

Reflections

Bulgaria Mission Trip 2009

As the mission team traveled home in June, many of them took some time to record their thoughts about their experience in Bulgaria.

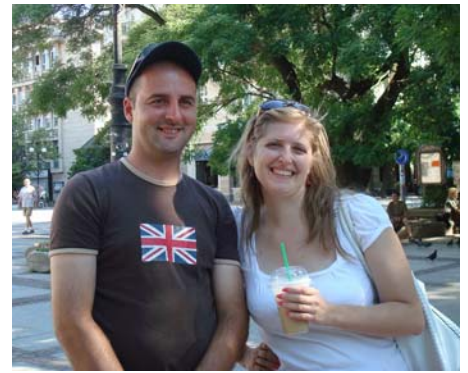
At first, I really didn't want to go to Bulgaria. I thought it would be cold and boring. Looking back, I realize that I was very wrong. To me, Bulgaria was something completely new that challenged me mentally, physically, and spiritually. Over the past ten days, I have learned so much and have developed a new outlook on life. I was very touched by Svilen and Elizabeth. It amazed me that even in their times of struggle and turmoil they never gave up hope. They always seem to be looking for the bright side of everything. When we all went to Svilen's small temporary church, I was amazed that people came and were worshiping God. Even in a small, confined, hot room, people still gather to praise God and be in fellowship. Svilen looked happy; he was in his sanctuary and proudly showing us his church. Every step of the way, dear Elizabeth was always supporting Svilen. I admire her for her courage, strength, and innocence. I also enjoyed working with the children at each of the schools, churches, etc. They were all so kind and happy to see us. I really think that our presence changed one small child's life. Even if our impact was small, small is better than none at all.

Spiritually, I feel as if I'm on the right track. Prior to this trip, I felt bad for doubting faith and asking questions. Now, I've learned that doubt and curiosity are important to spiritual growth. It's important to ask questions because God is simply complex. No one should ever comprehend who He is. By asking, one shows their desire to learn more and grow in faith. I have learned and have grown. Thank you to Beth, Boris, Beni, and everyone for making this trip for me wonderful. I have really enjoyed being with everyone and can't wait to see the progress that will be made in the future. Even though I am saying goodbye, I am actually saying hello to a new beginning, a new adventure, and a new chapter in life.

Youth, 18 years old

I have to admit that despite our introductory Sunday school this spring, I had some fairly dismal images of Bulgaria in my mind. I saw a gray, concrete land of unsmiling and taciturn workers—trying to make enough money for living. I was surprised by finding joy in Bulgaria—joy in the deep green hills and golden fields of wheat, and of course, in the Bulgarian people themselves.

Beni and Boris were the first Bulgarians I met and I'll never forget their warmth and kindness. Without them, the trip would have been much dimmer and less rich—they gave us a picture of Bulgaria from



Boris and Beni, mission trip guides extraordinaire!



Svilen, pastor of the Methodist church in Yambol and his wife, Elizabeth.



Elizabeth and Svilen's children, Robbie and Grace, were baptized during the FUMC-AA mission team's visit.



Woman in traditional Bulgarian dress.

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their hearts. And of course, Svilen and Elizabeth were welcoming and kind—they are really an example of hope in their church. I really pray that God continues to bless them in their work in Yambol and that they continue to plant seeds of love and service in that community.

What I gained most was a sense of awe and gratitude for the work of our team. They were patient, tirelessly cheerful and loving to all that they met—the kids at the school in Yambol, the kids at the Roma church in Veliko Turnovo, Pastor Ivan and his congregation, even Brooke, a friend of Bob and Becky Faber who joined us for a few days. Their optimism and commitment to service—whether making crafts and playing soccer with the children, or making the work chain to move lots of books for Pastor Ivan, or helping to spruce up the classroom at the Roma church—are such symbols of God's love and discipleship that I feel great hope for both our church and the church in Bulgaria.

This was an unforgettable mission trip, and I hope to return to Bulgaria again to see our brothers and sisters there.

Counselor

The experiences I have had on this trip have been ones that have touched my heart in a way it never has been before. Maybe it was the faces of the kids we worked with or Robbie and Grace's smiles.

Also part of what made this trip so amazing is that I got to share it with this wonderful group of people. I am so glad God brought me to this youth group so that I can experience Him through everything on this trip. Each person I met seemed so welcoming and willing to talk, as if God had sent me to make this connection with them. I came in 7th grade small like a mustard seed, but with the help of this church, have grown into a tree. I hope this trip is just the start of the bridges I hope to create and will return to Bulgaria to see the progress made. Thank you so much!

