

LIFTING PRAISES IN AFGHANISTAN

CC Budapest worship team travels to Afghanistan, ministering to soldiers, refugees, and children.



Michael Payne, center, leads the CC Budapest worship team.

*Story by Christmas McGaughey
Photos by CC Budapest*

Traveling into the heart of Muslim Afghanistan, a team of musicians from a Calvary Chapel in Hungary shared the love of Christ with soldiers far from home and wounded Afghan children who seemed far from hope.

The team of 11 included the worship band from CC Budapest—called *Golgota*, which means Calvary in Hungarian—and Robert Stewart, a former infantry lieutenant who still works with the military and felt a call to encourage troops on the remote front lines. During the 12-day trip, they visited five military bases and two refugee camps. One highlight of the trip came unexpectedly while ministering to children who had been brutally injured when a Taliban rocket hit their school the night before.

“As we walked into the hospital, I had this choking feeling: what could we do here? We don’t have any medical help or experience to offer them,” said bass player Komáromy Kornél. “At least we had two guitars and a bongo, and we knew God had called us here.” As the band quietly set up, they were told not to say anything that would be offensive to the Afghan people. So they began playing worship songs in Hungarian. Many of the children, some who had limbs amputated, were crying or in pain.

“As we started to sing and worship God, the nurses started to unfold the curtains which held the injured and ill children and adults,” Kornél said. “A young man came forward in his wheelchair, and another one came on his own feet. We kept



A day after Taliban rockets hit a school, injured children listen to worship.



The worship team was not allowed to share the Gospel, but their songs about Jesus lifted spirits at Bagram Air Base hospital.

singing, and we felt the very presence of God's peace, joy, and freedom."

As the band continued to play, the atmosphere changed. Children stopped crying. Some grew quiet and fell asleep. Some children, adults, and nurses were even laughing. Nurses who had been cool at the beginning crowded into the room, expressing joy and amazement at the children's response. When a guitar string broke, the people asked the band to play more songs. The head nurse told the band, "This has been the best painkiller for them," recounted Kornél.

"That was one of those times during the trip when I thought, *This is exactly why we're here. We've reached them.*" Robert said. "Though they didn't know what we were singing, everybody understands the word *Jézus* (Jesus)."

Robert, raised in a traditional church, said he first encountered Spirit-led worship at CC Budapest and felt God calling him to bring this to soldiers on the field. "Out there, you have guys who are Christians but don't get Spirit-filled worship," he said, "or guys who are close to being Christians, and guys who are considering Christ now because they are facing death every day."

Worship leader Michael Payne, an American who now calls Budapest his home, was a former Marine Corps sergeant. He recalled

that during their worship concerts, many of the soldiers prayed aloud for friends who were injured or killed. Some were weeping openly but silently to God. "There were these big, strong soldiers crying during some of the songs," Michael said. "I know God did some things that we will never know about."

Another band member recalled feeling God's presence during a concert which lapsed into a time of worship. "The concert was amazing. It seemed to be a time of healing for the soldiers; there was a real sense of our gentle, loving God," said Madarász Isti, who shot footage during the trip.

The band members had several opportunities to share the Gospel with soldiers from the U.S. and other countries. "Many of them said they were touched by our music and the fact that we were there," Michael recalled, "They would grab our hands and say that over and over again."

Hungarian team members were eager to greet soldiers from their own country and had brought chocolate to the NATO Air Base, where many international troops are stationed. There they met a Hungarian soldier who later brought several comrades to the concert that night. "That concert was different than the others in that it was at this café/bar, not at a chapel, so it was mostly non-Christians," Michael said. "But

they all stayed and loved the music. At the end I asked if I could pray for them, and we did." After the concert, the Hungarian soldiers waited to talk to the team; all spoke eagerly in their mother tongue. "The soldiers seemed touched by the music and even more by the fact that we had come there to share with them," Michael said. A singer on the team, Vass Timi, shared the Gospel in English with a Belgium soldier who asked why they were singing about Jesus. He seemed skeptical at first, but then listened as she shared Scriptures with him for more than an hour.

While there are chapel services at several of the bases, Robert observed, the worship atmosphere is traditional and formal. "They don't have the opportunity to really commune with God, to worship in the Spirit," he explained. "They needed this, true worship from the heart—not in Latin or with an organ."

During the evening "After Action Report," team members met to pray and to share verses and testimonies. Michael said they all agreed that God was illustrating Zechariah 8:23, in which people from other nations say, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

"Many times, we were not allowed to openly speak about God," he said, "but all we had to do was love, and people could see He

was with us. They were drawn to us." He added, "To Muslims, their god (Allah) is a very unapproachable person, but it was like they could see God's love everywhere we went. They just wanted to be with us."

Robert said that before he went to CC Budapest, his life was mainly about running his military souvenir business. He never dreamed God would use it as a springboard for ministry to soldiers and Muslim natives. His connections and reputation with military chaplains helped pave the way for the team to come to high-security, remote locations in Afghanistan where visitors were scarce. His business supplied the financial support needed.

One week before the band left, the report of a man on trial in Afghanistan for converting to Christianity hit world news. "People at the church thought we were crazy for going," Michael remembered, but Pastor Greg Opean of CC Budapest supported their calling to go. He had the whole church pray for the band before they went,



A Kabul shop sells propane gas used for heating and cooking in more affluent homes.

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Madarász Isti



During the CC Budapest team's first concert, Christian servicemen and women worship in a "clamshell" tent at Camp Eggers.



Robert Stewart, left, greets an Army soldier at right, looks on. Tracy helped coordinate the CC Camp Eggers, while Master Sgt. Tracy Williamson, team onto the base.



Michael Payne, foreground, joins the military worship team at Bagram Air Base after rehearsal.



Walking past a view of Kabul city basin, a woman wears tan-colored clothing, common because of the region's light-colored dust.

to entrust them into God's hands and to ask for His protection.

Robert, who has made countless trips to Afghanistan over the years, helped the team members blend in by the men growing their beards, the women wearing scarves, and the team driving in a common style of minivan in the country. The team also ministered to a group of foreign business-

men and women who are believers and are naturally building relationships with Afghan people. Robert added, "I see that God is bringing these people to reach those who are really seeking the truth." ➡

Note: Hungarian names are written with surname first.

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On a main thoroughfare in Kabul, a man carries dry goods in a basket.



Afghanistan borders Iran and Pakistan.



Team members distributed food and clothing and played with children at displacement camps for those forced from their homes by the Taliban. These children live in Kabul.