

City consultant finds a calling in Eastern Europe



The Condorachi family in Moldova receiving an Operation Christmas Love box sent by Mission Without Borders

By [Andrew Riley](#)

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The story of the 30,000 ‘love boxes’ sent annually to the poorest areas of Eastern Europe

David Hardisty is no ordinary charity chief. A former partner in the management consultancy arm of KPMG, it took him six months to accept the job of UK director of the Christian charity Mission Without Borders in 2008.

“I spent a long time praying about the decision and seeking advice,” he says. “In the end I felt that God was saying that He didn’t mind what I chose but that He wanted me to do it. I am not proud of it, but one of the big factors for the delay was the dramatic cut in pay; I now earn less than 20 per cent of what I used to. Also, to become a fundraiser at the start of a global recession wasn’t clever. I owe a lot to my wife, Tara, and our children.”

Mission Without Borders (MWB) was formed in 1960 to minister to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of people living in poverty or suffering persecution in Eastern Europe, particularly those oppressed because of their faith. Today its schemes include soup kitchens, children’s summer camps, clubs for the handicapped, training courses, child and family sponsorship schemes — and Operation Christmas Love, the distribution of more than 30,000 boxes of food and basic necessities to families in its six host countries of Albania, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova, the poorest country in Europe. MWB helps people regardless of colour or creed. “We do it because we believe that as Christians we are called to help others: we’re all part of the same body.”

Hardisty, 52, imbued his three children — and his hard-nosed father, Bill — with his passion for helping others.

“When my oldest daughter, Anna, reached the age of 6, we thought it would be helpful for her to sponsor a child in a different country. To be honest, I viewed the sponsorship as rather an abstract thing. It was only when I visited Moldova that I was forced into the realisation that the girl we sponsored, Ana, was more than some simple concept to

help my own children's learning. Ana's parents were very poor. They couldn't afford to feed their children so the local authorities had taken them into care.

"Ana had a problem with her nose and was teased mercilessly by the other children, who called her 'Drippy Nose'. All she needed was a simple operation to remove polyps, but there was simply no money available. I returned home determined to pay for it. While visiting my parents in South Shields, I told them about my visit. My father, who was a rear gunner in a Lancaster bomber during the war, was well into his eighties by then but was still the dour ex-copper — at least on the outside. He listened silently, then suddenly stood up and walked out of the room. He returned with a wad of notes in his hand. He handed them to me and said, 'You'll be needing to pay for that operation, then.' There were tears in his eyes as he did it."

The child sponsorship scheme is typical of the type of long-term project that the charity supports. Hardisty explains: "Mission Without Borders is not an aid agency. Our aim isn't simply to address a short-term need but to help people out of poverty to achieve self-sufficiency in a sustainable manner."

In this vein, MWB runs a number of vocational training centres providing courses in computers, catering, tailoring and car mechanics. "We also help people to learn how to grow crops and look after animals — everything from bees to cows," Hardisty says.

MWB has about 300 staff worldwide, including the equivalent of three and a half in its UK arm, but mostly employs only local staff because they understand the local culture and can best identify needs; buying locally also supports the local economy. It has nearly 4,000 volunteers spread across Eastern Europe who assist thousands of abandoned children, single mothers, the elderly, young people and poverty-stricken families. "They visit people in need, cook food, provide training, mentoring and so on. Many of those we help go on to become helpers themselves," Hardisty adds. The policy of using local staff, and local resources, helps to explain the UK charity's enviable figure of 98p in every £1 going directly to those in need.

To mark its jubilee last year, MWB launched yet another ambitious project. "How do a bunch of ex-Bible smugglers celebrate their 50th birthday? Answer: get a million Bibles into Eastern Europe," Hardisty says. "So far we've managed about 700,000, which we've given out. For many of the poorest people in Eastern Europe, it's a choice of do I buy a Bible or do I eat or do I heat the house? This is one way to help."

Many of the children in Eastern Europe in institutions (Hardisty dislikes the term "orphanages") are not genuine orphans but "economic orphans" — given up in despair by their families because they are too poor to support them. MWB supports them with food, clothing and counselling. Other children still with their families are supported in situ by MWB workers.

Another scheme the charity runs that gives children hope is summer camps, without which thousands of disadvantaged children in Eastern Europe would not have a holiday. Each vacation typically lasts ten days. "Camp is probably the only time in their lives when they experience true rest, good meals, recreation and receive biblical teaching, along with emotional healing. It's not Center Parcs but for many of the kids it's absolute luxury," Hardisty says.

For both children and families, however, the arrival of "love in a box" each December — the Operation Christmas Love scheme — is a godsend. Each large cardboard box (they should not be confused with shoeboxes, Hardisty says) contains the basic foodstuffs of flour, oil, rice, pasta, coffee/tea, tinned meat and vegetables, sweets, jam and biscuits. It also has "some treats and a booklet telling the Christmas story. Each box costs just £16 to pack and distribute, but the value to the recipient is priceless."

Hardisty tells the story of how, on a trip to Moldova to see the charity's work at first hand, he asked to visit the home of a recipient of an Operation Christmas Love box. Svetlana lived with her two children, aged 10 and 12, in a "ramshackle" house of two small rooms, only one of which was habitable in winter. Her husband had a serious head injury and would never leave hospital. Svetlana appeared heavily pregnant, but in fact had terminal stomach cancer. When it came to leave, Hardisty absent-mindedly stroked the Christmas Love box. "'Mister!' the lady shouted and ran towards me. I stood there in shock. What had I done to upset this poor lady? Our translator rushed to assist me. 'Mister — will you tell the big-hearted people who sent us this box that last Christmas they saved our lives: they gave us hope.'"

For more details, go to www.mwbuk.org

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