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Volunteers share warmth of God's love with needy people in Moldova

By George Henson

Staff Writer

TIRASPOL, Moldova—Mission volunteers from Texas, West Virginia and Tennessee converged on Moldova's Transnistrian region to warm the hearts—not to mention heads and feet—of impoverished people.

Children's Emergency Relief International, the international arm of Baptist Child & Family Services, facilitated the trip. Volunteers delivered shoes, winter boots, socks and hats to 31 churches, three correctional facilities, three adult-care facilities for the elderly or disabled, three day-care centers and 12 orphanages.

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Children beam with joy as they receive new shoes and socks from volunteers with Children's Emergency Relief International.

Toddlers received sneakers provided through Buckner International's Shoes for Souls program. Older children, teenagers and some adults received winter boots bought by CERI donors. More than 4,000 people received the footwear.

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 and Moldova declared its independence, the eastern region, Transnistria, wanted to stay tied to Russia. After skirmishes, U.N. peacekeepers stopped the conflict, but Moldova continues to embargo goods going to that region. Only Russia recognizes Transnistria as an independent nation.

Poverty is endemic. Many children in Transnistria's orphanages still have parents living, but the children are sent to institutions so they can have food, clothing and shelter their parents cannot provide them. Resources in the orphanages are scarce, but children in some outlying villages have even

less than the children living in orphanages.

While they were gratified to help, volunteers said it was difficult to see children with cold, dirty feet because both shoes and socks were worn through, exposing them to the cold, wet winters of Moldova. Many adults, some more than 80 years old, also received help.

At one stop, a juvenile detention center for boys ages 14 to 18, about 50 of the 59 boys were wearing slider sandals on a cold, wet, muddy day.



Volunteers sort socks by size before giving them to children in Moldova's Transnistrian orphanages.

Jonathan Gray, minister of youth at Second Baptist Church in Houston—North Campus in Kingwood, said the trip made an impact on him.

"This is my very first mission experience outside of something local, and I've just been realizing what a blessing it is to me to be here. More than ever before, I think I realize how much service is a part of living life to the full, like the Bible talks about," he said.

Weldon Knight of Kingwood has traveled to Moldova three times, and his wife, Joanne, has been four times. They also have sponsored four Moldovan children through CERI programs and remain in contact even with those who are now adults.

One particular scene Knight witnessed continues to haunt him. A young boy arrived wearing leggings that were soaked, muddy and full of holes. In order for the boy to keep the leggings and stay warm, he asked the mother if the feet of the leggings could be cut away before the new socks were put on. The mother gave permission, but then hit the boy in the head, because she was angry that he had embarrassed her.

“Anytime I’m putting shoes on a child’s feet, I think of the verse that says, ‘If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.’ Well, today, I saw Jesus hit in the head,” Knight said with a cracking voice at the end of one day.

Ted McElroy of Houston first traveled to Transnistria two years ago. A very special part of his experience this year was seeing how children he met on his first trip had grown, he said.

The groups also attended church services in Transnistrian churches. Seth Polk and Terry Vaughn, both of Cross Lanes Baptist Church in Cross Lanes, W.V., preached the English sermons. Translators interpreted the message into Russian for the locals, and then they translated the sermons of the local ministers to English for the Americans.

The Moldovan mission fit well with the West Virginia church’s emphasis on missions, said Polk, pastor of the congregation. Each year, the church is engaged in local missions, plans two other mission efforts within West Virginia, works on one mission project outside the state but within the United States, and involves members in two international mission trips. The church also dedicates 25 percent of its undesignated gifts to the Cooperative Program unified budget.

The church had been trying to work a Moldovan trip into its plans for a couple of years at the insistence of Vaughn, who was baptized by CERI Executive Director Dearing Garner while Garner was pastor of First Baptist Church in Kingwood.

The trip's focus on ministering to widows and orphans attracted his attention, Polk said. After Garner made a trip to the church to give details of CERI's mission, Polk knew it was something in which he wanted his church involved.

A focus on missions is important to the health of a church, Polk said.

"When we go, God blesses at home as well. In our culture, it's so self-centered, but missions is God-focused and people-focused. It helps us to remember that our focus is not supposed to be on ourselves," Polk said.

CERI teams have traveled to Moldova eight years. The agency was born out of a medical mission trip Garner led while pastor of the Kingwood church. After his retirement as pastor, he maintained his interest in the orphans and impoverished families of Moldova.

CERI also sponsors trips in January in which groups celebrate Christmas with orphans, since Romania observes Christmas according to the Orthodox calendar. CERI also sponsors summer camps with a Vacation Bible School format.

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