

Blessings in the Balkans

story by Deborah Taylo-Hough and Chuck McReynolds
photos by Geraldine Wilkins

A decade ago, Calvary Chapel of Olympia, Washington, helped establish a church in Gramsh. It is located in the mountains of Albania, a Muslim country in the Balkans. During Communist times, the country had the only official atheist government in the world. Despite recent world tensions, a team journeyed there to conduct a weeklong Vacation Bible School and to encourage believers.

*Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!
They walk, O Lord, in the light of Your countenance.*

Psalm 89:15

Weaving between donkeys, stray dogs, herds of sheep, speeding vehicles and machine-gunning police, several hundred children made their way to Vacation Bible School. They were about to hear the Gospel from Nitro the puppet and his American friends.

The faces of the Albanian children lit up when they walked into the simple sanctuary of CC Gramsh. It had been transformed into a colorful undersea adventure, complete with painted seahorses, fish, and coral. "Is this a church?" asked one local resident. "It looks more like a kindergarten!"

The goal of the trip was to bring more children into CC Gramsh to learn about the hope found in Christ Jesus. Past mission trips demonstrated that Americans coming to this isolated region of Albania sparked interest in the Gospel. The team's arrival in the midst of an uncertain international crisis added another level of curiosity.

"He's a big, big God ... big enough to know us ... big enough to help us ... He's a BIG, BIG GOD!" the children shouted as they sang. CC Olympia Children's Ministry coordinator, Tom Alongi, and his wife, Linda, taught the youngsters a song in English. They also taught them what the words mean when they shared about the gentle love that Jesus has for them. Later as the children played, they were heard singing the same songs. It is unusual for adults to show so much interest in the children, and these young ones thrived on the attention.



Chuck McReynolds

Nitro and puppeteer Matt Smith.



Pastor Chuck Lind and young Albanian children learn the hand movements to a worship song.



Excited Albanian children enjoy Vacation Bible School. There were two sessions per day for five days.



Albania

Chuck McReynolds

While the children all had fun and were entertained, some were also moved by hearing of Jesus' love for them.



An Albanian girl shows the fish she made with the Bible verse Jeremiah 10:10, “But You are the only true God.”

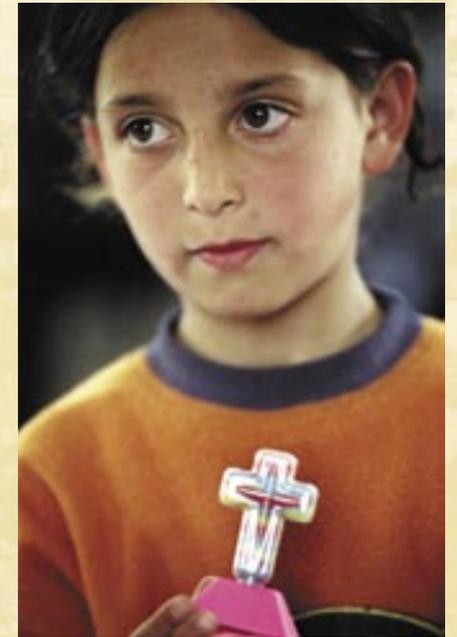
The children...were captivated by the puppet’s antics. They learned about God’s love for them from Nitro.



Albanian born missionary Ella Lewis, left, translates for CC Olympia team member Kelsey Hough. The boy, Besara, wears gloves with the word ‘frike,’ which means fear. With Jesus, you will overcome fear.



Albanian missionary, Miranda Dunham, joins the Albanian children in worship during VBS. Miranda is married to Dave Dunham, a missionary from CC Olympia.



The children participated in a variety of craft activities.

Matt Smith brought Nitro the puppet to share Bible lessons. While Matt worked the technical aspects of the puppet, Eltoni Liapushi from CC Gramsh provided Nitro’s Albanian voice. Matt had been concerned about how his puppet would come across the language barrier.

