

SO ALL CAN HEAR

worldview

*Bought
by
Blood*

ALBANIA



Gaylon Wampler

On the cover Holding back the lace curtain serving as her front door, Bardha waves goodbye to AGWM missionaries Kurt and Stephanie Plagenhoef and Albanian pastors Tani and Anisa Ramaj.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

I believe I was in the third grade when Albania became more than a word on a map to me. Our teacher gave each of us a country on which to write a report with visual illustrations. I was assigned Albania.

In those pre-Wikipedia days, we had to dust off ancient books called encyclopedias! I hand-traced the map of Albania and glued it to poster board. I studied Albania’s history, culture and people. But what I remember vividly was a statement I read: “Albania is the most atheistic country in the world.”

That sentence has stuck with me all these years. As I have read the testimonies from AGWM missionaries serving there, I have cried over the lost and rejoiced that more and more Albanians are coming to Christ. I’ve never lived in Albania, never visited. But I’ve always cared for that nation.

Each month, WorldView magazine shares stories of nations where the gospel is making inroads. Some stories include powerful testimonies, while others present only the needs. Our AGWM Communications team prays that the words in each issue will grip the hearts of those who read.

I pray that a nation will catch your attention and will rise to the top of your prayer list so that someday you can look back and see God doing miracles in that very country.

What people group or country are you praying for? We would love to hear from you at worldview@agwm.org.

ANDY RAATZ
AGWM Communications director



Next Issue

- **Thailand:** The Akha people need a gospel witness.
- **Cuba:** Churches are multiplying despite opposition.



Bardha

B o u g h t

b y

B l o o d

ALBANIA

By Kristel Ringer Ortiz • Photographs by Gaylon Wampler

I
In Bardha’s world, vengeance is bought by blood. Her homeland, Albania, has a long history of war, the roots of ongoing conflicts dating back to the 1500s. A wealth of traditional folklore and dances tell the nation’s story, keeping alive both the good and bad. Revenge killings have been an accepted norm for centuries in accordance with the Law of Lek, a behavioral code named for its medieval author, Lek Dukagjini. →



Left Stephanie speaks, prays and weeps with Bardha.
Below Pastors Anisa and Tani Ramaj



*Jesus' blood
bought our
forgiveness,
not revenge.*

Yet the afternoon AGWM missionaries Kurt and Stephanie Plagenhoef and Albanian pastors Tani and Anisa Ramaj visit Bardha, she operates under another aspect of that ancient cultural law — that of sacrificial hospitality.

Though feeling unwell, Bardha draws back the lace curtain serving as her front door, welcoming in the guests. She serves glasses of juice from a small silver tray, and soon conversation flows.

Bardha has suffered much, including the death of her husband and the suicide of her young daughter. Yet her troubles are compounded by separation from surviving family members due to feuding.

With gentle boldness, Stephanie explains to Bardha that Jesus extends ultimate forgiveness to us, and requires that we in turn forgive those around us, whether or not they ask for it or choose to forgive us in return. Jesus' blood bought our forgiveness, not revenge. Though Bardha faithfully attends her local church, her skepticism of Stephanie's words is visible.

By the end of the discussion, Bardha has softened enough to allow Stephanie to pray with her. Stephanie prays that Jesus would give Bardha the knowledge of how to forgive and the desire to offer forgiveness to those with whom she is feuding. As the visitors exit Bardha's home into the fading afternoon, she flashes them a smile. →

War in Heaven and on Earth

Modern Albania overlaps part of ancient Illyria, where the apostle Paul preached during his missionary journeys in the first century A.D. He is said to have passed through the city of Durrës, in which a Roman amphitheater contains a small chapel marked by a crumbling fresco of the 12 apostles and a window to the arena where one could kneel to watch and pray as fellow Christians were thrown to wild animals.

A warrior named George Castriot Skanderbeg ruled Albania in the 1400s. Honored as a hero and national father to this day, Skanderbeg defended the then-Catholic nation against invading Ottoman (Turkish) Muslim forces for 25 years. His base of operations was a Roman-era fortress, now called Skanderbeg's Castle, atop a stony mountain in Krujë. But during the reign of Skanderbeg's successor, Lek Dukagjini, Albania fell to the Ottoman Empire and became a Muslim nation for 500 years.

From 1946 to 1991, communism laid hold, and Albania had the dismal reputation currently attributed to North Korea as the single most closed and isolated nation in the world.

To believe in God or to speak His name (even as a curse) was illegal, and the country was declared the world's first officially atheistic state.

During those dark decades, the Lord's war for Albania continued. Many in nearby Italy threw gospel messages in bottles into the

Adriatic Sea, hoping the bottles would reach Albania's western shores.

Calvin Olson, a veteran missionary to Southern Asia's Muslim nations, penned the account of a graphic spiritual battle he encountered beginning in January 1990 while he served in the United States with the Center for Ministry to Muslims (now Global Initiative). Throughout Calvin and Marian Olson's ministry, Calvin was led many times to fast and pray regarding burdens God placed on his heart. In 1990 he went on a prolonged fast for the nation of Albania. By March, his warring prayers for Albania's deliverance became so intense that he did not leave his apartment, could not sleep, and abstained even from water.

The battle climaxed one night when demonic powers filled Olson's room. "It was one of the most frightening experiences of my life," he wrote. "There was an immediate knowledge that these were the principalities that had ruled Albania, and they were angry that their power had been curtailed."

At last, he reported, "a holy boldness took over," and he commanded the spirits to leave.

