
Gifts of Grace

First Edition

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Labas!

by Libby Myers

Welcome to Gifts of Grace Ministries first newsletter! Our plans are to send out a newsletter two times a year to keep you updated on the ministry that God has called us into. We would like for you to share this newsletter with your family, friends, co-workers, your church family and anyone you feel would be interested in God's work in Lithuania. We also ask for you to pray for the people we serve and this ministry, as we all know the Power of Prayer is what leads us to build God's Kingdom.

I will begin by sharing with you how our mission with God began in Lithuania. It all started with a small group of friends that wanted to do mission work abroad. We had all been a part of mission work in our hometown and other places in the US, but we felt that God was calling us to go out into the world and share His Love. So, one evening Emily Hiatt and I were going over a packet that the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (VIM) publishes of places they send building teams. While we were looking through this packet, one particular paper literally kept falling out on the floor and it was the one for Lithuania. We would just put it back in the packet, because we knew nothing of Lithuania. After the third time it fell to the floor, she and I got on the computer and looked up Lithuania and the first thing we saw was children singing. Emily and I both had tears streaming down our faces and we both said at the same time, "I know where I'm going". And so it began, we went back to our team and told them we would be going to Lithuania. They were all on board!

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Where It All Began

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The following summer, in 2004, six of us joined a VIM team that totaled 15 persons to work on the reconstruction of the United Methodist Church in Birzai, Lithuania. The building was a former Soviet Recruitment Center and is now a Beautiful United Methodist Church right in the heart of the city. This was not only the reconstruction of a building, but of the people of Lithuania who were in a reconstruction phase themselves. They were beginning to rebuild their lives after becoming free from Communist rule and we were beginning to build relationships with our Brothers and Sisters in Christ in Birzai, Lithuania. We were given the opportunity to not only physically build a place to worship but to build relationships with the people of the church and the local help center, Pagalbos Centras.

In 2005, on our second mission, Jesus Christ opened a door into a whole new ministry with Pagalbos Centras, called the Village Ministry. We went to Lithuania believing that these people needed our help, but to our surprise the people of Pagalbos Centras were helping many people in the outlying villages of Birzai. Regina Zidoniene, the Director of Pagalbos Centras and two other ladies took Emily and me out to meet the families they served. We were heartbroken by what we saw as we had no idea there were people living in such extreme poverty. We also visited the Orphanage, the Nursing Homes and the Special Needs School. Needless to say, our eyes had been opened and we knew why God had called us to serve in this area of Lithuania. Our eyes were also filled with tears and we were humbled by what God had allowed us to be a part of. Our mission, and lives, turned to an entirely new direction by going out into the villages that day. Through this experience in the villages the Gifts of Grace Gift Box Ministry was born. (Please read more about this ministry in the Gifts of Grace Christmas Box section.)

We have continued taking teams each summer as well as in the winter. The summer team has always consists of building work. After the church renovations were finished we began concentrating on renovations to village homes (read more under Summer Missions). We also participate in the Children's Summer Bible Camp by helping with crafts, the closing program and always providing T-shirts for the children each year. In 2007 Emily and I had been talking and feeling like there was something more God was wanting done in the villages. So, that winter, she and I and Glenn Schaal were on mission distributing the gift boxes and met with the social workers in the village of Paceriaukste, along with Regina the Director of Pagalbos. We asked them what their dream was for their people and they told us they needed a Help Center. We knew then exactly what God was trying to tell us. We felt in our hearts that God wanted us to help reach more people and this was the way; a new beginning. Regina and the social workers began looking and in April she called and said they had found a house and within two weeks God had provided the funds through so many generous donors to purchase and renovate this house into the Gifts of Grace Family Help Center. That summer a team of 18 people renovated this house and within a little over two weeks we opened the doors to the center in Paceriaukste. This center also includes a Bakery that once was a barn brought to life by our team along with folks from Sweden and elsewhere in Lithuania. In 2011 another Help Center opened in the village of Papily. Our vision for the future is to increase to eight Help Centers to provide people in all villages surrounding Birzai with a safe place to bathe, wash clothes, get a warm meal and enrich the lives of their children. With God's help we pray that one day we will meet this goal if it is His will.