Youth, 15 years old

When I found out we were going on this trip I was so excited. I was counting down the days and trying to find ways that would help me fall asleep at night because I would just stay awake thinking about it. But then Friday, 6-13-09, the day before we left, I started to get nervous and started having doubts. But now I know that there is not one thing that could ever change my mind about actually coming on this trip. This was my first time ever leaving the country and there is no place better that I could've gone on! I have learned so much on this trip. I have found a place in my heart that has opened up and learned to welcome others. I have learned to be more outgoing, and I prayed a few times out loud which is normally something I am afraid to do. This trip has just been a once-in-a-lifetime, life-changing, soul-



Beth Miller, trip leader, poses with a teacher and parent from the school in Yambol where FUMC-Ann Arbor youth support a daily feeding program for disadvantaged children.



Face (and leg) painting was a popular activity during the group's visits with Bulgarian children and youth.



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searching trip. My favorite part was working with the kids. Especially the kids at the school in Yambol. Not only were they gracious and kind, but there were loving and gave me a feeling of comfort. Coming on this trip meant that I had to sacrifice other social things, but it was worth it. Nothing could compare to this ever. I loved meeting Svilen and Elizabeth, Boris and Beni, Pastor Ivan and Anna, and everyone else. I have made so many new friends. I could say thank you a thousand times, but you would still never understand how much I appreciate this! I really, really hope we do come back to Bulgaria soon, because I am ready to go back. Thank you so much.

Youth, 16 years old

Being able to experience communicating with Bulgarian orphans, school kids, and pastors really opened my eyes to their culture. Eating multiple courses of food and learning their different body language signs makes everything ten times more challenging. But having to figure things out brings you farther away from your comfort zone, where you have to communicate with them to understand their actions. Having these connections made me grow in my social abilities and made me respect our differences even more. Every minute of this trip has been enjoyable. The kids have opened by heart to loving them unconditionally because they deserve it more than anything. They made me smile every time we walked through the doors of the school, orphanage, or church. I can now see how much of a change we can make just being there to play with the kids. I will never forget them and I am always willing to come back.

Youth, 16 years old

The first image of Bulgaria that I had was a dark, cloudy, run-down place. This picture stuck with me the whole time, until the plane landed. There wasn't a cloud in sight, and we were surrounded by green hills and golden plains. Seeing how beautiful it was I thought to myself, "This is going to be a good trip." In more ways than one, it ended up being true.

First of all, we had good weather the whole time. That just made everything more enjoyable.

In more heart-warming terms, it was good because of every single smile that the kids made that I can remember. Whether it was jump-roping, watching them get their faces painted, seeing them take a picture, or any other activity, seeing a smile come on their face was just contagious.

I realized that at each school or church we went to, we made a difference by just doing some simple things. Not everything had to be redoing a room. I think (and hope) that they remember the fun times they had with us, like I know many of us will.



The mission team gathers with students, teachers and parents at the school for disadvantaged children in Yambol.



Students at the school in Yambol were excited to see their friends from Ann Arbor!



A Roman-style amphitheater in Plovdiv.

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I've learned many things from this trip. An important one was that even if there is a barrier (in our case, language) you can still have a great time and you can make tons of new friends. Also, you can do a lot by actually doing just a little. In American, jump-roping with someone for a bit might not matter the next day, but with those kids I could really see happiness in their faces, and I feel it will stay there for a while.

I'm so glad that I came on this mission trip because when you make someone else happy, you will feel that way as well.

Youth, 18 years old

Bulgaria was most likely the best mission trip I have ever been on. Originally, I had doubts about going, but in the end I couldn't have been happier about my choice. I feel like I made a difference in people's lives, even just a little bit, and that is very meaningful to me. I could have easily spent another week or two on the trip if I had more clothes. I won't ever forget this experience, and I hope the people I met will remember me as well. I plan on coming back.

Youth, 16 years old

Coming to Bulgaria I really had no idea what to expect. I imagined it being dark, cold, and dirty. I had only seen pictures of the communist housing and it wasn't very pleasant. This view of Bulgaria made coming here a huge surprise! It is truly one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. What was most amazing to me was how kind all of the people are. Even with our language barrier, I felt like I was able to connect with these people in so many ways. Svilen and Elizabeth truly touched my heart and I was so glad I had the opportunity to meet some wonderful people. I loved listening to Svilen pray because even though I didn't know what he was saying, I could feel the spirit of the Lord through his words. What made the biggest impact on me was working with the children. It was easy to see that by doing such a small thing, like coming to play with them for a day showed our love and care for them which some of them are not often exposed to. It made me happy to leave an impact on someone's life and leave them with memories that I know I will have for years. Another thing that made this trip so wonderful was the group of people that came. It was such an interesting mix and everyone brought something special that helped us all get along so well. I will never forget the people I met and the places I went in Bulgaria. This trip was an absolutely amazing experience and I hope to return someday.