"They then changed their tactics and tempted me to bow down to them. The temptation was one of the most powerful I had ever experienced. By using the Word once again, I told them that I only bow to Him who is Lord of lords. Defeated by our Lord, they had to leave."

Within months of Olson's battle, an experience reflective of the concerted prayers of Christians worldwide, communism in Albania crumbled, reopening doors long closed to the rest of the world. →

To believe in God or to speak His name was illegal, and the country was declared the world's first officially atheistic state.



Calvin and Marian Olson



Top left Skanderbeg Square in Tirana
Top right Elvis, a student at the Bible college and first-generation believer
Bottom right Mustafa, a retired judge with whom Kurt is building a friendship

*“There is a future.
Jesus is greater than every atrocity.”*

Greater Than Every Atrocity

It was to this broken, reeling nation that Kurt and Stephanie journeyed in 1995. Within their first six years of service, they witnessed four divisive wars in the Balkans, one of which tore Albania apart in 1997. In spite of this, they began planting a church in Fushe Kruja, a small city with a history of strong Islamic influence.

During neighboring Kosovo’s war with Serbia in 1998-99, they led a refugee camp serving more than 500 refugees, and also ministered among the thousands of Kosovar Albanians fleeing the horrors of ethnic cleansing.

The Plagenhoefs recall watching refugees streaming down Fushe Kruja’s main road. God then spoke to Kurt’s heart, instructing, *Get a place ready. I am sending you a people to take care of.*

Kurt and Stephanie asked the owners of an old communist warehouse if they could use the facility, and were granted permission. With the aid of some Albanian friends, they prepared overnight lodging and enough food for 50 people.

But by the end of the first night, 200 people had come to stay. “We just prayed and kept serving food,” Kurt and Stephanie remember, “and by the end of the night God miraculously multiplied the food, and all 200 were fed.”

From January through June 1999, the Plagenhoefs and around 70 other people — largely missionaries from different ministries in Southern Europe — partnered to care for the refugees. And each week, around 100 refugees attended the church plant.

It amazed the Plagenhoefs that refugees who were running from torture and maiming and rape at the hands of enemy soldiers who claimed a “Christian” heritage would attend a Christian church. “The real love of God broke through and enabled them to meet Christ,” Kurt says.

Stephanie says, “It was also incredible to see how Albanians in the community responded to the crisis. Refugees would come sit in the city center with nowhere to go, but you could be sure that by nightfall, every one of them would be invited into a nearby home. Such was



Above Stephanie, Joel and Kurt Plagenhoef
Opposite Shkelzen Topciu — whose last name translates to “cannonball firer” — belongs to a family who for 500 years have been caregivers of Skanderbeg’s Castle.

the culture of hospitality. Those poor Albanian families didn’t have much to offer, but they shared what they had.”

When the war ended and the refugees were adamant about returning home, Kurt and Stephanie drove displaced individuals back to Kosovo. Unwilling to forsake the people for whom they had come to care so deeply, the Plagenhoefs partnered with British missionaries to provide ongoing humanitarian aid and to oversee the establishment of the first evangelical church in Mitrovica, Kosovo — a city of 100,000 people (about 85,000 today) and a focal point in the conflict with Serbia.

At one point, Kurt found himself staring into the faces of a Kosovar mother and father whose two sons had been brutally tortured and killed by opposing soldiers, while their third son was forced to watch.

“I did not know what to say,” Kurt remembers. “There are no words for that kind of horror.”

Then the Holy Spirit whispered words of Scripture to him, *Where sin abounds, grace abounds more.*

“You have been greatly sinned against,” Kurt told the family. “I cannot know your pain. But I have good news for you. Because of Jesus, there is grace and hope for forgiveness and peace. There is a future. Jesus is greater than every atrocity.” →

Below Kurt visits with pastors across Albania, praying, counseling and teaching.



The Forging of a Fellowship

In 2003, Kurt led in the foundation of the Albania Assemblies of God, a partnership between the U.S. and Brazilian AG fellowships and Fida, a Finnish Pentecostal missions organization. Kurt was elected to serve as the first general superintendent.

“Building a national church movement from ground zero takes a lot of time,” he explains. “Discipleship and training are key. It’s been a joy to see Albanian ministers assume leadership of the movement.”

Now, Albanian believers carry three of the Albania AG’s top leadership roles, includ-

ing that of general superintendent. At their request, Kurt continues to serve as assistant superintendent. Thirteen congregations and 16 church plants make up the Albania Assemblies of God, and plans for many more churches are underway.

“My role now, along with Stephanie, is shepherding and encouraging the church planting movement,” Kurt says. “It has been a real privilege to walk this journey alongside these brothers and sisters, and we look forward to seeing them take even greater leadership.” →

“Building a national church movement from ground zero takes a lot of time. It’s been a joy to see Albanian ministers assume leadership of the movement.”

Gezim the Joyful

Gezim Spahija currently serves as pastor of an AG congregation in the ancient coastal city of Durrës, and also as general superintendent of the Albania AG.

“My grandfather was a Muslim imam,” Gezim says. “I was the youngest in a family of eight children. I had to fight for food to eat. If I was not fast enough, I did not eat. So as I grew, I worked to become successful. When Albania opened in 1991, I was working in the ports, watching boats full of Albanians fleeing in a mass exodus. I also watched foreigners pouring in. Some of them were missionaries.”

Shortly after the nation’s reopening to the world, Gezim opened a bar and became extremely successful. He also abused alcohol and dabbled with drugs.