We have also created a relationship with the local orphanage and always spend time with the children when we are in Lithuania. I dare say it is never enough time as one would like to give and it is difficult to pull yourself away. Another relationship is the one we have with two nursing homes, one in Legailiai and Nemunelio Radviliskis. This is a highlight of the journey, especially in the winter, when we can sit and visit with these dear folks. We take special small gifts for them and always take cakes, as they love their sweets! In the winter we visit with the folks at the Handicapped Center in Birzai. Words are not enough to express the feelings that you experience when you are being loved on by these special folk. We also provide small gifts for them, but they are the ones who really give as they always have a special program they have prepared through dancing, singing and playing musical instruments.. This is a place where you leave with your heart full of love for the clients and especially for Jesus Christ as He has shared His love through such special hearts!

Another new outreach that Gifts of Grace has begun is a Support Program for the children in the Village Ministry and Help Center programs. In 2015 we began this program helping 33 children in hopes that God will provide for them opportunities in their lives that they would not have had otherwise (read more under Ongoing Support on page 4).

You can see there is much work going on in Lithuania and much work to be done. None of this would be possible if not for the Grace of God and for the people that God has placed in our lives in Lithuania. Building these relationships has helped to reach out beyond Birzai as we have now formed relationships with Jelena and Andrus Kask who are building up God's Kingdom in Vilnius. Through them we have begun new friendships with their church in Ukmerge. We are so excited about all these new relationships, how God's Kingdom is bringing us all closer to Him and how we are learning to share the love of Jesus Christ with each other and those in need. These people are not just friends; they are truly family and we Praise God for how they have blessed our lives. We also thank each and every one of you who prays for this ministry and for all of you whom so lovingly and generously give of your time and money to Gifts of Grace Ministries.

With all God's Blessings (Su visais Dievo Palaiminimais),
Libby Myers

CHRISTMAS BOX MINISTRY



Santa at the retirement home.



Libby and Renee handing out boxes.



Boxes ready to leave the U.S.!

Each year since 2007 Gifts of Grace has had the great fortune to deliver Christmas Boxes to children in Birzai and the surrounding villages as well as the orphanage, special needs center, and retirement homes. People that choose to fill a box are provided with the name and a current picture of the child they are supporting and often select the same child year-after-year. We now deliver over 400 boxes each year. This is just one way Gifts of Grace provides a connection and opportunity for relationships with some very special people.

My first trip to Lithuania was in 2004. We started renovating the Birzai United Methodist Church that the Soviets had taken over in the 40's as a Soviet recruiting center. This made a huge impact on me, just being in the church and knowing the horrific torture the people went through. Many men were killed if they didn't join them. So we started the renovation process rebuilding God's church. I went back with our team for several years working on the church and it was opened again as Birzai United Methodist Church in 2007. I went in December of 2007 to help hand out gift boxes. Words cannot explain seeing the children's faces when they receive a small box filled with hygiene products, toys, clothes, school supplies, etc. (It's amazing what you can get in these gift boxes!) Since 2005, we can see how the children are growing up from the pictures we receive. More importantly is seeing how their smiles have changed. Only through God and good and faithful servants, could this ministry make such an impact on the people in Lithuania. Matthew 25:35-40 has always been special to me. "Assuredly, I say to you inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

-Emily Hiatt

SUMMER MISSIONS

Since the first team in 2005 Gifts of Grace has supported numerous building projects in the Birzai region. From reconstructing a church to converting a house into a help center, from providing a family with running water and a bathroom to resurfacing the outside of a house we have found there is no job too big with God's help. Many relationships are also built through these projects. There are always local people around eager to help with every job. Getting to know the people you are trying to help is the most rewarding part of the entire experience. A highlight of every trip is visiting with the friends you have made. Aside from work there are great opportunities to have some fun by helping with summer bible camp, swimming with the kids from the orphanage, or just sitting around in Pastor Giedrius's back yard after a hard day of climbing Lithuanian "special ladders". (Also known as shaky scaffolding.)

One of my highlights for this summer's building team to Lithuania was taking some of the children from Paceriaukste to the circus in town. Their excitement was plain when they piled into the van in their best clothes, giggling and whispering to each other.

Once inside the tent, we loaded them up with soft drinks, cotton candy, and typical souvenir trinkets that spun, glowed, and made noise. But when the lights dimmed and the show began, their wide-eyed attention showed how amazed they were at the spectacle they were watching for the first time. Remigijus, in particular, spent much of the night standing up so he wouldn't miss a thing!

Afterward, we chatted with the performers, and they graciously took pictures with and for our group. Then they cranked up the swings and gave the children an extended ride - free of charge.

God's presence was truly evident through the sheer joy on the faces of these children and on the team's faces as we watched their smiles and applause. I'm truly grateful for the slight delay locating those "special ladders" since that gave us the opportunity to share another kind of "gift of grace" with our friends.