Youth, 18 years old

This trip has given me a sense of realization. I knew what it was like to be out of the country but some things were still shocking. The language barrier made things difficult at times. When we were with the



The Little Tykes playhouse delivered by the mission team provided a lot of enjoyment for the little tykes.



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kids at Yambol the first day, the communication as very difficult. The smiles we had allowed the kids to approach us and get us through the day. Wherever we went there were always stares from others. Although they seemed harsh, I learned to smile back. The trip has brought a great sense of teamwork to the group. We stayed patient and positive and rarely became frustrated with each other. The group of people coming along was ultimately a very good group. Any different group could have been more problematic.

Although I wish we had more time to spend with the kids and work on the church, I still feel a sense of accomplishment. We brought smiles to many faces, helped make the church healthier and attempted to make Americans seem nice and trustworthy.

The trip I've been dreaming of finally became a reality. I now understand our purpose for going. Through Elizabeth, Svilen, Ivan, and Anna, I feel like we have touched the lives of many. I realize we have made a change.

Youth, 15 years old

- What an awesome collection of people that become a mission team. They were fantastic helping each other, working together, and playing with curious children.
- Each child's eyes were filled with hope and curiosity.
- All of our foreign contacts were compassionate and caring in the work they did.
- We had a terrific balance between mission work and sightseeing. I had a great time!

Counselor

I learned a lot about Bulgarian culture, people, and myself on this trip. I tried to eat almost anything that was put in front of me, but ultimately I failed. I had hoped to be able to eat most of it, but I learned that I couldn't. I also learned how lucky and precious the life I take for granted is. After seeing all those orphans, I felt that my life was comparatively easy. I don't have to worry about getting food, shelter, or clothes. It really opens one's eyes to how harsh the real world can be. I also learned about kindness. The people in Bulgaria, though not very wealthy, went out of their way for us. I questioned myself, "Would I do the same?" I believe that I wouldn't have gone to the extent they did. I hope to improve my own life with these qualities as well as those I serve in mission and at home.

Youth, 16 years old

I am glad I was called to be part of the 2009 Bulgaria mission trip. My biggest fear going into it was the language barrier—but I found it to be the barrier that was most easily overcome. I guess I learned a lot about the strength of God's word; how it has no language. I was ex-



A little fresh green paint brightened up this fence at a kindergarten/day care center in Yambol.



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pecting the people we worked with would be loving, but I was not expecting the new levels with which I loved. We did not spend a significant amount of time in any one school or church, but strong bonds with the children formed quickly. I also gained lots of new insight through discussions with the members of the group, whether in small group or just talking on the bus, and from Bulgarians like our guides Boris and Beni and Pastor Svilen and his wife Elizabeth. It has been a wonderful trip and experience.

Youth, 16 years old

I have always been someone who is most comfortable at home—I know my schedule, my surroundings and the people around me. This trip took me far out of my comfort zone, but I don't think that's a bad thing. In fact, I believe that's how God planned it. When I'm tired, stressed, or unsure of myself, I may be more emotional but I also put more thought into my actions and I put in more effort. When I left Ann Arbor I told my parents it was useless to have packed paint clothes because I was unwilling to paint. Nine days later, speckled with yellow and peach paint, I had been rolling paint for four hours and helping others. Yeah, I ruined a pair of jeans and a pair of shoes, but I'd put in effort and time into something I know others value. I've been frustrated and upset at times, but I've also made memories that hold importance and joy: giving gifts to Roma children, holding Grace (Svilen & Elizabeth's new baby), seeing Svilen cry when I thanked him, and hugging Ivan goodbye.

Youth Alumni, 20 years old

Bulgaria was not what I expected. For some reason I was picturing concrete block houses, gray skies and unfriendly people. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the skies were blue and the weather was hot. There was also much more culture than the worn out remains of communism. We saw traces of many different cultures: Thracians, Romans, Greeks, and more. All this combined to make a rich culture.

As for the people, at least the ones I met, were not open at first. However, once I gained some of their trust, they were friendly.

The language barrier was a challenge. I remember walking next to this boy who kept looking at me with big eyes. I wanted to say something to him. To say something helpful. To try to understand what his life was like. But the dozen words I knew wouldn't cut it. All I could do was smile back in the universal language of kindness.