One night, already very drunk, Gezim allowed a tall Brazilian stranger to use his bar’s photocopier (one of perhaps four in the entire city at that time). The man was a missionary who told Gezim about Jesus and left him the address of a church. It was the first time Gezim had heard the name of Jesus.

Over the ensuing weeks, Gezim continued to cross paths with the missionary, but avoided visiting the church, despite saying that he would. He was haunted by a question the missionary asked him the first time they met, upon hearing that the name Gezim means “joy.”

“Do you really have joy?”

One night, while working in the bar, Gezim was shaken to the core by another Voice.

Look around you. It is your fault that all these drunken people are in this condition.

Gezim began to swear and shake. The Voice came again. *This is your fault.*

Panicked, Gezim called out that the bar would be closing in 10 minutes. Customers were angry, so he allowed them to leave without paying.

Following this experience, Gezim finally went to the church his missionary acquaintance pastored. For weeks he dodged in and out, staying only for the messages. Yet one Sunday, he committed his life to Jesus.

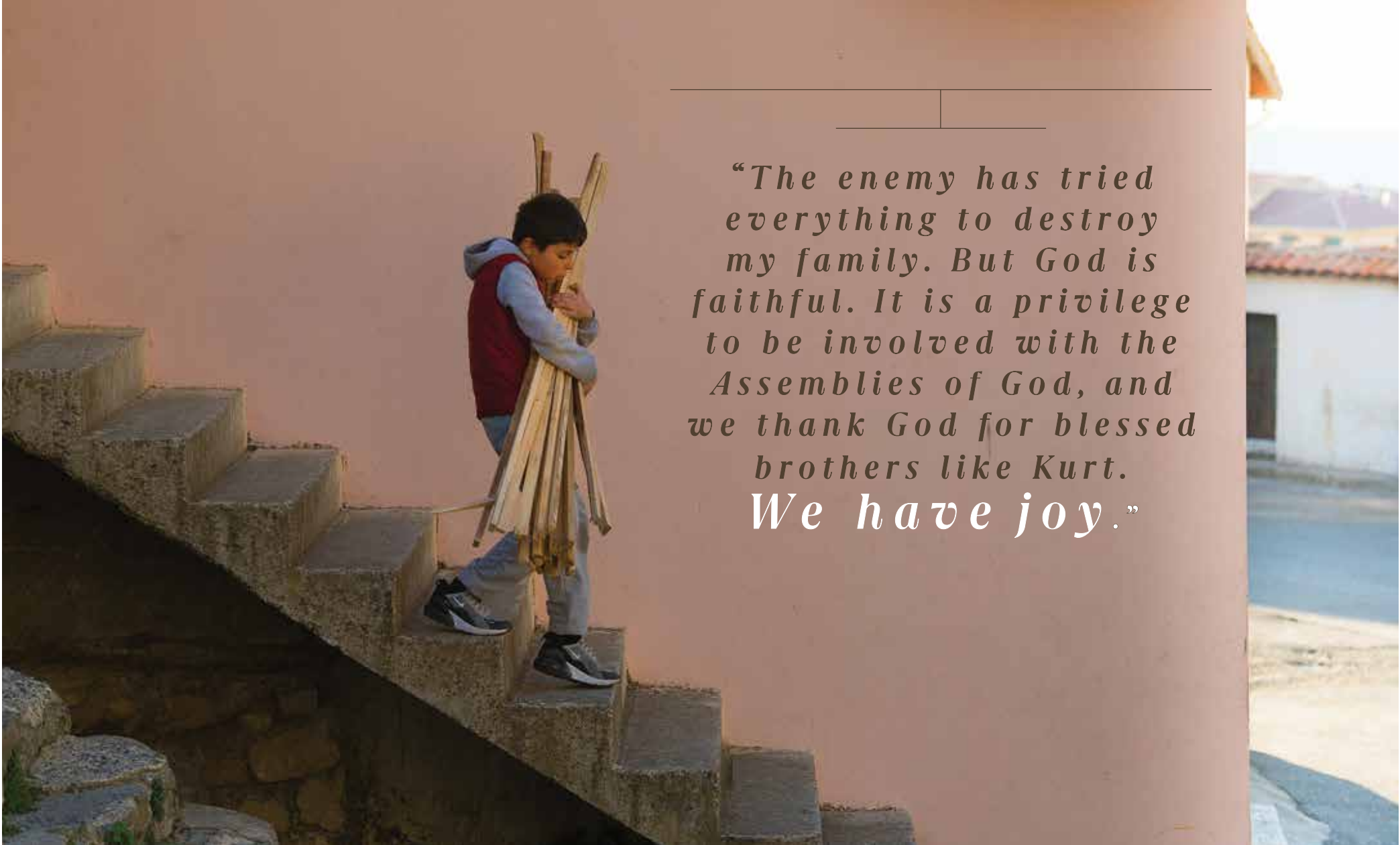
“I never left Christ’s way after that day,” he says. “But that day also began a battle with my family.”

Gezim’s wife, Arjana, struggled to accept his change of religion. His neighbors refused to speak to him, and his friends disappeared as his bar began to struggle. For a time following his decision to serve Christ, he kept working there; but he used the time to urge clients to give up drinking. “Even those who are drunk and addicted are within the Spirit’s reach,” he explains. “Even when in their lowest state.”

Finally, Gezim visited the home of the Brazilian missionary pastor and poured out his heart. Unbeknownst to him, the man had been praying for an Albanian co-worker to train up. Though it cut his income from \$300 per month to \$30, after six months of prayer Gezim left his other work to serve with the missionary.

