

First TBM volunteers return from Israel

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The first two teams of Texas Baptist Men volunteers in Israel are returning home after providing more than 30,000 meals since the Israel-Hamas war began.

However, it isn't the war that dominates their conversation. They talk about the faith that motivated them and the people they encountered.

"Being a witness was the main focus for us going there," said Genia Macon of First Baptist Church in Lewisville. "Christians coming from halfway around the world is a huge witness for Jesus Christ. ... It's not our words. It's our actions. We feel like we're the hands and feet of Jesus Christ."

Suzanne Shumock, a TBM volunteer from Mississippi, said people in Israel were "encouraged because we were there ... that we were willing to come and help."

Twenty-nine TBM volunteers have worked in Israel thus far. Most are from Texas, plus two from Mississippi, two Church Forward volunteers from Missouri and one Baptists on Mission volunteer from North Carolina.

'Flexibility is key'

The situation unfolded differently than expected, because the war did not progress as expected, said Gary Finley, who is TBM's volunteer coordinator in Israel and spent much of October there.



During a recent trip to Israel, TBM Executive Director Mickey Lenamon (center) assists volunteers Mason Willis (left) and Sid Riley. (TBM Photo)

Still, TBM has been feeding at least 2,000 people each day, topping 3,000 Thursday.

“We may not have gone over to do exactly what we planned to do. But ... the mission of TBM is to share the love of Christ, and feeding is just an avenue for that,” Finley said.

A third TBM volunteer team will go to Israel, but first TBM’s in-country partner—Emergency Volunteers Project—will focus on capacity building and making it possible for a field kitchen to increase the number of meals provided each day, TBM Executive Director Mickey Lenamon noted.

“In disaster situations, TBM has learned flexibility is key in ministering well. It’s even more important when serving in the middle of a war,” Lenamon wrote in a Nov. 1 email to TBM disaster relief volunteers.

“With that in mind, we have decided to postpone what would be our third team in Israel for a short time. Local Israeli volunteers will continue to serve as they expand the capacity to deliver meals. It’s going to take a little time and investment before sending in the next Texas team.”

‘Showing the love of Christ through our actions’

In October, TBM volunteers generally prepared the meals, working with Israeli relief workers and volunteers, who delivered most of the food, Finley said.

“We’re building relationships ... showing the love of Christ through our actions,” he said. “And they are receiving it very well ... and inviting us into their homes.”

People in Israel do not have much contact with Christians, and “most Israelis don’t have the best opinion of Christians,” Finley said. The volunteers’ presence in Israel is “breaking through the stereotypes.”

TBM has trained more than 100 volunteers specifically for Israel, Finley said. “We are trying to get them there first” and then “fill gaps with some that have not been trained” in Israel, he explained.

The 29 volunteers who have served thus far were busy preparing food for the people in Israel. That’s the work, but the witness is the purpose.

‘We are here because Jesus Christ has sent us’

Jackie Grey, of 121 Church in Grapevine, said the Israel experience “made me realize that people from other cultures and religions don’t understand that Christians want to share Christ’s love by serving them.

“The people we served alongside and who dealt with us ... could not comprehend that we were there to help without being Jewish or Israeli,” Grey said.

Macon found it interesting speaking with Israelis. She said someone told her: “I thought Christians were bad. You’re not bad. You’re here.”

“We want people to know we are Christians, and we are there because our Lord Jesus Christ has sent us,” Macon said.

Jodie Liford, of First Baptist Church in Forney, said, “All those little conversations we have with people, they matter.”

Andy Stern of First Methodist Church in Richardson said, “We were able to make a lot of food, and we know it got distributed to people in need.” But having the “chance to grow relationships with our Israel friends and volunteers” is what impacted Stern most.

Even as they began the journey home, Stern said, he had a “phenomenal discussion” with several Jordanians.

“It was a special experience of people getting to know each other,” he said. “We’re children of a God who loves us.”

‘God’s hand was over us’

Stern went to Israel “because God called me to go.” Proverbs 3:5-6 became important to him as he prepared and began the trip. The verses speak of trusting the Lord and leaning not on your own understanding.

The effects of war brought the TBM volunteers to Israel, but the volunteers saw little of it directly.

“One time we saw contrails of missiles,” Shumock said. “I was never afraid. ... That goes back to that prayer thing. God’s hand was over us.”

Macon noted it was a “little scary” considering going to Israel. “I had to think about it and pray about going. ... Once there, I felt safe and secure.”

Some TBM Israel training has been canceled, and other week-long offerings are now filling up, Finley said. Visit the Volunteer in Israel web page at tbmtx.org/israel to apply for training. There is a separate Israel Volunteer Sign Up web page at tbmtx.org/israel-volunteer-sign-up for those who are not yet trained in Israel but would like to serve if possible.