

ECMI 2019 Trip to Bulgaria

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From August 2-11, team members from National Presbyterian, Vienna Presbyterian, and two other churches traveled to Burgas, Bulgaria in support of the EMCI work among Roma communities there. Vienna Presbyterian offered spaces on their team for NPC to join, and Howard and Deborah were able to participate. Vienna and National have supported ECMI for many years but had not traveled together on a mission trip, so this trip was an appealing opportunity to collaborate.

Team members transited Bulgaria's capital Sofia in route to Burgas, a city on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, where ECMI's Bulgaria team is based. Project lead in Burgas is ECMI/New Hope country director Dimitrie Todorov, assisted by Simeon Krastev of Hope for the Balkans. Simeon is volunteer senior pastor of the Evangelical Christian Church, Dolno Ezerovo, where Dimitrie assists as a volunteer pastor.

The principal work of the trip was evangelism in four Roma communities in the Burgas area. The team met in the morning with the pastor at the church of the Roma community, and after being paired with an interpreter and church member guide, went out to talk with community members. Sometimes there was one, sometimes two Americans per group, and usually four-six groups total. The church member guide played an important role in leading the team to places in the community where the visitors could meet people.

Team lead Jim Jeffrey gave the training and providing several aids to evangelism which the NPC participants found valuable. One was the EvangeCube, with which one could give the Gospel message to someone with illustrations on a cube which unfolds. This tool is especially useful for children but enhances the message for adults as well. Another tool was "May I ask you a question?," which provides a useful approach for beginning a presentation of the Gospel message with strangers.

The "L-F-R-M" approach Jim suggested was helpful as well for starting these conversations. In this mnemonic, "L" means one initiates a conversation introducing oneself and asking about the other person and his/her life. "F" means one asks about the other person's family and shares about one's own. "R" means one asks about what the other person enjoys for recreation and shares one's own interests. "M" means that one finally introduces the Gospel Message. Using these questions to build a bit of a relationship before beginning a Gospel presentation both NPC participants found valuable.

When the group was in Bulgaria, on many occasions, the church member guide brought the small group to the home of church members, where after a discussion about the person's family and prayer needs, the Americans prayed for the needs of the family. In the evenings, the American team would return to the church in the community where they had been in the morning to participate in a worship service, giving their testimonies, singing, and talking about effective approaches to evangelism (such talks were normally provided by team lead Jim Jeffrey). The general schedule for the week was as follows:

-- Sunday evening, August 4 – Sredets community: the group assisted in the worship of the Sredets community church. The ECMI Bulgaria team has a feeding program for the children at this church, as they often don't receive nutritious meals at home.

-- Monday, August 5, - Gorno Ezerovo community: Evangelical Methodist Church; Pastor: Reverend Toshko Todorov. Monday evening the group assisted in the worship of the Pentecostal "Light" Church in Pomoriye, Pastor Jordan Atanasov. This church has a very active outreach to children. There were 80-100 children gathered at the church when the visiting team arrived, and a children's ministry leader at the church went through Bible stories and a quiz based on Child Evangelism Fellowship materials.

The group of children enthusiastically recited Bible verses and sang well-known Gospel-oriented children's songs. Howard, Debbie, and other team members provided greetings and short presentations to the children. The children expressed an interest in a connection with children in a US church if that were possible. The children thanked the team members for the treats of bananas and cookies the group brought (see the photo of Howard and Debbie among the other photos on the main web page for the trip.)

The ECMI Bulgaria team, when funds permit, has a feeding program for the children at this church. The ECMI team provides a nutritious meal for 150 children on Saturdays for about 30 cents a child, or about \$200/mo.

-- Tuesday, August 6, Kableschkovo community: Nadezhda Church; Pastor Daniel Ivanov. For the evening ministry, the group returned to this church.

-- Wednesday, August 7, Pomoriye community: "Evangelical Church Pomoriye"; Pastor Dimitar "Mitko" Hristov. For the evening ministry, the group returned to this church.

-- Thursday, August 8, Kosharitsa community: "Evangelical Pentecostal Church – Orizade"; Pastor Angel Mikhailov. For its evening ministry, the group returned to this church.

-- Friday, August 9, Dolno Ezerovo community: "Evangelical Christian Church Dolno Ezerovo"; Pastors Simeon Krastev and Dimitrie Todorov. The group witnessed to people in the neighborhood during the morning, then returned in the evening where team member and clinical psychologist Megan Gerbracht gave a program on anti-trafficking theme to about 15 pastors and their wives. She provided this program jointly with Dr. Rositsa Yanava, also a clinical psychologist and secretary of the Burgas Local Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. Dr. Yanava has been working on the trafficking issue for about ten years and expressed the city's interest in cooperating with the pastors in their anti-trafficking efforts.