“I was afraid this might end up looking like a badly dubbed foreign film,” Matt joked. The children, however, were captivated by the puppet’s antics while learning about God’s love. Other stories were narrated in Albanian while the Americans acted out the scenes to the amusement of everyone. A portrayal of King Ahab had the youngsters laughing hysterically.

The VBS team became instant celebrities with the Gramsh children. When team members walked through town, the children came running down the street shouting, “Linda! Jason! Debi! Kelsey! Jon! Chuck! Dena!” A smile from the Americans, a wave, and even faltering attempts to say, “Good morning!” in Albanian (“mirëmëngjesi”) were well received by the town’s children.



Jason Stahl, right, made a new friend during VBS. All team members wore an animal-themed hat during the VBS.

Laying the Foundation

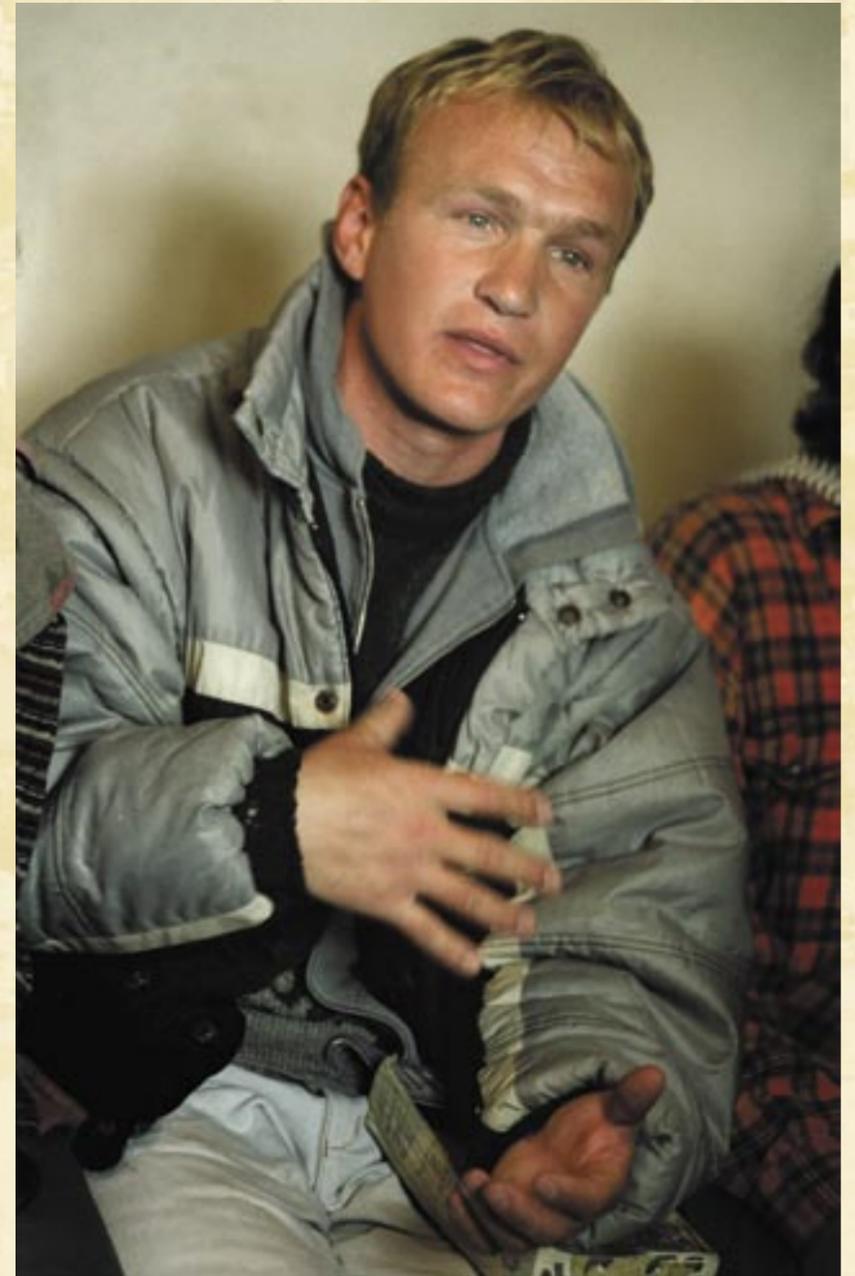
Joe Litton was the founding pastor of CC Gramsh. In 1994, he and his wife, Michele, completed their mission work in the Czech Republic and moved to Albania to help a friend plant a church in the Gramsh district, a region of Eastern Europe untouched by the Gospel at that time.

