

*"...All the way around  
to Illyricum, I have  
fully proclaimed the  
gospel of Christ."*

*- Paul, Romans 15:19*

*A History of the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Mission to the  
People of Albania*

*By  
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## **Albania's Religious Past:**

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod may have been one of the first Lutheran churches to step foot in Albania, but they were certainly not the first Christians. Albania, on the ancient Via Ignatia, is the ancient Illyricum through which Paul said he traveled as he sought to convert the Greek world through the powerful Gospel of Christ. Said Paul, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

God must have worked wonders through Paul in Illyricum because for the next 1,400 years the land of Albania remained primarily Christian. After the Eastern and Western Churches split in 1052 AD, northern Albania retained its Roman Catholic ties while the southern regions became Greek Orthodox. In the fifteenth century however, Islam was introduced into the land through Islamic Ottoman military conquest. The 500 ensuing years saw a gradual shift in the population, especially in the south, converting to Islam. However, while Christianity lost its position as the de facto religion of Albania during this time, Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy continued to be practiced.

However, every one of these religions was dealt a severe blow when in 1967, under the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (pronounced **Hoe-juh**), Albania became the world's first officially atheistic state. To be sure, all strains of religion continued to be practiced in secret, but nevertheless, many Albanians forgot their religion and became what one might call nominally religious, superstitious, and materialistic.

Thanks be to God, this state of affairs would end with the fall of communism in 1991. The ensuing democracy that was created allowed for the practice of religion.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan. (Romans 15:19)

### **The WELS Comes to Albania:**

The following story about the origins of the Albanian Mission is told by one of the first WELS missionaries in Albania, Pastor Richard Russow:

Before the fall of communism in Albania, on August 31, 1990, Robert Maurem, a WELS member in Kenosha, Wisconsin, received a letter from a relative, Hëna Selmani, whom he didn't even know about in Albania. Robert's father was an Albanian and his mother was German and the two of them had learned English as a way of communicating with each other. However, their son Robert knew neither German nor Albanian.

The letter was addressed to both his deceased father and himself. Robert considers it a miracle that the letter even arrived at all. The street address was wrong, but it was sent to "Kenosha, Wisconsin, USA," and he was the only Maurem in the phone book. He was not going to pick up the letter from the post office. In fact, the post office called three times before he actually let his curiosity about the stamp lead him to get the letter. Since the letter was written in Albanian, he had to look for someone to translate it for him. He eventually found a local ethnic Albanian immigrant from Macedonia. This man was also the Imam (the leader of a mosque) in Kenosha. God used this unbeliever to help open the door to the WELS mission work in Albania. After having his letter translated, Robert began corresponding with his relatives. After some correspondence, Robert noticed that his relatives were saying that they were praying for him. He asked and found out that they were Muslims. Robert then told them to stop praying to their false god. He also began sending Christian, Sunday school type material to them.

In the course of time, Robert contacted his pastor who in turn contacted the Synod offices and asked if missionaries could contact Robert's relatives. The WELS Board for World Missions (BWM) asked the Committee for Mission Expansion (CME) and the WELS missionaries in Bulgaria to make the contacts.

The initial mission visit to Albania was made March 26 through March 28, 1995. Those making the trip included Mission Coordinator for Bulgaria, Pastor Kirby Spevacek, Publications Coordinator, Pastor Harold Essmann, and teacher Robert Dusseau, who was serving as a missionary in Bulgaria. Contacts were made in the Albanian cities of Durrës, Kavajë, Tiranë and especially Korçë. In all about 11 baptisms were conducted on that first visit. These people had become Christians by studying the Christian materials sent to them by Robert Maurem.

After the blessing of this first visit, a more thorough evaluation of the mission potential in Albania was authorized by the CME and the BWM. This mission exploration was carried out by Missionary Kirby Spevacek (Bulgaria), and Pastors Don Fastenau and Harold Essmann. The survey was conducted from October 2 through October 13, 1995. This visit took place immediately following a Slavic Conference in Bulgaria, so that Pastor and Mrs. Stephen Valleskey and BWM Administrator Duane Tomhave could also be present for several days in Albania.

The mission exploratory team conducted several journeys to Albania that year, during which time they traveled to several Albanian cities: Skodra in the north, the capital Tirana, the main Albanian port city, Durres, and Kavaja, a city near Durres. It was on this visit that registration for the Lutheran Church in Albania was begun. It was first registered as a foundation, since registration as a Church was nearly impossible at

that time. Mr. David Allen, a Christian, a lawyer and a British citizen residing in Tiranë, assisted in this registration.

Soon after this first visit, the exploratory team also traveled to Pogradec (in south-eastern Albania) and Korça (also in south-eastern Albania). God blessed this visit, and six children were baptized in Korça. Soon after this trip, another was made to the city of Vlora on the shores of the Adriatic.