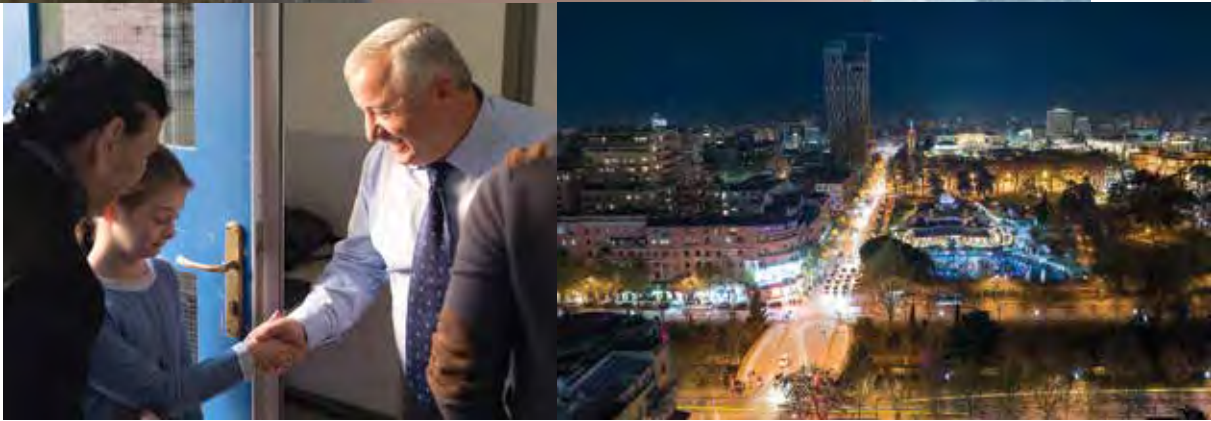
Around the same time, Arjana experienced a traumatic miscarriage. Their family blamed the condition on Gezim’s change of religion, but his pastor friend urged Gezim to pray for his wife.

After a failed operation performed by candlelight in a primitive facility, Arjana lay alone in bed, her belly dangerously swollen. Suddenly, she felt two hands reach into her belly, setting everything right and pressing with healing power upon the swelling.



Deep in her spirit, she knew they were the hands of the God to whom her husband had committed her. She stood up, proclaimed the name of Jesus, and gave her life to Him.

“My wife is a blessing,” Gezim says. “The enemy has tried everything to destroy my family. But God is faithful. It is a privilege to be involved with the Assemblies of God, and we thank God for blessed brothers like Kurt. We have joy.” →



Left Gezim Spahija visits with congregants.
Right Tirana at night

Below Pastor Genci Zeka shares his burden for Jesus to be personally and mightily known in Bathore.



Left Pastors Ergys and Eltjona Abazi with their young daughter



Silva

Equipped to Serve

In 2003, as the Albania AG took shape, the Plagenhoefs and several colleagues also spearheaded the establishment of Evangelical Theological College (ETC) in the capital city of Tirana.

“As church planters and leaders, we quickly realized that we could either plant churches one by one ourselves, or we could multiply ourselves and let churches be planted that much faster,” Kurt says. “So ETC was founded simultaneously with the Albania AG. It was the only school with Pentecostal curriculum in Albania. We have translated over 40 textbooks into Albanian.”

ETC is viewed as the hub of the Albania Assemblies of God; the trained leaders it produces are helping to ensure the church’s long-term growth.

The school emphasizes solid biblical and theological training, missions, and church planting, and has served students from all over the Balkans and the world. Yet for Kurt and Stephanie, its key focus remains equipping Albanians to serve in Albania.

Around the nation, the school’s graduates and even current students are doing just that.

In Burrel, Pastors Ergys and Eltjona Abazi lead Light Rays Church, carrying a vision to reach out to surrounding villages that have no gospel witness. They pray for unity among churches, provision for the area’s many poor, for chains of addiction to drugs, alcohol and pornography to be broken, and for cleansing from magic and superstition.

In Instituti, Pastors Miljard and Jessica Gosturani lead a congregation originally founded by another Brazilian missionary. In partnership with Carlos Valladares, a missionary from the El Salvador AG, the church runs a King’s Castle program. King’s Castle originated with AGWM missionaries Don and Terri Triplett in El Salvador and has spread across Latin America and the world. The Instituti chapter serves 50-60 children each week, many of whom come from areas where human trafficking has been a significant risk.

In Bathore, Pastors Genci and Ilda Zeka share their hearts while the Muslim call to prayer echoes up the street past their church. “In Albania, not many people want to live in Bathore,” they say. “There is poverty, unemployment is

around 70 percent, and many children come to our programs to escape the abuse of drunken fathers at home. But we believe God is going to change the reality here and that believers across the country will look to us as an example.”

“Our power is not in our speaking or our programs,” Genci continues. “The power is in Jesus. We visit the community members, and I ask them just to give me five minutes to pray in the name of Jesus for their families. We share the gospel in our prayers, and release His power.”

The blanket of faith that Genci and Ilda have laid over their community is bringing miraculous results. One churchgoer, Silva, was paralyzed, yet continued attending church as faithfully as she could. One night, a Man dressed in white appeared in her dreams.

“I saw no face, only a great light,” Silva says. “He told me to throw away my crutches and walk.”