- Renee Hayes (summer 2015)



Working on "special ladders"



Cirkas Amber!!

HELP CENTERS

Pagalbos Centras in Birzai operates as a home base for the three current help centers in the region. The help centers in provide enrichment programs for children of all ages after school and during the summer. Children are taught the importance of making a better life for themselves and about the love of Christ. They are given at least one hot meal, a place to shower and wash clothes and so much love. It is amazing to see how much the workers truly love each and every child that comes through the centers. The centers also provide a safe place for families to stay for short periods of time. They are very much a safe haven.

Pagalbos Centras in Birzai also has a used clothing store where people from all around can find everything from dress outfits to warm outerwear. Clothing and other goods are donated on a large scale from Sweden. While clothes can be purchased at the store many are given to families throughout the region when the ladies of the center see a need.

The Gifts of Grace Help Center in Paceriaukste has a bakery that was converted from an old barn. While the costs of electricity are so high that it can only be operated a couple days a week, the ladies of the center are still able to provide baked goods, delicious breads and sweets, to all three centers as well as families that cannot make it to the centers on a regular basis. The women that work in the Gifts of Grace Help Center welcome everyone with open arms and are always looking for new ways to give back even though they do not have a lot themselves. It is so inspiring to see people freely give their time and talents to help others.



Roma the baker!



Pagalbos Centras - Birzai



Fun at Bible Camp



Before/After Kitchen for Samantha and Haroldas

When we arrived the first time, I didn't know what to expect. When we left, we all had a new family. From the moment we arrived until the time we left we were treated like family. As soon as we pulled ourselves away, we knew we had experienced something special and would be back. After 15 trips, the experience is still as good and moving as the first time.

-Glenn Schaal

ONGOING SUPPORT

The Christmas gift boxes and summer mission teams are just a couple ways Gifts of Grace provides support to the people in the Birzai region. 2015 ushered in a new way of providing ongoing support for the children of the area with the introduction of sponsorships. Our current program includes thirty-three children that visit the various help centers. Each month €25 are distributed to the participants. They are instructed on proper use of the funds by the Pagalbos Centras workers. Participants can use the money for school supplies, clothing, health care, food, and anything else they need to give themselves a better life. Many children use this money to help with living expenses and to feed their families. While €25 may not seem like a lot (~\$27); it can go a long way for the people of Lithuania.

One child saved his sponsorship money to purchase a bicycle for his mother. He wanted to give her a better way to travel to and from work. Some people in the villages walk 5-10 miles to work and town each day. This bicycle also allows her to get home quicker so she can be with her family. Once at home, the other children of the family get to ride the bicycle. This small amount of money has truly been life changing for this family and many others.

Our goal is to expand the sponsorship program to more children every year. If you would like more information about sponsoring a child please email: info@GiftsOfGrace.us

While some of the funding for the ministries Gifts of Grace provides comes from individual donations and grants, yearly fundraisers are held to support our partnership with Pagalbos Centras in Birzai, the Christmas box program, and the summer building project(s).

For the past several years The Grove Theater at Mitchell's Grove UMC has hosted plays performed by the drama department at Greensboro College with proceeds going to support missions. Plays, such as 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," "It's a Madison County Christmas," "Over the River and Through the Woods," "Searching for Eden," and "Harvey," have been performed dinner-theater style, providing entertainment and a great meal to area audiences.

An Annual Tour of Tables in late winter has also raised awareness and dollars for our ministries in Lithuania. Whether the theme is months of the year or hobbies, participants have a great time decorating tables and sharing our passion for the families we work alongside. Neringa Statuleviciene of Chicago shared her story in 2014, while Andrus and Jelena Kask spent several days serving in mission and speaking in and around the High Point area, visiting Lake Junaluska in the NC mountains, and sharing the Word and song with many in attendance in 2015.

In response to their ministry here, Gifts of Grace's outreach in Lithuania has expanded to include Rev. Kask's congregation in the capital city, Vilnius. The 2015 building team spent time worshipping with a congregation in Ukmerge and touring Kaisiadorys and the castle at Trakai with the Kasks and two of their congregants. December, 2015 marks the addition of children in Vilnius to the Christmas box ministry.

Every project undertaken is bathed in prayer as we seek God's blessing and will for each one. Please join us as we pray for the individuals involved and consider participating in these fundraising activities with us.

If you would like to make a donation please visit: www.giftsofgrace.us and click on the donations link. You can also donate directly by using the link: giftsofgrace.us/donate/donate.html