The exploratory team recommended sending full time missionaries, and the CME forwarded this recommendation to the BWM. Until the missionaries could arrive in Albania, Bible studies were sent to over forty addresses in Albania. Periodic visits were also arranged. During these visits by the missionaries from Bulgaria, contacts were made with people in five cities of Albania: Durrës, Tiranë, Kavajë, Pogradec, and Korçë. It was during these visits that contact was made with Vitori Meçe, an English teacher who served as a translator for the missionaries in Durrës. By the grace of God working through his Word and people, Vitori and her husband Agron soon became stalwarts of the Lutheran church in Albania. The missionaries also made contact with another English speaker, a teenage girl in Korçë, Helda Shyti. Helda acted as the missionaries' interpreter while they were in Korçë. On a May, 1995 trip to Albania, Missionary Spevacek and Missionary John Roebke traveled from Sofia, Bulgaria to Pogradec, Albania and made contact with Flora and Clement Mato. During the winter of 1995, Missionaries Kirby Spevacek and Eric Verstein also made a visit to the cities of Durrës and Korçë. The missionaries conducted Bible lessons with the adults and Sunday school lessons with the children.

In March and April of 1996 Missionaries Kirby Spevacek and Arno Wolfgramm visited Albania from Bulgaria. With the help of lawyer David Allen, they drew up the required documents to legally register Kisha Ungjillore Konfessionale Luteriane në Shqipëri (the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church in Albania) with the government. Missionaries Spevacek and Wolfgramm signed the document along with Agron Meçe, from Durrës, and Durrim Shyti, from Korçë. In June of 1996 Missionary Roebke and his wife Nancy, continued the visits with the WELS contacts in Albania.

In June of 1996 Richard Russow, pastor of Salem Ev. Lutheran Church in Sturgeon Bay, WI, was called to be a missionary to Albania. He accepted that Call in August of 1996. Missionary Kirby Spevacek from Bulgaria accepted the Call in September of 1996 to be the other missionary to Albania. The Spevacek family, Kirby, Audrey and daughter Roxanne, moved to Albania toward the end of November 1996, and the Russow family, Richard, Karla and Caleb, moved there in early December.<sup>2</sup>

### **Living in Albania**

The Spevacek family (Kirby, Audrey and daughter Roxanne) moved to Albania toward the end of November 1996, and the Russow family (Richard, Karla and Caleb) moved there in early December 1996. Both families resided in Durres, a port city on the Adriatic, at that time about a hour's drive from the capitol city, Tirana.

Life in the poorest country in Eastern Europe proved both interesting and difficult for these two families. Russow described his first impression. "The Alps and Adriatic were a

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<sup>2</sup> This is a conglomeration of various documents, including a personal journal, produced by Pastor Richard Russow. The documents have been compiled and edited by this author.

beautiful site to see. But the Tirana airport is something else. It has one runway made from tiles. There is grass growing in the cracks. The grass along the runway is waist high...”<sup>3</sup>

The amenities for the missionaries took some getting used to. Water only ran for forty-five minutes a day. Someone needed to fill a big tub in their house and use this and the reserve tank mounted above the house for water all day. The missionaries’ homes did not have central heat, which is not a problem for most of the year, but during the winter months when temperatures can dip into the 30’s, this can be somewhat difficult. The tile floors in all the homes make for a cold winter on the feet. Power outages were also very common. Since Albania’s power comes primarily from two huge hydro-electric dams in the northern part of the country, when there is little rain, there is little electricity. Additionally, Albania’s government, despite its problems with black and brown-outs would sometimes sell electricity to neighboring countries in order to provide itself with a source of income.

While some living conditions were difficult, life in Albania also had a lighter side. Fresh vegetables and fruits were abundant and quite flavorful. A later WELS kingdom worker, Josh Odell, was amazed when he first went to a market and discovered one of his favorite foods, olives, for sale at about \$3.00/kilogram! There were so many that there were multiple vendors selling their olives out of 50 gallon trashcans!

There were some cultural difficulties for the missionaries. It was somewhat of a shock for Roxanne Spevacek and Karla Russow, the wives of the Lutheran missionaries, to discover how much of a male-dominated society Albania actually is. Later WELS Kingdom worker women discovered the same thing. Women are expected to cook for men, clean for them, and serve them in every way possible. During the early years of the WELS mission, Roxanne and

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<sup>3</sup> Russow’s personal journal, Dec. 4, 1996

Karla were even expected to stand in separate lines for women at stores while men were served first.

The missionaries also faced civil difficulties. In the first days of the mission, Albania's government was very weak. This daily showed itself in the dangerous situation on the roads. Most drivers had only been practicing their driving skills for about five years since during communism all private cars had been outlawed, this is, unless one was a politician. This general lack of driving skills combined with a weak government meant that as one stepped onto a sidewalk or into a car, one was taking his life into his hands. Said Russow, "Heaven help the pedestrian who is minding his own business and a car wants you to move so he can park where one is supposed to walk."<sup>4</sup>

Lawlessness in those early years of the mission did not just show itself in traffic, however. There was a serious problem with corruption at all levels of government in Albania. This especially showed itself when Pastor Russow tried to get his main shipment of all his family's belongings from America. The shipment was packed on September 25 in the U.S. and was not received by the Russow's until January 25! This fiasco was partially due to the red tape of Albania's government. However Russow was also quite sure that it was also due to the fact that those delivering and holding the shipment at customs hoped that by causing as much delay as possible they may earn themselves a bribe in order to get matters moving along more quickly.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Missionaries Get to Work**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Dec. 5, 1996

<sup>5</sup> The full account of this story and the missionaries' thoughts on it can be found in Russow's journal, see especially Jan. 24, 25.