At 1 a.m., Silva got out of bed and did just that. When her husband, a staunch communist, saw her, he replied, “I am going to work. When I get back at 6 o’clock, if you are still healed, then I will become a follower of Jesus too.” When he returned, Silva was up, having already prepared dinner. Her husband accepted Jesus, and the pair were soon baptized. In their home they now host a weekly cell group with Pastor Genci and Ilda. →



Pastors Ilda and Genci Zeka with their young son

“Our power is not in our speaking or our programs. The power is in Jesus.”

National to International

Similar to Genci's vision for Bathore in relationship to the rest of Albania, Kurt and Stephanie believe that Albania will be used by God to impact the Balkans and beyond in the Muslim world. They are praying about the foundation of an international training center comprised of missionaries from the U.S., Europe, and Latin America, that will train and strategically send multinational church planting teams into the Balkans.

"We dreamed and preached for years about Albania being a sending nation to other areas of the Balkans," the Plagenhoefs say. "Now Albanian church leaders have that vision too. They are organizing missions trips, while still working towards becoming fully indigenous and self-sustaining. Women being able to lead and contribute in significant ways is also a great victory in this very male-dominated society, where up to 80 percent of the women have suffered some form of abuse. The ministry here has truly gone from national to international. We are experiencing greater fruitfulness simultaneously with greater spiritual warfare."

In December 2013, Kurt was overwhelmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who left him with a specific promise: *Just like Joshua and Caleb in Canaan, I have given you the Balkans, and I am moving the mountains of the Balkans before you.*

"I had asked the Lord for the Balkans many times in prayer," Kurt says, "but this time God answered! It was a divine confirmation of God's promise, and we are moving forward in faith to possess these nations for His kingdom."

The key to fulfilling this promise, Stephanie explains, is long-term commitment to the call of God.

"Having a clear, undeniable call from God has kept us here through wars, spiritual warfare and many difficulties. We stay dependent on the Holy Spirit, and we fast and pray," she says. "The call has enabled us to persevere, and we have learned to be content in our context, though at



Bible school students minister in communities across the nation.



times that has meant suffering along with our brothers and sisters. Those who come to the Balkans must accept the culture and region for what it is."

She and Kurt rejoice in what they see in many ways as missions coming full circle in Albania. The 1990s, they say, were the decade of missionaries planting the church. The 2000s were a decade of training Albanians in practical ministry skills and spiritual depth. And the 2010s have proven to be a decade of national multiplication, in which the Albanian church is now doing what missionaries did in the 1990s — leading the church planting movement in their nation and beyond. →



Reconciled to God, Reconciled to Each Other

Kurt and Stephanie’s ministry has set profound precedents of friendship and partnership in Albania and far beyond. This is vital in a region where prejudice and division have run deep for centuries.

“In this part of the world, ethnicity is important in ways that are foreign to Americans,” Stephanie says. “People hold to it in a unique way. It takes great strength for them to let go of ethnic division and be reconciled to each other despite long histories of hostility.”


“People can’t be reconciled to each other until they are reconciled to God,” Kurt agrees. “First comes discipleship, and then once they are mature enough, they will be able to be reconciled to each other.”

They emphasize the importance of explaining Scripture, so that people understand that the cultures they are raised in are not excuses to behave in ways contrary to the Bible. “We all have to learn to lay down our ‘rights’ and submit to Christ’s culture,” Stephanie says. “We speak the truth and let the Holy Spirit convict. We do not debate. We go straight to the heart of human need — how to be free from spiritual bondage, guilt and shame.”

As the Holy Spirit’s conviction and grace bring about change, testimonies abound. Christ’s culture reigns in individual lives, such as in Mirdjan Gosturani, whose brother pastors Instituti Assembly of God. An Albanian Special Forces soldier, he was one of only 19 such soldiers able to pass a six-month training course with U.S. Navy SEALs. In a culture in which handling children is deemed women’s work, this accomplished man drives the church van around the neighborhood, picks up children for King’s Castle meetings, and gently plays with them on the church floor. He is willing to break cultural norms for the sake of Christ.

“In our early days, we learned that if we asked Albanians for directions, they didn’t want to just tell us the way,” Stephanie says. “They wanted to jump in the back of the car and show us. That was the law of Lek — the law of hospitality. They wanted to personally guide us to where we were going.”

Kurt and Stephanie understand. Their commitment is the same — not just to tell the way, but to show it.

And so today, a nation once one of the darkest on earth is becoming a nation full of light bought by the blood of Christ, and reconciled to Him. 

KRISTEL RINGER ORTIZ
AGWM Communications



Left Mirdjan Gosturani helps protect two neighborhood children whose drug-addicted father sets them out on the street each morning.



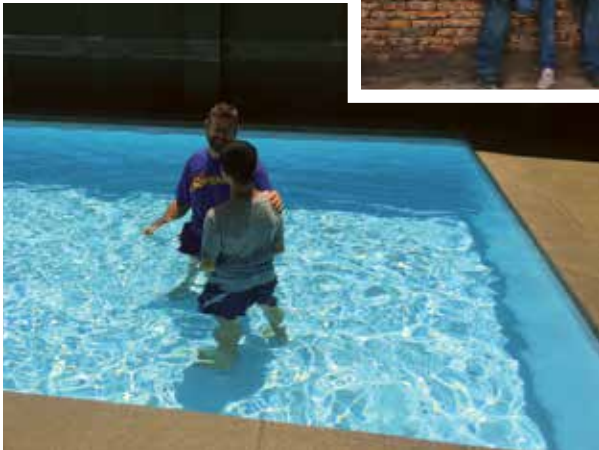
“We speak the truth and let the Holy Spirit convict. We do not debate. We go straight to the heart of human need — how to be free from spiritual bondage, guilt and shame.”

