

FIRST PERSON: 'Is this really happening?'

By Junior Davis

Correspondent

The Ukraine relief mission trip to Poland March 27-April 4 was unlike any I have experienced in some 65 years on this earth. Seeing and listening to so many stories of hurt in real time was a bit overwhelming. There were times I had to ask myself, "Is this really happening?"

Story after story involved refugee wives and children leaving their husbands behind in Ukraine to fight for their country. These fleeing families just wanted their story heard. Before the conversations finished, members of the Mississippi Baptist mission team almost always had the opportunity to share the Gospel.

I don't know if it was to my surprise or simply my ignorance that so many Ukrainian refugees knew Jesus, had a strong faith, and possessed a solid understanding of the Bible.

Listening and praying

These stories of separation from husbands and parents who could not make the journey to Poland with their families always involved tears from both the Ukrainians and, yes, from me. I realized there was some comfort by them knowing that another person from the other side of the world had empathy and cared enough to listen and pray for them.



MINISTERING TO REFUGEES – Retired pastor Junior Davis (left), member of Williamsville Church, Kosciusko, talks with a refugee mother and child from Ukraine at a shelter in Gdansk, Poland. Davis was part of a team of Mississippi Baptist volunteers who spent March 27-April 4 ministering to a large group among the millions who have been forced to evacuate the war zones in their home country. (Photo credit: Junior Davis)

There were pockets of joy in the middle of war. One example was when we had the unexpected privilege to love on children from Ukraine while their mothers went to fill out paperwork with the Polish government and search for jobs. We saw one mom smiling while she watched her daughter laugh for the first time in weeks. That one moment was worth all the travel and preparation.

Many men, myself included, have the idea we can fix any situation or problem that arises, but the situation that caused these women and children to travel for days in extreme cold while bombs were falling all around them was completely out of our control to fix. To see some laughter in an unfixable situation was a moment of joy.

Acknowledgements

First, I want to say thank you to my beautiful wife Margaret. Without her support, love, prayer, and patience, my involvement in this mission effort could not have taken

place. I want to thank Dr. Shawn Parker, executive director-treasurer of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB), for his unwavering support to take Mississippi Baptists to the hard places.

Thank you to the entire Mississippi Baptist Convention for making these trips possible and spending resources so our team could represent Jesus, face to face with these hurting people.



A BREAK FROM CRISIS – Barri Shirley (left), chief operating officer for the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board and member of First Church, Madison, entertains a Ukrainian refugee child at a shelter in Gdansk, Poland, who was forced to flee the Russian invasion of her home country. Shirley served as the team leader for the March 27-April 4 mission trip. (Photo credit: Junior Davis)

Hubert Yates, MBCB disaster relief director, is working tirelessly to organize this continuing effort. Barri Shirley, MBCB chief operating officer, led our team from start to finish under uncertain and difficult circumstances with integrity, compassion, and wisdom. (Some might be surprised to know that Barri is a master at making balloon animals. This made the children very happy.)

Tom and Vickie Kilpatrick, members of First Church, Jackson, are our site coordinators in Gdansk and will stay in Poland for many weeks. Mississippi Baptists can be proud of this

outstanding couple representing our Lord and all of Mississippi.

The Kilpatricks are long time volunteers with Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief (MBDR) and are currently serving as MBDR chaplain coordinators/lead trainers. They are coordinating disaster relief teams provided by the state Baptist conventions of Mississippi, Louisiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. Their volunteer ministry effort is being provided through MBDR and supported by giving by Mississippi Baptist churches.

To all those who continue to give so others can share the love of Jesus with hurting people, we say a special thank you.

Worshipping together

Then there was Sunday worship. We attended a Polish service with more than 200 in attendance and also a Russian/Ukrainian service with more than 300 in attendance. Both services included baptisms and The Lord's Supper. Wow! What an experience. Refugees from the war torn country of Ukraine continue to come together to worship and encourage each other.

As I looked across these congregations worshiping in a language I could not understand, my thoughts went to Mike and Linda Ray and their daughters, Rebekah and Hannah. This family served as missionaries in Dniprotrovsk, Ukraine, with Southern Baptists' International Mission Board from 1995-2014.

Currently, Mike is MBCB's missions mobilization director in Jackson. Linda serves in children's ministry and seeks to develop missions awareness with women in their local churches. Rebekah is the ministry assistant for the Mississippi Baptist Christian Action Commission in Jackson. Hannah is a physician in the Mississippi Delta.

God is at this moment undoubtedly using their ministry in Ukraine for those many years, during these trying days for the

Ukrainian people. Thank you to the Ray family for their investment in Ukraine.

The impact

The ending of this story is uncertain. Most of the Ukrainians with whom we spoke long for their homeland and believe they will be back there in a few weeks. The reality is that the war's devastation hasn't left much to go back to for the foreseeable future.



YOUNG REFUGEES – Lana Waggoner (right) observes as Danny Ivy (left) engages Ukrainian refugee children and Cathy Ivy (center, background) prepares play time activities at a shelter in Gdansk, Poland. The children and their families were driven out of their home country by invading Russian military forces. (Photo credit: Barri Shirley)

Please continue to pray for them, and for the Kilpatricks as they organize and plan for future teams that will have an impact on spreading the Gospel during this critical time. Our team was divinely put together and consisted of:

– Barri Shirley (team lead), member of First Church, Madison.

- Danny and Cathy Ivy, members of Victory Church, Brookhaven.
- Lana Waggoner, member of First Church, Carthage.
- Myself, retired pastor and member of Williamsville Church, Kosciusko.

If you have the opportunity to minister to the hurting people of Ukraine who are facing such uncertain futures, you will probably be like us: unable to speak Polish, Russian, or Ukrainian, but enabled to speak the language of love through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Editor's note: How to get involved

Mississippi teams will be participating in a rotation every four weeks with Louisiana, Ohio, and Kentucky state Baptist conventions in support of the Gdansk refugee site. Mississippi Baptists have teams scheduled to depart on April 24, May 22, June 19, July 17, and August 14.

Those interested in being placed on the Ukrainian Refugee Response/Poland Interest List may submit their name, e-mail address, church affiliation, and telephone contact information to hyates@mbcb.org. For more information, call (601) 292-3335.

At this time, only credentialed Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers are being scheduled but a changeover to church-based teams is anticipated. Due to the type of refugee work that is being conducted, individuals with training/credentialing in childcare and emotional/spiritual care are being given priority consideration.

Gifts by churches in support of the Ukraine crisis response may be given through the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, utilizing the Church Mission Giving Designation Form (Pink Sheet), designating "International Disaster Relief/Ukraine Conflict Response." Submit to MBCB, P. O. Box 530, Jackson, MS

39205-0530.

Individual gifts may be given through the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board website, designating "International Disaster Relief/Ukraine Conflict Response." Checks may be mailed to the above address with the same designation.

Gifts will be utilized to support the ministry needs of MBDR and MBCB teams assisting in Poland, supporting the other response sites with funding for ministry needs, and assisting SEND Relief, the joint compassion ministry of Southern Baptists' International Mission Board and North American Mission Board, with purchasing supplies for distribution in the affected countries.

The Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief ministry is supported by gifts to the Mississippi Cooperative Program and the Margaret Lackey State Missions Offering.