On December 8, 1996 the first worship service was held in the Russow family apartment in Durres. That day there were a total of 22 souls in worship and 15 in Sunday school. Pastor Spevacek preached and Vitori Mece translated. The very next Sunday, worship was held in the new Church Information Center (CIC), a large rented room that was to be dedicated to the mission of the Lutheran Church in Durres. That Sunday there were also four baptisms.

Worship services were held every week in the CIC and averaged an attendance of 22 souls in worship. These worship services were conducted by Pastors Spevacek and Russow and were translated into Albanian by Vitori Mece. Sunday school was also conducted every week, and it averaged about two-thirds the attendance of the services. The missionaries also conducted Bible information classes to a small number of people in Durres. During this time Vitori Mece also conducted English as a Foreign Language classes at the CIC.

The original plan of Missionaries Spevacek and Russow was for Spevacek to remain in Durres and work with Agron and Vitori Mece to minister to the souls there. Russow was to eventually, after his language training was completed, move to the southern Albanian city of Korça and minister to the WELS contacts there (those relatives of Robert Maurem and their friends who had been converted by the Spirit working through the materials that Maurem had sent).

Before such a move could take place however, the missionaries needed to learn the Albanian language. This would not be a very quick task. Albanian is a very difficult language to learn; some say it is the most difficult in Europe. This is because Albanian is a very ancient language. It remains relatively unchanged since Biblical times and reflects a structure similar to that of ancient Greek or Latin. It is a highly grammatical language, so one must not only

memorize many words, but also a highly complex grammar system. (For example, Albanian has nine different moods for verbs!)

However, while the missionaries began to learn the language and serve the church in Durres, they did not leave the believers in Korça and Pogradec without a shepherd. Visits were conducted to these areas on a regular basis. In addition to these visits, the missionaries continued to send Christian literature to the families in Korça and Pogradec.

During this period, Russow and Spevacek also used funds from the WELS Committee on Relief to provide humanitarian aid to needy members of the churches.

### **Abort Mission!**

In the early and even late 1990's Albanians—who had lived under communism for fifty years—could not be considered very money savvy. They made for easy targets by swindlers. Therefore, during the early to mid 1990's, various sorts of pyramid schemes began popping up around the country. These classic Ponzi-type schemes paid off their first investors with record earnings, prompting word to spread around the country. Most of the Albanian public invested in the schemes. Some invested their entire life savings. But as always happens, the schemes eventually collapsed.

During the rise of the schemes, the government of Albania did issue some warnings about the dangers of investing in them, but these warnings were also accompanied by leaders of the schemes being seen at official government functions and even with the current president of Albania, Sali Berisha.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Elbirt, Carlos. *Transition Newsletter: The Newsletter about Reforming Economies: Albania under the Shadow of the Pyramids*. 2001: The World Bank Group. URL: <http://www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/trans/so97/albania2.htm>

After the collapse of the pyramid schemes, Albanians were outraged. They were furious that the government had not strongly opposed the schemes, and rumors began to spread that the government had actually been behind the schemes all along. People began protesting. Clashes with police broke out. Over the course of a couple of months, the violence and strife between police and protestors reached a climax when police shot some civilians and then protestors broke into a government armory and stole the weapons. Using those weapons, the rebels began to overrun other armories. Bands of raiding parties were formed. Some of these bands took over towns. Some burned government buildings. Eventually, the country was thrown into total anarchy. Order was not restored until foreign forces intervened militarily.

The uprising had begun in southern Albania, prompting the missionaries to postpone planned trips to Korça and Pogradec, but not immediately prompting them to evacuate the country. However, in March of 1997, the civil unrest finally reached Durres, prompting the missionaries to catch the first ferry possible from Durres to Italy. However, when they got to the dock, they were sorely disappointed. The following excerpt from Missionary Russow's journal tells the story in its entirety:

We ran for the ferry, but it was pulling out. We found out later that it never docked to let off or take on passengers. We looked around the harbor and boats were pulling away from the dock, some without even untying their moorings—they just cut the ropes. We watched with sadness as the ferry slowly pulled away. After standing and watching the ferry for a few minutes, we all gathered along the East wall of the port. There were 4 - 6 policemen around us. They had the Albanians and the foreigners separate. The police stood watch around us. We sat there for a while. Audrey got out some sandwiches and