21 |

Your Move


Once completely closed to gospel, Albania is now wide open and the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully nationwide. This reflects a larger reality of the Balkan region, for many years off-limits to evangelism while under communist administration.

- Committed, intercessory prayer — even during the darkest and most seemingly hopeless times — is responsible for many breakthroughs in Albania. Prayer is needed to sustain the ongoing work across the Balkans. Pray for wisdom and protection for spiritual leaders, unity among believers, and provision for new churches. Pray that graduating classes of Bible school students will be used of God at key ministry locations. Pray that chains of deception and addiction will be broken and for an increased interest in Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and new life.
- Take advantage of open doors around you to connect with the lost. Such opportunities may be temporary. Be alert and look for simple ways you can offer Jesus to those around you.
- Consider joining a short-term missions outreach to the Balkans. Learn how you can serve alongside AGWM missionaries by visiting agwm.org/GO for a list of locations and opportunities.




Tim, Doris and their family

Indonesia NEW BELIEVERS BAPTIZED

Tim and Doris were the first AGWM cross-cultural ministers to live in the South Sulawesi region of Indonesia when they moved there in 2012. In 2017 they began pastoring an English church service at All Nations Fellowship. Followers of Islam from Indonesia and the Middle East have come to All Nations Fellowship, and many are hearing the gospel for the first time. For the past two years Tim and Doris have been praying that people in their congregation would profess Jesus as Savior and Lord. This year, the Lord has begun to answer those prayers: So far, Tim and Doris have baptized three former Muslims who have accepted Jesus as their Savior! Tim and Doris believe other Muslim visitors to their church will soon make a confession of faith, and they pray for the Lord’s empowerment as they disciple these new believers. 

Germany MIRACLES FOR REFUGEES

Maureen, AGWM missionary to Germany, has a burden for Syrian refugees who arrive in her city and are housed in crowded camps. Mohammed, a Syrian refugee whom Maureen has known for some time, shared with her that he had been living for three years in one camp and was desperate to get out. She immediately began praying, and asked her church to pray, that Jesus would help Mohammed find an apartment. The very next day, Mau-

reen received word that an apartment owner wanted to rent to refugees! A Syrian refugee family with children moved into the larger apartment, and Mohammed moved into their former dwelling, which was the perfect size for his needs. He thanked Maureen, who explained to him that the Person he should really thank is Jesus. Maureen later heard Mohammed speaking on the phone to his mother, who lives in Syria: “It is Jesus you should thank because He helped Maureen find this place!” Maureen is grateful for the practical yet profound ways in which Jesus shows refugees that He cares for them. 



Note: Names changed for security.

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Jesse Peters

Story provided by
Rick Lang/BGMC

Oksana sat in the snow in front of her tiny little house and cried. In a pen next to the house lay her only companion, a goat. It was dead.

An elderly lady, Oksana lived alone with no friends or family. All she had for company was her goat. The goat wasn’t just a companion to her — it was her only source of income. The goat had always provided her with milk for herself and for selling, so that she could have a little bit of money each month. And now the goat was dead.

Later that day, Oksana headed into the village. But she could not quiet the sorrow in her heart. Soon she found herself sitting on a park bench, crying.

A woman’s voice startled her. “Why are you crying?”

Oksana looked up. “Who are you?”

“I’m part of a team here to tell about Jesus,” a lady named Valentina answered.

Oksana shrugged. “What good is that to me? I am crying because my goat is dead. She was my only source of income. And now I have nothing. I don’t know what will happen to me.”

“We’d like to pray with you,” Valentina said. “Take us to your house.”

When they arrived, Valentina knelt down and prayed for the goat.

Suddenly, the little animal moved its head. Its legs twitched. Then it got up and ran around the yard!


Oksana gasped. “You brought my goat back from the dead!”

Valentina said, “Jesus cares for all creatures. He cares for that goat. But even more, He cares for you. He wants you to know that He loves you. He wants you to know that you can have eternal life if you give your heart to Him.”

“I want to know Jesus!” Oksana said. “I want to know the One who can bring my goat back from the dead and who loves me that much.”

Right there in the snow, Oksana prayed with Valentina, giving her heart and life to Jesus.

Pray for people like Oksana who have the opportunity to hear about Jesus for the first time because of missionaries around the world. Boys and Girls Missionary Challenge (BGMC) helps AGWM missionaries tell people about Jesus. You can help BGMC to reach them!

For more information on BGMC, visit bgmc.ag.org. 

OKSANA'S
GOAT!

Sponsored by



Faith Changes

Photographs by
Andy Raatz

Story by
Mindy Hines

Everything

Overcoming the collision of
fear, failure and futility

Why would a gifted pediatrician walk away from a growing practice in America to live in Africa? A young and successful church planter resign his thriving new church stateside and move his family to begin planting churches across the continent? An MIT-educated engineer commit to a life of service in African communities? A clinically trained psychologist give up potential prestige to live and minister in one of the most challenging places on planet Earth? →





It's a simple principle. Jesus called, and they answered. Each one of the people mentioned above *heard* the call of God — and now they are *doing* the will of God in Africa.

I am continually amazed by the capacity God has placed within His people to embrace and celebrate His call, even when missions work was not part of their original life plan. Only a handful of the missionaries I know were called to missions during childhood. All the other missionaries I know yielded their plans to God later in life. Today, they serve as missionaries around the world, often living in inconvenient, obscure places, working among people who have yet to respond to the gospel.