There were no believers in the city of Gramsh or in any of the district’s smaller villages. From 1995 to 1997, the church provided every home in the district with a New Testament, an effort that led to conversions and the beginnings of the church.

The Littons returned to the States, leaving the church to an Albanian who had come



Shpresa counsels Albanian believer Juli after the prayer meeting. Shpresa, mother of missionary Ella Lewis, leads a women's Bible study in Vidhani.



Albanian believer, Ramizi, shares his testimony at the weekly Bible study in the village of Vidhani.

By helping families like Eltoni's, the church is able to show God's love and be a witness to the community.

Pastor Pellumb Ranxha

to Christ in one of the villages. Pellumb Ranxha was taught at CC Gramsh under Pastor Joe's guidance and graduated from the Bible school in Durres, Albania. Pastor Pellumb and his wife, Manjola, continue to serve the Lord in Gramsh.

Missionaries Tyson Lewis and David Dunham, CC Olympia, traveled to Gramsh

for a six-month commitment. Both later married Albanian women and stayed in Gramsh. With their wives, Ella Lewis and Miranda Dunham, they now serve the church and help with Christian efforts throughout Albania.

Eltoni Liapushi, Nitro's 18-year-old Albanian voice, works for CC Gramsh in many

capacities. His family lives in an abandoned warehouse where they have converted a small area into two rooms for their large family. During heavy rains, the water runs through the house.

"By helping families like Eltoni's, the church is able to show God's love and be a witness to the community," said Pellumb.



Albania is slightly smaller than the state of Maryland.



Pellumb Ranxha helps an Albanian believer with his homemade ladder.



A gutted auto service building was rebuilt to house CC Gramsh.

Chuck McReynolds



Albanian children gather at the gate of CC Gramsh.



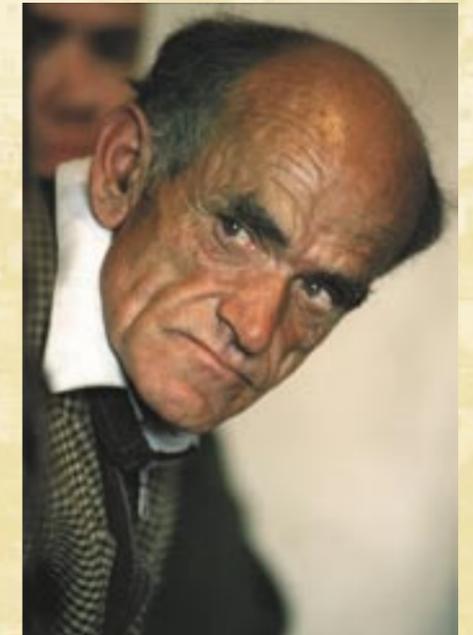
A shepherd and his sheep are a common sight in Albania, where over half of the economy is based on agriculture.

Village of Vidhani

Narrow, winding roads lead to Mount Tomor, a snowcapped mountain looming over the Gramsh district. It is considered a Muslim “high place,” where animals are still sacrificed. Pastor Pellumb took the team to visit a nearby village close to the mountain. Except for the overhead electrical wires, Vidhani could be a place from centuries past—grazing sheep, dormant grapevines, and views of Mount Tomor over roughly hewn stonewalls.