distributed them. I refused anything. Karla fed Caleb. We gave a hat to another couple for their baby. The little girl's parents were of mixed nationalities - the father is an American who is a missionary; the mother is an Albanian national. Around noon we heard the first shots ring out. They were coming from the hills to the West - from up near the king's palace. The Albanian mother became hysterical. After some more shooting from that direction, the police had all of us move to the west wall. As we ran, more shots rang out. The Albanian mother was carrying her child and a duffel bag. She stopped to cry hysterically about half way over. I consolidated the bags I was carrying to urge her on. I also took one handle of the duffel to help her carry it. When she stopped again to cry, I took the entire bag and urged her on. I noticed that a policeman was helping Karla over. We finally made it over. We huddled around two Land Rover vehicles. Both of them were with people connected to the AEP (an Evangelical Missionary Society). One of them had a radio on board. One of the vehicles was pretty new, worth about \$40,000. They were going to drive the vehicles on the ferry and take them over to Italy, but they too were disappointed. We spent the afternoon huddled close to the wall. Although we could hear shooting in the distance, at least I didn't feel I was in danger. The police were still sticking around. However, each time I looked they were further away. One hundred or so foreigners were gathered around us. There weren't too many Albanians at the time. But more foreigners and Albanians kept arriving all the time. The AEP people were on the radio speaking to people on the outside to contact the embassy - any embassy: American, Italian, etc. to try to get the ferry to turn around. But, if the ferry would dock without police or military protection, it would be overrun with Albanians. By now we had been on the dock for several hours, and the call of nature was being felt by everyone.

There was a bathroom along the west wall, but all the stalls were locked. The door to the bathroom was open, but the stalls were locked. People solved their dilemma by urinating and defecating on the floor of the bathroom. That is until Kirby could no longer control his urge. As he went in the bathroom, he saw a man urinating in the sink...

When I went into the bathroom, the toilet was already filling up. There was no water to flush the toilet. By now there were at least 500 people on the dock. At 4:30 more foreigners arrived from the British and Italians. We heard reports that one American woman was shot in the head. It was a stray bullet and a flesh wound. We could hear people shooting all around us now. At about 6:30 we saw helicopters go back and forth from an area further up the coast. We found out later that at this time the Italians didn't know we were on the dock or our situation. The information hadn't been passed on properly. As more Albanians gathered on the dock, they became very bold. Since all the police were gone by now, they started to loot and steal. They broke into the semi-trailers on the dock. The first had Italian pastries in it. Another had electronics. Kirby saw one guy sitting near us with a computer. I joked to him that maybe we could get his computer today anyway, since we were supposed to have gone to Tirana to look at computers again, along with other things, today. Some trucks came in and quickly backed up and drove away with the trailers. Some were still full; others empty. I hope that they were the owners or drivers of trailers who took them away. But one can't know for sure. Agron showed up again on the dock to look after us. The looters started stealing the vehicles on the dock. They even stole a cement truck. With this they broke down the gate, allowing more people on the dock. Audrey shared the sandwiches she brought along. Karla fed Caleb. I had nothing. I wasn't hungry. I did take some water.

The American woman who was shot was brought in. She sat in one of the trucks. She seemed to be not that badly off, yet I would not have liked to be in her place. Even though the bullets were still being shot, I sat down and read some of my Tom Clancy novel. Around five o'clock Agron left, but said he would be back. The looters broke into the customs offices. People were wearing the ugly green uniforms of the customs officers. Even one beggar whom we had seen on the street corners wore a uniform. The AEP people were giving out information periodically about our rescue. They were to come at 7:30 p.m. That time came and went. We gathered together and sang some hymns. The AEP people got together to do the same. A TV camera captured the AEP singing. The Albanians started to burn things to keep warm. At first they just burned the cardboard from the looted boxes. Then they got wood from somewhere. Karla secured some of the cardboard for us to lay on. It helped to keep us warm. The Albanians also burned the inserts of shoes which had been looted. Those really stank. We stayed in our little place until about 10:00 p.m. We heard that the Italians were coming at about 11:00 p.m. We moved around the AEP people, because they said that the Italians would take out their citizens first. Then they would remove the other foreign nationals. We were to identify ourselves by sitting on the ground. At about 11:30 p.m. the Italian marines came with 3 landing craft. The marines set up a perimeter. The problem was that they had too few soldiers. They had about 20 marines to hold off hundreds of Albanians. The funny thing I noticed was that when the Italians showed up, the custom uniforms came off, some burned. The Italians went first, along with the injured woman. The Italians were behind us. So, when they left, we were left out by ourselves. The Spevacek's and we were like a little peninsula, with Karla, Caleb and I at the end. While the Italians were