When God called our family to missions, I resisted for years. And by “resist,” I am not referring to a brief, polite push-back. It was more like a street fight. There were so many reasons I did not want to be a missionary. I proceeded to make a long list filled with my own rationales of why God should call others to be missionaries instead of us. As I reflect on the list I created (almost 20 years ago now), three main themes emerge. Fear topped the list, failure came in second, and futility followed close behind.



The beautiful truth is that God loves to shine His radiant light through flawed and broken vessels — just like me and like you.

Since childhood I have struggled with fear; the idea of taking our young children to Africa in the early 2000s felt terrifying to me. At that time in Africa, crime ran rampant and malaria and other tropical diseases posed additional threats to our family's health. I worried about everything from venomous snakes to inadequate education. But the fear that haunted me most anchored itself in a fundamental feeling of inadequacy. The missionary women I knew were pretty amazing people. I saw them as spiritual superheroes. I was certain they were braver, wiser and holier than I was. I measured my shortcomings against their strengths, and I always came up lacking.

Fear joined forces with failures from my past. An inner voice mocked, *Who do you think you are? What makes you think God would really call you?* The obvious truth is that I remain a flawed and broken vessel. The beautiful truth is that God loves to shine His radiant light through flawed and broken vessels — just like me and like you. Paul said, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7, NIV).

The final issue facing me was a sense of futility. The overwhelming needs in Africa were so great; my small contribution would seem to make very little difference. But when I consider more than 237 million people across Africa who still have no access to the gospel, I am compelled to do something. I am continually reminded that small things done in Jesus' name are always fruitful — never futile, especially in dark and unreached areas. →





Northern Cameroon is such a place. The need for missionary workers cannot be overstated. Cameroon sits nestled between Central African Republic and Nigeria, deep in the heart of Boko Haram territory. The area is home to people who are “inconveniently lost.” By faith, we believe God is calling a team of missionaries to serve in northern Cameroon.

If you were to visit a local village in the Adamawa region of Cameroon, you would soon notice the prominent visibility and pristine condition of the mosques. Each morning at 4:30, the call to prayer would awaken you from your sleep. If you were fortunate enough to get acquainted with one of the local Adamawan women, you would hear a story similar to Rafina’s (names changed in this story).

When she was only 12, Rafina’s mother and father married her to an older man, Hassan. Rafina is Hassan’s third wife. Hassan’s first wife, Califa, determines how and where Hassan spends time with his other wives and children. The assignment and division of household responsibilities fall under Califa’s jurisdiction. Rafina’s duties include carrying water, cooking, cleaning, and selling produce from the family garden on the roadside. Rafina’s relationship with Hassan resembles a sort of benevolent dictatorship; life is reasonably peaceful as long as Rafina does what Califa instructs her to do and remains open and available to Hassan. If Rafina resists, she will be disciplined harshly to bring her back into subjection. Rafina is currently 26 years old; so far, she has borne Hassan five children.

A.W. Tozer once said, “God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible. What a pity we plan to do only the things we can do ourselves.”

If you are like me, Rafina’s story causes righteous indignation to rise up and shout, “It’s not right! It’s not fair! She should be free.” But I would submit to you that the greatest injustice of Rafina’s young life has nothing to do with her parents, or with Hassan, or with Califa. The greatest injustice Rafina faces lies in the fact that nobody has ever shared the gospel with her, not even once. In places like northern Cameroon, Rafina is not unique. Her story could be repeated over and over again.


Penetrating a culture and context like Cameroon is impossible in our own strength. But God is dreaming a God-sized dream for northern Cameroon, and we believe that even now God is calling a team of missionaries to serve there.

A.W. Tozer once said, “God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible. What a pity we plan to do only the things we can do ourselves.”

Perhaps you sense the persistent nudge of the Holy Spirit calling you to carry the gospel into the unreached places of the world, and it seems like an impossible task. Perhaps your own reasons for resisting His call hold you back. Yet, in the quiet moments, as His call continues to echo in your spirit, you feel deep unease with the status quo. May I encourage you to lean into God’s call on your life? Stop resisting, hesitating, or holding back. Instead, trade your plans for God’s, and you will discover some of life’s sweetest treasures.

Until every man, woman, boy and girl knows they are loved and valued by God, our work remains undone. The gospel is only good news if it arrives in time. Our task remains unfinished in Africa and around the world.

Everything changes at that divine moment when our fears, failures and futility collide with faith in a God who cannot fail.

The choice is yours — will you answer His call? Rafina and millions of unreached people just like her are waiting. 

MINDY HINES
AGWM missionary to Southern Africa





Joyce Kitano

UNSUNG HERO

A HEART FOR JAPAN

Missionary to Japan Joyce Kitano firmly believes she is alive to see Japanese students transformed by the saving power of Jesus. “Life is a gift,” she says, and as someone currently battling two cancers, she speaks from experience.

On the day Joyce was born, her father prayed fervently for his wife and child when doctors discovered a tumor inside the womb that put mother and daughter in danger. Miraculously, both survived.

Born to a Japanese-American mother and Japanese father, Joyce grew up in Hawaii and then in the Philippines where her family served as missionaries. As a child she endured her classmates’ prejudice for her Asian heritage. “I hated the way I looked,” recalls Joyce. “I was the only Asian student in my class. I rejected my identity, and I really felt God couldn’t use someone like me.”

