

Garland church ministers to Ukrainian refugee children

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For the third consecutive year, volunteers from [First Baptist Church in Garland](#) will travel to eastern Europe to bring Christmas joy to Ukrainian refugee children.

Six volunteers from the church are scheduled to journey to Poland and Czechia—formerly the Czech Republic—Dec. 5-15.

As in past years, they will serve in partnership with [Hope International Ministries](#) and its director of Eastern European missions, Leonid Regheta, the Ukrainian-born pastor of River of Life Church in Plano.

“We follow the lead of the people who are on the ground,” said Jim Witt, minister of missions mobilization at First Baptist in Garland.

The volunteers expect to deliver 850 Christmas gifts to a new orphanage serving Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw, as well as four refugee church starts in the Prague area.

The gifts include stocking caps and other items made by members of the women’s ministry at First Baptist in Garland and cards made by Sunday school classes and other small groups.

“We also send money ahead to partners on the ground who purchase gifts,” Witt said. “That helps to stimulate the local economy where our team is serving.”

Those gifts vary from practical items such as insulated thermal bottles and winter gloves to treats such as toys and candy. Children always receive a Bible in their “heart language,” and the gospel is presented at every

Christmas party, Witt added.

First Baptist Church in Garland has longstanding ministries to refugee groups that resettle in the North Texas area. However, the international component involving Ukrainian refugees in Europe was an unexpected blessing.

“We were looking for opportunities to continue our ministry to refugees here. We never dreamed we’d become involved in the international trips,” said Terri Carter, pastoral ministry assistant at First Baptist in Garland.

However, while on a Zoom call during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding ministry to refugees, Carter connected with Regheta and learned about his work with Hope International Ministries.

‘Demonstrate the love of Jesus’

That contact has led to annual trips just prior to Christmas. While the gifts the volunteers deliver are appreciated, the people they serve and the ministry partners who work with refugees year-around value even more the Texans’ willingness to travel around the world to be with them, Witt said.

“Our presence is a gift, as well,” he said. “It’s an opportunity to demonstrate the love of Jesus.”

As volunteers from First Baptist in Garland prepare to serve in Poland and Czechia next month, based on past experience, they also are “prayerfully expecting” to respond to “the Lord’s extras”—new opportunities they discover once they arrive in Europe, Carter said.



Volunteers from First Baptist Church in Garland plan to travel to Poland and Czechia—formerly the Czech Republic—Dec. 5-15 to deliver Christmas gifts to Ukrainian refugee children. Trisha Beavers from First Baptist Garland is pictured with a gift recipient on a previous trip to Eastern Europe. (Photo Courtesy of First Baptist Garland)

For example, in 2022, the missions team anticipated delivering 500 Christmas gifts in Krakow and Warsaw, Poland, and in Cluj, Romania.

“We found out that the Lord’s plan was greater than ours,” Carter said.

The team received an invitation to minister in two Ukrainian refugee schools and to send presents to a church in Ukraine.

They contacted Witt to let him know about the unexpected opportunity.

“God was out there ahead of us, and we were just able to step up to respond to the need,” Witt said.

The team serving in Europe discovered church members had continued to contribute financially to the mission trip after they left Texas, and the funds were available to respond to the newly discovered needs.

"The money kept pouring in," said Teresa Brown, missions ministry assistant at First Baptist in Garland. "It's all the church working together."

Last year, the volunteers planned to give away 700 Christmas presents in Krakow and Warsaw and in Kortrijk, Belgium. In Krakow, they met a missionary who asked if they could provide gifts for children of refugee families involved in her small-group Bible studies.

"Again, we called Pastor Jim and found out that the donations given after the team left were just enough to cover the number of gifts she needed," Carter said.

Ministries continue to expand

Beyond the Christmas mission trips, First Baptist Garland also has helped sponsor events where Ukrainian pastors and spouses receive trauma counseling, as well as similar events for the wives and children of Ukrainian soldiers who are serving on the front lines.

The church also provided seed money to help Ukrainian refugees in Romania start a small business, and they have enabled children from war-torn areas in Ukraine to attend summer camps.

Even while First Baptist Garland is involved in a major capital fund-raising campaign for a building expansion and renovation, members have continued to give generously to the ministry to Ukrainian refugee children, Witt noted.

People in the community also have supported the ministry, thanks to the efforts of John and Beverly Combs.



Ministry to Ukrainian refugee children has become a passion project to Beverly Combs (left) and her husband John. (Photo courtesy of First Baptist Garland)

For several years, the couple had been involved in First Baptist Garland's ministries related to refugee resettlement, working particularly with people from Afghanistan and Central America.

Then in 2022, they journeyed to Eastern Europe with the first mission team who ministered among Ukrainian refugee children.

Since then, the couple have become advocates and local ambassadors for the people of Ukraine, and particularly the refugee children.

As a retired schoolteacher, Beverly Combs had seized opportunities to talk about Ukraine with several school classes and assemblies.

John Combs—who often wears a Ukrainian bracelet, hat and shirt around town to spark conversations—has made 40 presentations to local civic groups and other gatherings in the last three years.

"It's become our passion," Beverly Combs said. "It's in our hearts."