that may harm them. Even though we experienced the joy of singing, dancing and gifts—it was difficult leaving knowing that the children would be spending the night out in the snow. In addition to the purchased gifts women here at home made tote bags, hats and mittens for these children. It is so wonderful to have so many people connected.

Wed., Jan. 5 - travel to Bila Tserkva

Galina, Lubov and Victor greeted us in Kiev, loaded us in two vans and drove us to Bila Tserkva. We first went to Rosava for the traditional New Year program for the children. We were then taken to our host families.

"Again God has blessed us with the warmth and love of people who have suffered much pain and loss but seem to have such a zest for life. Still I believe they truly haven't the knowledge and opportunity to grasp and experience a personal faith and relationship with our Lord. They've not experienced the "Abba" relationship. As beautiful as worship experience can be in the Orthodox setting, I bet they'd love a good praise/celebration service. Maybe some day our Methodist churches will grow and reach more people on a personal level." Sue's journal entry.

Thurs., Jan. 6 - Organ Hall and the Women's Psychopathological Institute

The day began with a wonderful program of traditional and modern music presented by

the children and youth from the Sunflower Youth Center. As always, we were all impressed by their beautiful voices and talent. It was here where Galina thanked the United Methodists for their long-term friendship/partnership.

At the Institute we were warmly greeted by the Assistant Director, Natalya and Dr. Vasily, the psychiatrist. They explained their facility and stressed their attempt to create a “homelike” atmosphere. We visited with 200 plus women with different stages of mental illness. The staff consists of 100 caregivers who work six-hour shifts around the clock. We were told about the chapel being added. Currently a priest visits the facility three times a week. This is appreciated by the women and the staff. The Asst. Director noted a sense of calmness since the priest has been visiting.

We visited each wing and sang carols with the women, hugged, held hands and gave each woman a handmade bag with night clothing in each one. The smiles are forever engraved in our minds. (We later found out that Natasha from Galina’s center made each bag. She did have some women helping her). *“Natalya later thanked us for our warmth and willingness to embrace the women. Little did she know how meaningful this personal contact was for us.” Lynne’s journal entry. “Several of us noted how neat and clean but impersonal the rooms were. One woman wept as she took off her head scarf and showed us how short her hair was. All had the same hair cut and most wore similar clothing. However, many different personalities were evident.”*

When we visit such places, it is an eye-opener for the translators and others who go along. They would not be exposed to such places normally.

Fri., Jan. 7. - Cerebral Palsy Center, Worship Service, Luncheon with Pensioners

Christmas Day was spent for most of us at the CP center from about 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. We’ve been able to spend more time at some of the locations interacting with the folks. The CP children entertained us with their songs and poems. It was just lovely. And we in turn sang songs, did our skit and presented the children with gifts. *“It was a joy to see all the children’s faces light up when we presented them with gifts.” Megan’s journal entry.*

Patty, Fif, Anna and Alan along with Galina and Lubov went to a luncheon in honor of the pensioners. Apparently it is tradition to honor the elderly on Christmas Day with such a dinner. The mayor was there and greeted the pensioners. Also, children performed a concert for them. Galina introduced us and we greeted them. Later, two by two we went to the tables and put a handmade scarf around the neck of each person along with a hug. They were just thrilled and so were we.

Bill Lovelace (UMC District Superintendent) officiated the Christmas Day worship service in the upper room of the CP center. Helen directed a very touching skit performed by the children. *“It showed the three wise men giving their gifts to Christ, but then the more introspective question arises, “What can we give to Him?” The kids brought gifts of clothing for those who are in need of them, food for the hungry and flowers for the elderly that we might give our time and the gifts made by our hands to them. Its subtle message reminded us that we are to be Christ’s*

hands and feet and touched areas much deeper within us.” Megan’s journal entry. We were presented with a banner made by the children. Their hands were covering the banner. We presented the church with another wooden cross and flame made by Pastor Jeff. The children also made gifts for all twelve of us - a candleholder with a candle. “The time of reflection has almost arrived though I feel as if we just came yesterday. Tomorrow is sure to be a busy day though and I know God’s work with us here is not finished yet!”

Sat., Jan. 8 - Voloshka Orphanage and Dinner at the Center of Goodness and Charity

Oh what fun it was to see all those children again. “We sang several songs and seemed to capture the interest of the kids through our singing, but mostly through huge smiles, winks, and gestures of love that were directed personally towards each child. As we started our skit, many children were enlisted to be various animals. Two little girls rushed to be near Mary who was holding baby Jesus. Woody, the donkey was holding one girl, I, Joseph was holding the other. I don’t remember any of the Gospel’s telling the story of Jesus’ birth with a donkey holding a little angel, but I couldn’t help but think of why Jesus so loved the little children — they weren’t afraid to drop everything and come and see him for themselves. They came as themselves. Thank you, Father for that reminder.” Alan’s journal entry. “

The orphanage looks pretty much the same as well as some of the same faces. Thank God for these loving faces that are here year after year. We were able to give each child a gift which they were just tickled with and we were down on the floor playing cars or dolls or coloring. And of course, Polaroids were a huge hit.

Onto the Center of Goodness and Charity. Maria was able to join us. She had started a knitting circle and teaches young girls and women to knit. They showed us how they are recycling military uniforms to make boots and slippers and the blankets they are making from other recycled materials. It was a wonderful evening of fellowship.

Sun., Jan. 9 - Farewell

On Dec. 30th I made an entry in my journal that went: Well here I am, on a plane bound for Ukraine. How I wish that I understood God’s plan for my life today. I don’t and probably never will, but how exciting it is to live with an air of expectancy about that plan! Who will I meet this day that needs to see Jesus? Will they see Jesus in me? Who will I meet this day that needs to know the unconditional love of God? Will I love them as I have been loved? Let them see Your hand, O Lord!

Well a whole lot has happened in ten short days. We have laughed; we have cried. We have celebrated life and yes, we have loved. We have been loved, even more in return. As we have looked into Jesus’ eyes, in the “least of these” I believe that they, in return, have seen Him in us, as a group and in us individually. My prayer for the entire trip is that the people we would meet might feel loved. Thus I believe our “Mission of Love” was a success because Christ’s love was there in abundance, and it was definitely a two-way street.” Woody’s journal entry.