I'm not really sure what I learned from this trip. Maybe I will have an enlightenment later, or maybe I learned something subconsciously. Something like a change in perspective after seeing how other people live. Something like an awareness of a new culture. Something like a confirmation of how much I enjoy helping others.

Youth, 18 years old



Pastor Ivan helped host the 2006 mission team. At that time, his congregation worshiped in rented space. This year the team was able to worship with his congregation in their new church building in Veliko Turnovo. They performed "The Good Indian," based on the Good Samaritan parable and visited with the congregation members.



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This trip renews my hope that we can make a difference. When I see the faces of children we meet and the compassion in the faces of our youth toward them, I know that there is a future. We cannot change everything but we change what we can and the change is as much to use as to those we help. One youth asked the hard question in our [Sunday school] class before we left. "Why not just send the money we would have spent going there?" I believe that question was answered in every contact and every moment spent in fellowship with the people there. From hours of soccer matches to one youth spending an hour on her knees simply tossing a ball to a little girl who could barely break a smile, it was a commitment to do whatever was needed when it was needed. I am so very proud of this group of youth and so glad to be a part of it.

Counselor

Going to Bulgaria is a state of mind. To serve others was extremely important to the memories I am taking back home. I must first off say that I am extremely impressed with the level of coordination and preparation that was put into making a trip and experience like this possible. Because of the self reflecting process that occurred, I believe the individuals on this trip were astounding and made the group dynamic excellent. Looking back ten days ago, the work done in Bulgaria felt like we have been there more than ten days, while the retention of time passed felt like a long weekend.

Being part of such an easy going group made cliques and other pesky social norms almost nonexistent. This refreshing and welcome break made the spiritual journey expected over the trip much easier to focus on and develop. This was shown in the willingness to do what was asked when that allowed us to enjoy all the benefits of the trip.

I came into this trip hesitant because I thought that the best way to make sustainable change would just be to send the money. Now that I have been there though, I realize that the relationships built were worth more than the trip cost. It is these relationships that will motivate me to go out in the community and raise support that will create 100-fold the change that the initial money given for my travel could create.

I expected to find the large change in culture and the inspiration, but it is how amazingly similar the people are in Bulgaria that is the true motivator. It is the similarities that show the connection to us, and the spirit of humanity that motivates me the most.

Youth, 16 years old

I am still not sure what motivated me to want to come on this trip. I think it was the combination of spending time with family along with knowledge of what great experiences Kenya has been to others.



Everyone got their hands dirty with some hard work at a satellite church led by Pastor Ivan outside of Veliko Turnovo.



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It was definitely out of my comfort zone to be an adult chaperone on a teenage trip...but I've been feeling really stressed at work and feeling like it is not well balanced right now, so why not leave it all behind for eleven days and go to Bulgaria!

This trip has been a great experience. Getting to know almost everyone on the trip has been an unexpected bonus. I know I will feel more connected in church for years to come based on these relationships. Now that I have been with these youth, I can see how God's work can be done in little and big ways in faraway places. If this work becomes their dream and passion, than I could not only understand but support and encourage them along that path. I am not sure if that would have happened without a trip like this.

This trip was a great balance of tourism and mission work. I feel like I understand more about Bulgaria and some of its past and present because of that mix than I would have gotten from all tourism or all mission work. It was special for me to feel the warm welcome at the church in Sofia, to see the stark conditions of Svilen's current location, to see the determination to build a church in the village where Svilen's friend is the mayor, and to see the excitement and success of Ivan's first location, and to feel the hope for his Roma church despite its horrible conditions.

Ultimately, I will remember the faces, not just those in photos, but those in our hearts: Svilen, Elizabeth, Robbie, Grace, Ivan, Anna, Christian, and all those amazing children who couldn't understand our flash card Bulgarian language but knew we would be there only to brighten a day or two and met us with love and smiles and not suspicion or mistrust. What they gave to us and our children is clearly far greater than anything we gave to them, yet somehow I feel that it is alright.

Finally I must mention Boris and Beni. They are truly wonderful people who were doing their jobs, but truly put their hearts and souls into our trip. What a different experience it could have been without their detailed advance planning, knowledge, patience, flexibility, and love! Eleven days without emails, a pager, and a blackberry has been great!

Counselor

Our 2009 Bulgaria Mission Team included 12 youth, 4 youth alumni, and 7 adults from the First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

For more photos, please visit www.fumc-a2.org/youth



Painting took place in several of the mission stops.

