

# Singing Men to reach Ukrainian refugees on Poland tour

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MARIUPOL, Ukraine (BP)—The Mariupol Baptist church where Trent Blackley last performed is rubble, the city hard hit by Russian military forces who have killed 8,500 Ukrainian civilians in the war on Ukraine.



The Singing Men of Texas performed before capacity crowds at multiple venues during their 2017 Ukraine mission trip. (File Photo courtesy of Singing Men of Texas\_)

“It was good that we got to Ukraine while we could,” said Blackley, director of the North Texas chapter of the Singing Men of Texas and lead vocalist and accompanying guitarist for the Texas Country Boys ensemble.

“One of the churches we were in was in Mariupol, and that’s the city that just got totally devastated, right on the sea of Azov. We’ve seen some before and after pictures of their worship center. It’s rubble now.”

Blackley was last in Mariupol in 2017 with the Texas Country Boys, which

grew from the larger Singing Men of Texas. Blackley continues to minister to Ukrainian refugees, this time in a Singing Men of Texas concert tour of Poland April 17-28 with Southern Baptist evangelist Michael Gott and Gott's wife Jan.

Gott last evangelized in Mariupol "just a few weeks before the Russians began attacking that city," he told Baptist Press. "And we saw the very hall where we held the concert bombed or at least destroyed by the rockets, and now it's all under the control of the Russians."

It was "breathtaking" to see "how God gave us unique opportunities just before the curtain fell," Gott added.



Ukrainians packed to capacity the multiple venues where the Singing Men of North Central Texas performed during their 2015 missions tour with international evangelist Michael Gott. (File Photo)

Founded in 1975 and composed primarily of Baptist ministers of music, the Singing Men of Texas have sung numerous times in Ukraine in partnership with Gott since 2010. England, Romania, Brazil, China and Spain are among the group's international travels, in addition to concerts across the

United States.

Blackley has kept in touch with Ukrainian pastors who have hosted performances there.

“So many of them, it’s every situation you can imagine. Some of them are there, and they’re leading their communities to respond to people’s needs in the community,” Blackley said of the pastors.

“And then there are others—a lot of the younger ones—that have gone to Poland, and they’re working there in ministry, or some that we know of that are in Texas. So we’ve been able to keep up with them, mostly through social media.”

## **Perform concerts, proclaim the gospel**

The 90-member North Central chapter of the Singing Men, the largest chapter in the state, will take a group of 113 on the Poland tour, including wives. The men will sing most songs in English, with Ukrainian and Polish subtitles.

Gott will preach brief evangelistic messages translated in Polish at the end of each concert and distribute more than 1,000 Polish New Testaments with the Psalms donated by the Eastern European Mission.

Eastern European Mission distributed 2 million Bibles in Eastern and Central Europe in 2022, the group’s president Bob Burckle said, continuing its ministry that began in 1961 by smuggling Bibles and other Christian materials to the Soviet Union.

“Our mission statement is, ‘The Bible, we want everyone to get it,’” Burckle said. “And there’s a double meaning in the English language. We physically want to get the Bible into people’s hands. ... You read it and you get it in your head, and then from the head, you get it in your heart.”

Thousands have written professions of faith at Singing Men of Texas and Gott outreach events, Blackley and Gott both noted.

“What we’ve found is music is just a very powerful tool to bind our hearts with other people,” Blackley said. “The fact that we come in and rent a hall there in their city, and they can come and enjoy a great concert in one of the finest music halls in their town, seems to be very attractive to them.

“Because of the experiences we’ve had over these last 12 or 13 years, we’ve seen God move in a really powerful way when we’ve combined our music with a simple gospel message from Michael Gott,” Blackley said.

“And that’s really been kind of the catalyst for everything we’ve done, even stateside. We’ve had great response from guys who want to see God at work.”

“House of the Lord,” “Jesus Brought Me Out,” Swing Down Sweet Chariot,” and “Sing the Story” are among a repertoire the group will sing, including various genres of Christian music.

In Lodz, the last concert on the Poland tour, the group will sing in a choral festival including several local choirs. The program will include “Agnus Dei,” the lone song the Singing Men will present in the Polish language.

“I think perhaps it’s easier to sing it than to speak it,” Blackley said.

## **Uneasy but open to the gospel**

Blackley was in Poland in October 2022 with the Texas Country Boys. He found refugees in various states of recovery.

“Those that had kind of landed on their feet and had connections there within Poland, they were in good spirits and taken care of,” Blackley said. “And those who came across with nothing, not knowing anyone, they were

still trying to figure things out.”

Many in Poland remain uneasy about the war.

“From the Polish people ... there was just a very uneasy feeling, because they hoped that they weren’t the next to incur some wrath from (Russian President Vladimir) Putin,” Blackley said. “But I do believe that that made them extra open to the gospel message.”

The Gotts arrived in Poland in advance of the tour to handle logistical details. There, they met many Ukrainian refugees.



Evangelist Michael Gott

“Some of these people are just a step away from breaking into tears because they are living with incredible stress,” Gott said.

He and Jan met a Ukrainian mother and wife who worked as a server in a restaurant, sending money back to family members in Ukraine where her father, brother and a cousin are fighting in the war.

The Gotts met an attorney with four children whose husband visits her monthly from Ukraine, where he’s in the armed forces. In Poland, the mother and her children live in a two-bedroom apartment.

“We wanted to see this apartment for ourselves to understand the stress these people are living under,” Gott said. “And yet, I want to tell you without any apology, that the Polish people have gone out of their way to help Ukrainians, and they’ve given them every benefit.”

Blackley solicits prayers for the success of the ministry.

“We’re thankful for people all across Texas and across the United States that join us in prayer, as we sing to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in music and spoken word,” he said.