While in college, Joyce sensed God’s call to full-time ministry; she argued with God for four years as she pursued a pre-medical degree. “Finally, in the last semester of my senior year,” she remembers, “I said to God, ‘OK, I give You these puny little dreams to get Your big dream for my life.’ The minute I said that, it was like 10 tons fell off my shoulders. It was like I was set free.”


After earning a master’s degree in cross-cultural communications, Joyce served in Singapore for two years, teaching at the AG Bible school. When she arrived in Japan for a two-year term, she felt God call her to that nation. “For the first time, I could see the beauty in the Japanese culture, people, and nation,” she says. “God healed the wounds in my heart. He told me, ‘I want you to share My love with these precious Japanese people.’”

She returned to Japan as a fully appointed AGWM missionary in 1993. She launched Chi Alpha Japan in 1997 at the University of Tokyo, Japan’s premier university. The nation of Japan is less than 1 percent Christian, and the Japanese comprise the second-largest unreached people group in the world. Joyce notes that students are the most open to the gospel, though it takes them months or years to open their hearts to Jesus. “It’s important to understand that Japan has never really had a revival,” she says. “My team and I believe if we can see students saved, we can impact this nation.” Chi Alpha is now on 23 Japanese university campuses, but 2,000 universities remain without a Christian presence.

In addition to directing Chi Alpha Japan, Joyce also teaches at Central Bible College in Tokyo, serves on the National Youth Department and Foreign Missions Department of the Japan AG, and ministers in a local church.

In October of last year, doctors discovered a cancerous tumor in Joyce’s uterus. Upon further investigation, doctors discovered she also had breast cancer. In December, Joyce underwent surgery to remove the uterine tumor, and in January, she had another surgery to remove the breast cancer tumor.

“So many people around the world were praying for me,” Joyce says. “I knew if I died, I would go to heaven, and if I didn’t, then God had more for me in Japan that He needed me to do.”

As this issue goes to press, Joyce has finished chemotherapy and radiation and continues to serve in ministry. 

RENÉE GRIFFITH
AGWM Communications

Footprints

These days, a different kind of “footprint” is making headlines in environmental news stories — a “carbon footprint.” Your carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide emitted as a result of your energy use. Every time you drive a car, plug in a lamp, use an appliance, or fly on a plane, you take part in a carbon dioxide-emitting process. Vehicles and power-generating facilities emit tons of CO₂, and that gas traps heat in the atmosphere and contributes to pollution.

You don’t have to be a global-warming prophet of doom to believe that all of us have a responsibility to take care of God’s creation. So small “footprints” sound fine in principle.

But are there circumstances when our footprints should be big? Even huge? Yes.

Parents want their “footprint” of influence on their children’s lives to be massive. There are so many godly choices to make, and sinful choices to avoid.

Spouses want their “footprint” of love to be inescapable for each other. Wives and husbands should never have to wonder if they are loved extravagantly.


In fact, love footprints need to reach everyone else we meet. That’s God’s command, that’s been His example to us, and followers of Christ are called to take that very seriously.

Godly love points to another area of “footprinting” that applies to all followers of Christ. We’re all commanded to “go into the whole world and preach the good news” (Mark 16:15). We’re to tell everyone about the good news of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection in our behalf.

Many believers treat their “Mark 16:15 footprint” like their “carbon footprint.” They come and go at work or school or among friends and

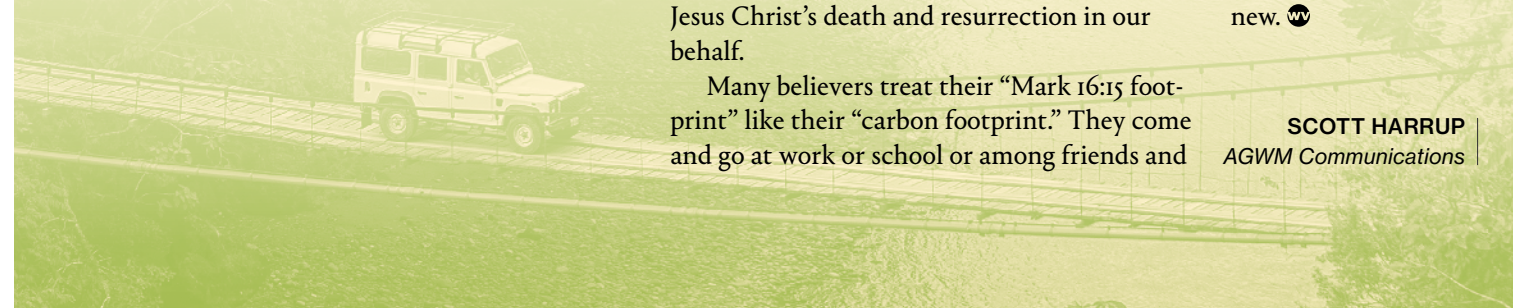
strangers, and leave little or any impression about the gospel’s life-transforming truth.

Ask yourself three very important questions: (1) Do the people around you know you are a follower of Christ? (2) Do they see that your relationship with Jesus shapes who you are and what you say and do? (3) Would they describe your life as one worth imitating, even if they do not yet have a relationship with Jesus?

A “Mark 16:15 footprint” keeps a lost world in focus at all times, looking for an open door to be involved in outreach far and wide. Pray faithfully for missionaries who are leaving gospel footprints around the world, give of your resources to help them expand their influence, and be listening to the voice of the Spirit for that moment when He might ask you to put your footprint somewhere new. 

SCOTT HARRUP
AGWM Communications

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