loading, Albanians were jumping in the boats. AK-47's were being shot in the air close by. One nut even ran up behind the crowd of Albanians and shot his gun through his jacket sleeve into the air to intimidate the Italians. He is lucky that he wasn't shot! The Albanians were crowding the Italian soldiers. One concussion grenade was thrown. This dispersed the crowd while the Italians were being loaded. The crowd reformed and pressed harder. By this time more than an hour had passed since the Italians had arrived. They were there for about an hour and a half. At the time it seemed as if it were only 10 minutes. Finally, the Albanians had crowded around the Italian military. They were shouting and pushing. They were almost pressing the Italian soldiers into the Sea. So, the Italians let loose with a series of at least a dozen concussion grenades while they reboarded their transports. They let loose with rifle fire into the air. At the time I thought these were blanks, but later I learned that it is impossible to fire blanks automatically, since the rifles need the bullet in the barrel, so that the gases can work the mechanism to allow the rifle to fire automatically. Otherwise, a blank would fire once, and then the shell would have to be manually ejected and the next round inserted. When the grenades and the shots rang out, the Albanians tried to escape. Karla described it as if it were dominoes falling over each other. As they untangled themselves, they started running away—right over the top of us. One ran over and stepped on Roxanne's face. Another almost stepped on Caleb, who was sleeping in Karla's arms. Karla then rolled over to cover Caleb. On her back was the black back pack. It stood out enough that people no longer ran over Karla and Caleb, but they still used her back pack as a place to put their hands as they hurtled over. One guy stepped squarely on my ankle. There was a lot of initial pain. I was relieved later to find that it was not broken. We had our luggage

strung out between us the crowd. The stroller was in front of the luggage. We were lucky that one of the fleeing people didn't reach down and run with one of the bags. We huddled together after the stampede. We decided to consolidate our position closer to the other Americans and British. There were few Albanians left. Most of these were the looters and thieves. One group made a fire close behind us—it really was smoky and smelly. During the night we heard reports from other people that the Albanians camped around us were discussing looting us. They wanted to steal our documents and money. We heard reports that some people got a pistol put to their head. Some Albanians did a bait and switch on Kirby. They came asking for some food. While he and Audrey were looking for some, two others grabbed two of their suitcases. Kirby ran after them and managed to get his suitcase back, but they made off with Roxanne's. We heard other reports that some others got their notebook computers stolen. We circled the wagons even more. Early Thursday afternoon, I had taken all our money, except for \$13 and the leke (Albanian currency) we had left, and put the money in the bottom of my shoes. At this time I took our passports from my trucker's wallet and put them in my coat pockets. Caleb had slept through the great noise of the Italian marines, but he woke up when Karla moved. He was put back to sleep in the stroller. He was bundled up well for the cold. Karla got some sleep on the cardboard. I sat on a suitcase and watched our other baggage. I started to nod off a little, but the cold kept me awake. Another woman offered to hold Caleb. She said that this was beneficial to both. Caleb got a comfortable place to sleep, and she got to keep warm. I got so cold that I started shivering. I had only my wind breaker on. I had brought my long winter underwear along, but Roxanne needed them to keep warm, so she put them on over her clothes. Karla saw me shivering



and teeth chattering, so she took off her wool sweater and I put it on. Karla had a warmer coat on. About 4:30 a.m. news went out that the British Special forces were coming to rescue us. The AEP people had been on the radio since the Italians left. They were telling them to return right away, since most of the Albanians had left. A little after 6:00a.m. we saw the boats returning in the harbor. They landed at about 6:30 a.m. There were 65 Italian nationals left. They got on board first. Then women, children and families were loaded. We got on the boat at 6:45 a.m. These were Italians again, but we later found out that there were also British Special Forces mixed in with them. While on the boat, we were not allowed to take pictures. Karla and I got separated as we boarded. She got help from the soldiers, since she had Caleb. But I was carrying 2 suitcases, the CPAP (sleep apnea breathing machine) and the stroller. So, Karla got ahead of me... The Spevacek's were at the front of the boat. As we headed out into the harbor, I saw the eyes of people all around me watering. My eyes were among those gushing.<sup>7</sup>

### **In the Hands of God and Natives:**

After the Spevaceks, Russows, and the rest of the expatriates were safely on board the Italian ship, only Agron Mece, having seen the foreigners safely onto the boat, was left on the dock. On the way home, he was almost shot when a rebel sprayed a bus, which Agron was behind, with gunfire.

It did not take too long until foreign forces helped establish a functioning government in Albania again. However, it was not yet considered safe for the Russows and Spevaceks, with their young children, to return.

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<sup>7</sup> Russow's journal. Thu., March 13 & Fri. March 14, 1997

In spite of this, during the next eight months, the Lord blessed the efforts of Agron Mece to continue leading the small church in Durres. He conducted services every Sunday. He also organized periodic distributions of humanitarian aid to the needier members of the church. In September of 1997, Pastor Russow, along with Missionary Roebke of Bulgaria, made a trip back to Albania. By this time the U.S. Embassy had reopened and many other expatriates and their families had returned to Albania. The missionaries deemed that it was time to send missionaries back to Albania, and in November of 1997, the Russow family returned to Albania. However, during the eight month stay in America, Pastor Spevacek received and took a call to serve as a missionary on the Apache Reservation in Arizona. The Board for World Missions then began calling other men to serve as his replacement.

### **The Second Go-Round:**

On November 16, 2007, the first service which Pastor Russow was able to attend now that he was back in Albania, there were 25 children in Sunday school and 20 people in worship. The Lord had sustained his church through the difficult times. Missionary Russow, therefore, continued his work. He learned Albanian while at the same time leading regular worship services and teaching Bible classes (through his translator, Vitori). In April of 1997, five adults were baptized in Durres, three women and two men. A little later, the Russows returned to the states for the birth of their second son. During this time Agron led the worship services in Durres. In July, when Pastor Russow returned, it was decided that since many Albanians visited relatives on Sunday mornings, worship should instead be changed to Saturday evenings to help facilitate more regular attendance.