The team split into smaller groups and visited several village homes, trying steaming cups of thick Turkish coffee and sampling homemade native specialties. The group also attended meetings throughout the day with the believers of the village, spending time in fellowship and encouraging them.

The believers in Vidhani are the most mature in their faith, traveling to other villages to



Albania

Salmon listens during the weekly Bible study held in his home.

share the Gospel. The Albania Christian Service Foundation, where Dave Dunham is director, is negotiating with the government to build a new school to replace the condemned one.

“The church is developing strong community relations and a good witness by helping the people where the government has failed,” Dave said.

Turned Away from God

One of the poorest nations in Europe, Albania has little to offer its citizens in the way of jobs, housing, healthcare, or solid futures for their families. It is quite common for young men to leave the country in search of employment.

Albania’s borders were closed to the outside world for nearly 50 years under communism, leaving the country isolated and lagging far behind other nations in social, economic, and modern developments. Albania’s brand of communism was curiously modeled after China’s rather than Russia’s. Remnants of Albania’s former ties to China—rusty Chinese-made trucks and tractors—still litter the countryside.



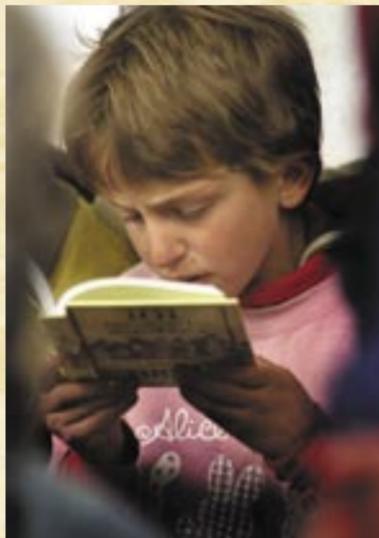
Two women walk by the Muslim mosque in Gramsh. Albania is 70 percent Muslim, 20 percent Albanian Orthodox, with the remainder being Roman Catholic or Protestant.



After only 6 months of guitar lessons, Albanian believer Eltoni Liapushi leads the prayer meeting worship.

The best way to learn about running a church is by observing how the first century church started out.

Pastor Chuck Lind



A young Albanian boy in the village of Vidhani follows along intently as the Bible story of Samson is read.

Albania was the world's first official atheist state. After decades of persecuting religious leaders and forbidding religious tracts, Bibles, and other materials, the Communist Party closed every remaining religious building in 1967. Albania's constitution, adopted in 1976, forbade all religious-related activities and organizations.

In 1990, Albanians regained the right to travel outside the country's borders, and religious freedom was restored. However, the generation raised under a strict atheist regime is still uncomfortable speaking about God or spiritual matters. Many children are discouraged from attending church and some believers are persecuted.

Planting on Good Soil

Church attendance grew significantly after the CC Olympia outreach. The main service added 70 adults, and the Sunday school expanded to 80. The average age at CC Gramsh is 18, and CC Olympia Senior Pastor Chuck Lind knew that sound leadership needed to be encouraged in this young body of believers. Leadership classes, based on the first four chapters of the Book of Acts, were conducted each afternoon.

"The best way to learn about running a church is by observing how the first century church started out," said Pastor Chuck.



Teens worship at CC Gramsh before Bible study.

Twenty young adults and teens attended the classes each day. Pastor Chuck noticed a change in the congregation from his previous two visits.

"The people in the church have spiritually matured over the past few years," he said. "Pellumb is a gifted pastor who has led the Gramsh church body into maturity."

Kelsey Hough, a 16 year-old from CC Olympia, commented, "It was exciting to see people my age involved in everything going on at CC Gramsh. The kids weren't just there for another youth group event or



CC Gramsh Senior Pastor Pellumb Ranxha, son Andrea and wife, Manjola (front center); CC Olympia Senior Pastor Chuck Lind (left); Tyson and Ella Lewis (front left); and Dave and Miranda Dunham (front right).

to visit with friends; they were there because they ARE the church."

"Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14

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