

Bread Trucks Make Special Delivery to Romanian children

Metro Ministries is taking food, music and God's love to children in needy villages

In some countries, loaves of bread mean more than bars of gold. In fact, hungry children from poverty-stricken villages in Romania grip loaves of bread as if they actually are 24-carat gold bars.

That's how Thomas and Tanja Funkhauser describe the response of the youngsters who were fed by Metro Ministries International's mobile bakery and Sidewalk Sunday School truck in a Romanian village.

"The children would come running," said the Funkhausers, team leaders with Metro Ministries International (MMI), based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Funkhausers run Switzerland-based Operation Starvation, a new program introduced by MMI during Christmas last year. Bill Wilson, MMI executive director, launched the program as a means of linking child evangelism with feeding hungry families. "I see the project as something that has the potential to change the way people do foreign missions," he said.

The first yellow Sidewalk Sunday School truck and bakery trailer that visited Sighisoara, Romania, attracted crowds of curious children. "It looks like the circus is coming to town," Wilson said. "These villages and towns have never seen anything like it."

As the evangelism service begins with loud music, bakers are toiling furiously in the trailer. Their goal is to make 200 loaves per hour. The Sunday school team stresses basic Christian principles in Bible stories and skits for the kids. Last year, more than 1,000 decisions for Christ by children and adults were recorded on signed cards.

"Whenever we arrived in a village, it was so amazing to see people from the hills and mountains streaming down to our yellow truck," a team member reported. "Some of the families seemed to be sad and oppressed. But the love of Jesus was stronger and worked miracles. Many experienced Jesus personally."

The team visited a ghetto in Tirgu-Mures, where youngsters sniffed glue in front of them. Girls offered to sell their bodies. Young children stole milk from a passing farmer.

In some cities, orphans and runaways live in underground sewers and in abandoned buildings and ruins. "It's a sad situation," Wilson said.

The program was extended to the spring of this year before it revved up again for another Christmas blitz this month. Two feeding units will leave Germany soon, heading for Romania and Kiev in the Ukrainian Republic.

Last spring in a garbage dump in Timisoara, Romania, a woman dressed in black and bent over from age grabbed a loaf of bread. She told the MMI staff that she lives in the dump because she has no income.

Wilson hatched the mobile-bakery idea three years ago when he spotted the Swiss army feeding troops near Zurich, Switzerland, from a self-contained mobile bakery truck. "It just hit me," he said. "I thought there has got to be a way to take this principle to feed children."

After asking many questions and meeting with American and Swiss engineers, a prototype was designed and built in Germany. MMI purchased a used Mercedes-Benz diesel truck and trailer, which was outfitted with high-speed electric ovens donated by a company in St. Louis.

"After many engineering and logistical problems, we were able to put the first one in the field in 2000," Wilson said. The first mobile unit cost \$65,000. Building the second one cost less—\$40,000. A recently completed manual provides specifications so the design can be reproduced anywhere now.

Wilson sees the program going worldwide.

"When there is an earthquake, when there is a flood, these mobile units can be mobilized," he said. "They can go to these areas where disasters are happening. What a great testimony for Christianity to respond as quickly as the Red Cross."

Wilson anticipates the mobile bakery becoming a model similar to the widely adopted Sidewalk Sunday School program he founded 20 years ago. Inquiries are pouring in from India and Africa.

"In the sub-Saharan area of Africa there are hundreds of thousands of kids wandering around because their parents are dead of AIDS," he said. "It's horrendous. Somebody has got to

step up to the plate. Once people start hearing about the bakery, when they see its potential, they're going to latch on to it."

—Peter K. Johnson

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