-- Saturday, August 10 -- the group visited the UNESCO World Heritage Site Nessebar and enjoyed a dinner and the hospitality of the Todorov family at their home.

-- Sunday, August 11 -- the group assisted with the worship service at the Dolno Ezerovo church, then traveled back to Sofia. That evening, the group met with two Iranians Akhmed and Sami, along Akhmed's wife Saba and their child. The three had fled Iran in 2018 after years of persecution as Christians. The ECMI team had met them at the refugee center near Haskovo in the south, where the team cooperates with a church community in refugee outreach. The group was very interested to hear the stories of faith of these Christians and others in Iran. The two men had found work in Sofia, and they and Saba were participating in a church in Sofia.

During the week Megan Gerbracht and clinical psychologist Deborah Cole met with Dr. Yanava and her assistant at their office to discuss anti-trafficking activities. Megan and Deborah also spoke to representatives from Daughters of Bulgaria, an evangelical Presbyterian group dedicated to the challenging work of helping recover women from sex trafficking in Bulgaria.

NPC participants considered the trip successful. Team lead Jim Jeffrey estimated that about 100 members of the Burgas Roma community became believers during the week of the team's visit, and the respective church community pastors and members will follow up with those people to provide spiritual nurture. NPC participants considered valuable the opportunity to partner with VPC, and team lead Jim indicated on several occasions that he appreciated having NPC participation.

Respectfully submitted,

Howard Tucker-Frost

Appendix – Photos and Trip Details



Team leader Jim gives a missionary talk at the Sredets church



Pastor at Sredets Church prepares a message for the evening service.

Monday: Gorno Ezerovo, Evangelical Methodist Church; Pentecostal "Light" Church in Pomoriye



Preparing to go out to the community at Gorno Ezerovo.



Sharing about Jesus with a local businessman and his family.

Tuesday: Kableshekovo, Nadezhda Church



The team regularly prayed with Christian families in neighborhood, with the sick and distressed.



During the evening worship services, host Simeon Krastev would interview team lead Jim Jeffrey on strategies for good evangelism. These talk were designed to encourage local church members and pastors in their own evangelism.

Wednesday: Pomoriye, “Evangelical Church Pomoriye”



Some team members committed to helping Irina, member of the Pomoriye church, with a series of kidney operations she would need to have. The surgeries were possible because of this support.



Team member Joni Jorge (left) gives his testimony about his life and his parents as refugees from Cuba in the 1990s. His parents are church planters, and he has a strong gift for evangelism.

Thursday: Kosharitsa, "Evangelical Pentecostal Church – Orizade"



Team members prayed for Chrisanka, a church member whose son Simeon and daughter-in-law Zharna were having marital difficulties in Burgas.



Debbie gives her testimony at the Orizade Church about becoming a Christian at university

Friday, Sunday: Dolno Ezerovo community



The group talked about spiritual issues with these two ladies who went regularly to a local Orthodox church but said they were not very interested in spiritual topics.



Megan in her talk discussed factors affecting trafficking from the standpoint of the victim, the perpetrator and the Christian community. Dimitie interpreted.



The anti-trafficking dinner at the Dolno Ezerovo Church was well attended—about 15 pastors and their wives from Roma and non-Roma churches. Hopefully they will be able to use effectively the teaching materials local anti-trafficking office offered



Dr. Rositsa Yanava, psychologist and secretary of the Burgas Local Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. Dr. Yanava indicated the local government would be interested to work with Roma and non-Roma churches on anti-trafficking initiatives.



Megan, Howard, and Mike Doak provide a musical contribution during worship at the Dolno Ezerovo Church on the team's final Sunday in Bulgaria.



Team members Jim Jeffrey, Mike Doak, Megan Gerbracht, Howard Tucker-Frost, Deborah Cole, Joni Jorge, and Simeon Krastev pose at St. Sophia church, Nessebar.



Team leader Jim Jeffrey (left) and interpreter Simeon Krastev (right) give a message at the Dolno Ezerovo church on sharing the Gospel.



Debbie, Dimitrie, and Howard have dinner in Sofia with two local Christians, Destiny (left), an immigrant from South Africa and Ruthyana (right) an immigrant from Kenya studying for her MBA.