

Religious Youth Service in Georgia

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The Religious Youth Service (RYS) project "Peace in the Southern Caucasus: Unity through Actions of Love and Service" was held on July 16-25, 2011 in Zugdidi, a city in the Western Georgian historical province of Mingrelia (Samegrelo), the center of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region.



Twenty-eight participants and staff members from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ivory Coast, and Georgia and Russia, representing the Armenian, Georgian and Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim faith traditions, joined together to live and work as an interfaith and international community. The project was sponsored by the Universal Peace Federation and "Save the Future Generation" program.

The first day began the orientation that served to kick-start the project by helping participants understand the unique elements of RYS and begin generating the spirit of "One Family Under God." During these days, the group visited the Georgian Orthodox Church, Synagogue and Mosque, where religious leaders shared the relevance of their religious lifestyles and traditions, and emphasized the impact that people of their faiths were making for the sake of world peace.

The service component of this project involved the renovation of classrooms at the Zugdidi Orphanage House as well as cleaning and improving the general school environment. Additionally, environmental cleaning of a beach near the village of Anaklia was carried out.

Volunteers also devoted themselves to share with the children—some scheduled basketball and soccer training sessions for orphans, while other participants read books to them. Local people were inspired to see the youth group enthusiastically working despite the hot summer weather.



The children and about 50 community members participated in a cultural program prepared by the volunteers. This was a program where all volunteers and local people could showcase many unique cultural aspects of their home countries. Conversely, on the last day of the project, children from the orphanage, who had actively supported volunteers at the work sites, organized a concert for the service group.

As part of the educational component of the project, the RYS participants planted fruit trees together with the children. After four days of living and working side by side, bonds of true friendship emerged and everyone altogether demonstrated the ways of living in peace and co-prosperity. In addition, foreign volunteers shared gifts from their countries with the children.



The cultural program for the volunteers afforded them a variety of experiences in the local communities, including an outing at the largest hydroelectric power plant Engurhesi, and visits to the Dadiani Palace museum and the rapidly developing cultural city of Batumi.

Through practical and focused educational programs (covering Peacemaking, Conflict Resolution, Family Values, Religion's Role in Creating Peace, and Character Development) and through sharing, the participants gained insights into their own lives as well as the lives of others.

Many volunteers, through their efforts to serve and care for the local residents, grew closer to becoming true "Youth Ambassadors for Peace." In the commitment letters they wrote as part of their education, the volunteers expressed their determination to continue organizing peace-promoting activities with culturally and racially diverse people in the future.

The Zugdidi RYS project enabled us to plant the seeds of peace—to transform the local community into a community of peace through promoting a culture of service. On the last day, we invited representatives from the local administration and shared with them the precious experiences from the project and affirmed our hopes to return and carry out even greater service projects in the future.