However, while the worship services, Bible classes, and evangelism training of Agron Mece continued in Durres, it had for some time been difficult to make the trip south to Korça and Pogradec because of continued lawlessness in those regions. Finally, in the spring of 1998, Missionary Greg Bey of Bulgaria visited Albania, and he and Pastor Russow visited Korça and Pogradec, reestablishing contact with the Christians and prospects there. Later, on August 10-12, Pastor Russow and Agron Mece visited the contacts in Korça again. It was on this visit that Pastor Russow experienced one of his sweetest moments as a missionary in Albania. During this visit he was privileged to baptize Hena Selmani and her daughter Rita. Hena was the relative who first wrote to Robert Maurem in Kenosha, WI. After having received some Christian literature from her cousin Robert, she told Robert to stop sending such things because she would never become a Christian. God clearly had other plans.

This visit also saw another triumph of the gospel as instruction classes were begun with an attendance of eleven people in Korça and twelve people in Pogradec.

Unfortunately, the successful visit to southern Albania was followed by more bad news. On August 14, 1998, Pastor Russow, as a warden for the U.S. Embassy in Tirana, received word that the embassy was closing down operations again. This time it was because some Al Qaeda terrorists had been arrested just outside the U.S. Embassy in Tirana. United States citizens were urged to leave. The next morning, attempting not to make the same mistake twice, it was decided that Pastor Russow and his family should again evacuate Albania. They left the next day.

### **The Second Vacancy:**

Once again, the small church was left into the hands of the Mece. Agron Mece again conducted services (reading sermons sent to him by missionaries and translated by his wife, Vitori). He also aided in humanitarian aid distributions. In December of 1998 and in March of 1999, Missionary Russow, along with Missionary Greg Bey of Bulgaria made visits to instruct people and to continue Agron's training to become a full-time evangelist for the church in Albania. In the summer of 1999, Agron and Vitori Mece were able to attain visas to come to the US to produce the video instruction series, *Communicating Christ*, in Albanian. (Vitori Mece has been, and remains to be instrumental in the translation of much Christian literature into the Albanian language.) Missionary Russow helped in the completion of *Communicating Christ* project, and once it was over his call as a missionary to Albania officially ended.

In the months and years that followed, various missionaries from Bulgaria continued to be in contact with the small Albanian church. They would send sermons to Agron and Vitori Mece in English, and Vitori would translate them into Albanian for Agron to then read in the worship services. Pastor Greg Bey reports that over a two year period, in the absence of a full time missionary to Albania, he made about 20 different trips to Albania. Normally he would visit for a weekend, but once he stayed for a period of three weeks. Such missionaries also devised an interesting way of continuing to instruct Agron in his pursuit of becoming an evangelist. Since Agron knew Russian as well as Albanian, instructional materials from Russia were sent to him. He would then study the Russian materials, but when Greg Bey or another missionary would visit him to question him on the material he read, Agron, with his Russian study materials and written Albanian notes would speak his Albanian answers to his wife, Vitori, who would then translate Agron's words into English for the visiting missionary.

The traveling missionaries also helped oversee the distribution of humanitarian aid during this period. Distributions of foodstuffs to needy church members were made quarterly. Pastor Greg Bey also reports using between \$20,000--\$30,000 from the WELS Committee on Relief to purchase beds and mattresses for the pediatric ward of a local hospital.

Bey reports that when he began visiting the Durres church in the absence of a full-time missionary there were between 50 and 60 people attending weekly services. (Of this number, about 20 were communicants.) However, when Bey discontinued his visits because he accepted a call back to the US, he reports an average weekly attendance of somewhere between 100 and 120 people, and a communicant base of 40-45 people. Pastor Greg Bey commented that this goes to show that the Lord grows his church when and where he will. In Bulgaria, where Bey regularly served as a missionary, he reported that they were fully staffed, funded, had all the "bells and whistles" so to speak, and yet growth was very slow. Albania, by contrast, had very little external blessings, was fraught with civil unrest, and yet seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds.

After Pastor Bey accepted a call to serve as a pastor in the US, Missionaries Verlein and Bartch of Bulgaria, took care of overseeing the Albanian mission. (However, in all practicality, it must be noted that during most of the time which passed without a regular foreign missionary, Agron Mece supervised the mission on a day to day basis.) These men visited Albania once a month and had regular classes to train Agron Mece. This continued for about two years. Pastor Verlein recalls the Durres church attendance at this time being between 70 and 100 people per week, while the Bible classes which Agron led saw an attendance of roughly 15-20 people.

