

Partnership helps handicapped kids

By Denise Sherman, Staff Writer

Zebulon — A call to help orphans and handicapped children is uniting Mogilev, Belarus and Zebulon.

The teamwork started in 2006 when a group from Calvary Cross Baptist Church that meets at Zebulon GT Middle School visited Mogilev on a mission trip, said Vicky Griffin, secretary treasurer of the church's Hearts for Children. That organization also does mission work with orphanages in North Carolina.

When the group met Dmitryi Kontsevenko, founder of the international charity organization Stephanus, through a missionary friend, they already had a common bond.

"We had been visiting orphanages for a long time and we saw that the kids needed care and support and we decided to buy this former camp with the help of our American friends," said Kontsevenko last week through interpreter Julia Laitseva, also of Mogilev.

The team was visiting Zebulon at the invitation of parishioners at Calvary Cross Baptist.

Churches from Germany and the United States including the Zebulon church helped Kontsevenko's organization both buy and refurbish the camp. The facility was a former camp for children run by the Belarus government that had fallen into disrepair.

They named it the Isle of Hope, an oasis of play for orphans, some of whom suffer illnesses today because of radioactive fallout from the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine in 1986. About 60 percent of the fallout landed in Belarus.

A number of children at the camp suffer from complications of fetal alcohol syndrome. And many handicapped children come to enjoy other children, crafts and games.

The camp is a Christian camp with Bible stories and activities. Kontsevenko received help from his own church Emmanuel Baptist in Mogilev in holding the summer camp.

It's the first camp for handicapped children in the country, Kontsevenko said.

He criticizes a lack of public programs for the handicapped. He said there is a lack of humanitarian consciousness on the part of the Belarus government.

"There is no help for handicapped children because there is the feeling that they cannot help the country," said Kontsevenko.

Elena Petrachenko of Mogilev sent her son, Kirill, 9, to the camp. She told Kontsevenko that Kirill was able to forget about his cerebral palsy while he was there.

"He studies at home so his communication with other kids is very limited," she wrote. "We're so glad that we spent the whole week in the camp where people loved us and paid attention to us."

Stephanus also provides medical supplies to hospitals and clothes and food to senior citizens who need help, Kontsevenko said.

The organization is run by Kontsevenko, who used to work in a factory before he turned to missionary work.

About 600 children attended the Isle of Hope six-week camp last summer, he said.

Griffin is introducing Kontsevenko and Laitseva to people at six churches in the area including congregations in Wake Forest, Knightdale and others in Zebulon.

“It’s a good opportunity,” said Kontsevenko. “We want to thank them for their support and invite people to work with us if they have the desire.”