

Buckner care continues in Russia even after the shoes are put on feet_122203

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Buckner News Service

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia—The shoes Texas Baptists have sent to Russian orphans for the last five years represent only the first steps of ministry there through Buckner Orphan Care International.

Buckner, a ministry affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, supports a seven-member follow-up team that works year-round in St. Petersburg.

In addition to the annual distribution of goods collected through Shoes for Orphan Souls and the work of volunteer missions group from Texas and beyond, Buckner continues work with Russian orphans through the follow-up team.

This team provides activities that most resemble children's Vacation Bible Schools once a week in six orphanages, ensuring the message of hope in Christ is taught to children often left hopeless.

Team leader Olga Vlasenko explained the work by quoting a Russian saying: “You need to leave today as good as possible, so you're never told tomorrow you did something wrong yesterday.”

He added: “This is our ministry, and we cannot do God's work badly.”

The team's purpose in providing ministry to about 400 children weekly is a simple one, he said. “Our purpose is to save children. We encourage as many children as possible to go to church, find God's purpose and to be the best people in Russia.”

“I'm trying to give them hope in Christ,” concurred team member Ishmael Arslan, a former Muslim missionary who admits he's still a Muslim missionary but with a twist: “When I see a Muslim, I tell him about Christ.”

Arslan, one of two men on the team and a father, said being a male team member is an important part of his contribution. The children “want to see a man, because all the time they are around women.”

Because of the presence and direction of the two men on the team, he said, “When they pray, 'Our Father,' they'll know what it's like to be around one. We hope that will make sense in their spiritual lives.”

Masha Yerenskaya, who noted the team reaches children ages 3 to 12, said she became a team member because she has “a heart for missions work” and wants to influence the orphans with something to change their hearts and give them hope.

Weekly activities include Bible lessons, singing, games and crafts.

Team members invest heavily of themselves in the lives of the orphaned children, a practice that can take its toll, said Sveta Yatskaya. “When I come in, I'm looking forward to seeing the kids as a friend. But it is difficult. When I pray for them, my prayer is emotional: 'Please find a family

for this child.”

Being the mother of a 10-month-old also has changed her ministry perspective, she added. “Before, I was compassionate. I knew their life was very hard. Now I can't tell you the grief I feel for them. I'd take them home if I could.”

But personal involvement is integral to sharing the gospel message, noted team member Lena Korepanova.

“Eight years ago, when I came from another part of Russia to study in St. Petersburg, I was lonely,” she said. “I understand what it means to be lonely. The people filling that gap were Christians.

“Christ can fill the gap with these kids,” she explained. “I try to give them hope that even though they are lonely, they are not left alone. I also want them to know they are loved.”

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