In October of 2002, a new full-time missionary, Pastor Bruce Ahlers arrived on the scene. He and his wife, Barbara, located in Tirana (about a 40 minute car ride from Durres), and began

to study Albanian. Agron Mece continued to lead the weekly services in Durres. However, before Pastor Ahlers could complete his language training, the Meces announced plans to emigrate to Canada. Their two children had been living in the United States for some time, and to seek better living conditions as well as be closer to their children, the Meces were going to move. The couple left for Canada in Feb of 2003, leaving big shoes to fill. The couple recommended Pavlina Bishka take over Vitori's position as church secretary, which she did. But the team deemed that there was not a man in the congregation who was qualified to lead the services at this time. Therefore, Pastor Ahlers, still a beginner at Albanian, then began having a local bilingual Albanian translate his sermons for him. Ahlers then conducted the services, reading the liturgy and his sermon in Albanian. In the spring of that year, retired pastor John Brant came to Durres to help Pastor Ahlers. Brandt then led the services in Durres and also began more membership classes (through a translator) in Durres.

When Brandt left in July of 2003, Ahlers, while continuing his language training, began to lead the weekly services and Bible information class in Durres. During this time, Mikel Bishka, the husband of the church secretary Pavlina Bishka, began attending services and Bible information classes. These classes finished in October, 2004. Mikel Bishka was then confirmed. Being a devout Christian and able leader, Mikel was also soon thereafter voted president of the church in Durres. In the course of time, Ahlers began training Mikel to become an evangelist. Ahlers agreed to pay him a small monthly stipend so that he could free up time to focus on his studies.

In August, 2003. Pastor Ahlers had resumed approximately monthly visits to Korca and Pogradec with plans to begin membership classes along with worship services. However, he found that interest seemed to have waned significantly. He found no interest in starting classes

in Pogradec. However, he did hold monthly worship services for a small group in Korça. In October, 2004 Ahlers began a Bible information class in Korça and increased his visits there to twice monthly. Finally, in the spring of 2006, the classes were eventually completed and plans were made for some people to be baptized and even confirmed, but this never took place. Ahlers cites disinterest as the main reason for this. In light of this seeming lack of interest in actually forming a church, Ahlers discontinued visits to Korça in the summer of 2006.

In 2005, Agron and Vitori Mece had returned to Albania, unable to attain a permanent residency visa in Canada. However, instead of returning to Durres, they moved to Tirana to be closer to their parents. Agron then continued his studies to become an evangelist, and Vitori found a job as an English teacher at a private school, while volunteering at the church as much as possible.

Unfortunately, from the time Pastor Ahlers had come to Albania to this time (2002-2006) church attendance had begun to decline. Around Christmastime, one service which Ahlers attended in Durres had about 200 people in attendance, while an average service had roughly 100 people. But by late 2006, attendance was normally closer to about 80 souls. Ahlers feels that this may have been due, at least partially, to a number of people attending services in the hopes of getting a humanitarian aid distribution. Distributions had traditionally taken place quarterly, and often in conjunction with major holidays. Ahlers reports that the distributions of aid that he had heard about and that he witnessed when he first arrived consisted of locking the doors after church and handing out a food voucher worth just under \$20.00 to everyone in attendance. Unfortunately, this practice seemed to Ahlers to create the kind of Christians who followed Jesus after his bread producing miracle but who left him after learning his teaching more thoroughly.

To battle this trend, Ahlers began making the distributions less regular. In his opinion, this may have led to a decline in attendance.

Though attendance had declined during Ahlers time at the mission, the leaders of the church were not about to give up reaching out into the largely non-Christian population of Albania. Since the Ahlers and the Meces still lived in Tirana in 2006, it was decided in January of that year that Agron would be given a subsidy to start a church in Tirana. His initial job would be to research what other churches in the area were doing and to study where to locate this new church. In the spring of the same year, it was decided that the church should rent a storefront on the bottom floor of the complex in which the Meces lived. Agron then began some Bible classes for families. He started Sunday school for children, and he spent many hours simply sitting in this new Church Information Center (CIC) watching over the children who would come to color pictures and read Christian materials.

Attempting to reach out into the community further, Ahlers applied to WELS Kingdom Workers to receive funding for an English as a Foreign Language teacher. On September 2006 of the same year, Joshua Odell and Joel Hoff arrived in Tirana. Odell had decided to take a year away from his studies at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and he had convinced his good friend and long time roommate to come along. In two weeks, the two of them began to teach in both Tirana and in Durres. Their classes were only advertised by a sign on the CIC's front doors and by word of mouth, yet in little time at all Odell and Hoff were teaching over fifty students of various ages. After getting their feet wet and becoming more comfortable with the language and teaching, Odell and Hoff split up the teaching duties. Hoff taught the younger children and Odell taught the older. The two sought to find adults to teach, but this proved difficult. Odell thinks that this may have been due to the fact that the CIC in Tirana was quite a distance from the



National University. He also feels that it may have been due to the lack of advertising which was undertaken. However, in the winter months of that year, Hoff and Odell had managed to find a number of young women who were interested in learning more English. Joel taught this class.

After each English Class Agron Mece, Pastor Ahlers, Odell, or Hoff, would have a Bible study with the students who desired to remain for it. Most of the students would stay after for these Bible studies.

### **A Church is Born:**

Shortly after Hoff and Odell had arrived in Tirana, Pastor Ahlers suggested not only attending the Albanian church services in Durres, but also beginning an English church service at his home. He invited the kingdom workers and the English speaking Mece family (which now included Dorian Mece, who moved home in December of the previous year).

After conducting these small, informal worship services in the Ahler's home for some time, a decision was made to move the services to the CIC in Tirana, officially starting a new church in Tirana. These services are attended by some of the English students and an occasional parent or two as well. Anywhere from ten to twenty people regularly attended these bilingual services that were held in the Tirana CIC. However, at Christmas, when the children who had been attending English classes performed a Christmas Eve service, many parents attended. In fact, many of the children from Tirana also decided that they wanted to attend the larger Christmas service in Durres. A twenty passenger van even had to be rented to accommodate all the children who wanted to go. Additionally, on Easter of 2007, forty-two souls heard the

Gospel in a worship service at the Tirana CIC. Just months ago, there had been no church there at all.

Another triumph of the efforts to start a church in Tirana was the baptism of three young people shortly before the kingdom workers left to return to the states and continue their education. Olsa, Neda, and Ledio Huna were washed in the waters of Holy Baptism in June, 2007.

After Josh and Joel returned to the US, they were replaced by two more kingdom workers, Emily Bey and Laura Janke. Bey had grown up as the daughter of a missionary, Greg Bey who used to serve Albania himself during the time when missionaries had been evacuated. Laura and Emily picked up right where Josh and Joel left off. They continued to strengthen relationships with the English students and their families, and during the winter of 2007/2008, the three Huna children (Olsa, Neda, and Ledio) were confirmed in their Christian faith. Bey and Jahnke had success with their teaching, and church attendance remained steady.

Unfortunately, since these teachers were young ladies, they had to work very hard to keep the boys in their classes disciplined, and they also had to deal with continual stares (and worse) from some Albanian men as they conducted their business around town.

In the summer of 2008, Laura and Emily returned to the US. Laura decided to continue her schooling at Wisconsin Lutheran College, but Emily came back to Albania for a second year. Accompanying her was her cousin and friend, Katie Huebner. This school year (2008/2009), the girls decided to focus their efforts mainly on Tirana. They felt that this would enable them to exert a more concentrated effort on reaching out to their Tirana students and their students' families. Also, due to financial difficulties in the WELS and the somewhat stagnant numbers of adults (not children) being reaching in Albania, it had been decided that 2008/2009 would be the

last year that the Board for World Missions and WELS Kingdom Workers would fund any full-time expatriate workers in Albania. This meant that while Emily Bey and Katie Huebner remained in Tirana for the duration of that school year, Ahlers would only visit Albania on an intermittent basis (three times for three weeks a time) in order to help guide and teach Agron Mece and Mikel Bishka who had assumed the daily oversight of the respective missions in Tirana and Durres. Therefore, the women kingdom workers felt that without Ahlers and his car, they were not fully comfortable regularly traveling to and from Durres.

As the kingdom workers concentrated more on their work in Tirana, they were able to spend more time coordinating events to create fellowship and evangelism opportunities. In addition to regular English classes, they also began having regular activity nights. These were originally open to the public, but because they became so popular with local children, they finally had to limit attendance to only students and their families. Activity nights included games, crafts, and food, and they usually centered on some aspect of American culture. Bey and Huebner also began a program called Mary and Martha Meetings (MMM) in November, 2008. This enabled young ladies aged 13-18 to regularly meet for a fun activities such as baking cookies, having a picnic, or having a “girl’s night.” But the meetings always also included a devotion. God-willing, these young women will continue to meet and grow in their faiths during the next challenging years of their lives, even without the influence of Huebner and Bey.

During that last year in which the WELS funded full-time expatriate missionaries or teachers to Albania, attendance at the churches remained steady. In Durres Mikel Bishka led services including 70-80 souls. In Tirana, Agron led services which continued to be sparsely attended on a regular basis. However on Christmas and Easter, when children would put on some sort of performance, attendance usually spiked.

At present (2009), Agron Mece continues to lead services at the small church in Tirana. Vitori Mece has taken over the role of English teacher at the center and teaches about 30 classes a month. In Durres, Mikel Bishka continues to lead weekly services, and attendance has continued to average between 70 and 80 souls per week. Pastor John Vogt, the rector of the ELS seminary in Ukraine has taken over as the one foreign counselor/advisor/mentor of the missions in Bulgaria and Albania. He will continue to serve as such for as long as he remains in Ukraine. Vogt is presently helping Agron and Mikel continue their training for two hours a week by studying Christology with them over the internet. He expects to travel to Albania in the summer of 2010 for two to four weeks to lead these men in more intensive studies. The Meces, Bishkas and Pastor Vogt continue to discuss ways in which the churches might continue to reach out to more of the Albanian people. They feel that having more native English speakers return to Albania to resume control of the English classes would be helpful, but they lack funding for such a project. Meanwhile, they continue to serve the souls entrusted to their care and to try and seek the lost with the glorious gospel of Christ.

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