

# 'ALSO TO THE GREEKS':

AN ANCIENT NATION AT A SPIRITUAL CROSSROADS



From left: a typical Greek Orthodox church; the Temple of Athena Nike, near the Parthenon; inner-city Athens; Kavala (known as Neapolis in the Book of Acts).



ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN HORN

*Greece is a country with a rich history and nearly unparalleled influence. The nation is known as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. Its ancient roots are strongly pagan, but the Book of Acts tells of its significant Christian influence.*

Occupying the southern portion of Europe's Balkan Peninsula, Greece is slightly smaller than Alabama. Take a drive through the country and you will pass signs to places familiar to readers of the Bible, though sometimes disguised with modern names. Corinth, Berea, Thessalonica, Philippi and Neapolis are among numerous sites of note. Walk the ancient streets of Athens, the nation's capital, and find pagan sites such as the Parthenon or nearby Mars Hill where Paul preached his sermon on the unknown God (Acts 17:23).

Greece has been called "the world's geographical and spiritual crossroads." And it is certainly at a spiritual crossroads today. Greece bears the indelible markings of its history — both Christian and pagan — yet fervent Christianity can be hard to find.

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In Acts 20:21, the apostle Paul said he had held back nothing, “testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (KJV).

Though the term *Greek* meant something broader then (it often represented all non-Jews ... the Gentiles), Greeks of today present a truly needy mission field. Greeks were among the first to hear the gospel (or *evangelion*), but today evangelical Christianity has fallen on hard times.

Greece is dominated by a traditional, highly liturgical and exclusionary state church that presents barriers to the growth of all other churches. Pentecostal worship, which has flourished in the past, has plateaued or declined on most fronts. Some Pentecostal leaders lament the loss of nearly an entire generation. And while not every Pentecostal leader in Greece agrees on the method to be used, all are in agreement that the trend needs to be reversed.

Pastor Lambis Sidiropoulos, a man of immense vision and energy, leads the



Pentecostal church in Kavala. The city was once known as Neapolis, where Paul landed on his way to nearby Philippi. An hour before the Wednesday night service, the Kavala church is nearly full of people in prayer. By the time the service begins, hardly an empty seat remains.

Greek pastors, even those who lead large churches, often hold secular jobs as well. Sidiropoulos is a medical doctor with a thriving practice, but he also maintains an intensive ministry schedule. He is superintendent of the Apostolic Church of Pentecost, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. He also directs the charge in evangelism ministries — a 24-hour radio station, weekly outreaches to four other cities, drama teams, door-to-door Bible giveaways and a Christian newspaper.

Why does Sidiropoulos do so much? “We have good helpers, but leaders are hard to find,” he says.

With a growing vision, Sidiropoulos is planning outreaches to the Pomake, or Slavic Muslims. But the need for new ministers is critical. The current Greek leaders are spread thin.

The thriving Kavala church is not typical. People regularly accept Christ, and once a year believers hold a water baptismal service at “Lydia’s Baptistery,” the traditional site where Lydia and the women prayed in Acts 16:13,14. The converts are very committed believers, according to Sidiropoulos. Yet 10 years have passed since the Fellowship has ordained a new minister.

Resistance from the state church is part of the reason. All nonstate churches face opposition, but Pentecostals are especially scrutinized. The state church has labeled

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*From left beginning on page 20: Mars Hill, location of Paul’s sermon on the unknown God; John, a homeless man, with one of the many cats he cares for among the ruins in Athens; komboloi, or worry beads, which many Greek men carry and finger as a stress reducer, a substitute for prayer or as superstitious protection against “the evil eye”; Craig and Dana Mathison in front of the ancient wall of Thessaloniki.*



*From left: Bob and Becky Creel; the Corinth Canal (Ships once were portaged across a land bridge between Athens and Sparta. Nero undertook the building of a canal in New Testament times, but it was not completed until 1893.); Athens; Lambis Sidiropoulos family.*



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them as cult members. “Any who are born again are genuine,” says Sidiropoulos, “because there is a price to pay.” While in the military, Sidiropoulos himself was prevented from advancing in rank because he was a born-again believer.

As much as national ministers are needed, Greek leaders also are praying for more missionaries. “We Greek Christians love Americans,” says Sidiropoulos, “because you’ve helped us.” Additional missionaries to this challenging land would help greatly to lighten the burden from overtaxed pastors.

The Kavala service features an announcement that a new Gypsy church will begin soon in the biblical city known today as Thessaloniki. Some 150 Gypsy believers will call the church home. The group has an array of remarkable testimonies, which they share with me after the service.

Jimmy, now 32, was 16 when he accepted Christ. The Lord healed him of three diseases, including epilepsy. Radically changed, Jimmy began leading relatives to the Lord.



Gregory was a heroin user. Interpreter Panos Lilis, who knew him before he was saved, says, “He was a dead man from drugs.” Gregory’s wife prayed for him for 10 years. Ironically, his imprisonment in Thessaloniki led to his salvation after a Christian spoke to him about Jesus.

But God’s work in the prison was not finished.

Bill is the patriarch of the area’s Gypsies. Bill’s son was imprisoned for drug abuse, and Gregory led him to the Lord. Two years ago, these two young men and some other Gypsy brothers prayed for Bill, who suffered from heart trouble and a spirit of fear that had plagued him for years. Bill was delivered of both and gave his heart to the Lord.

Today Bill, his son and Gregory are serving the Lord, as well as Gregory’s entire family. Bill, as the Gypsy leader, has opportunities to influence those who have not yet made a commitment to Christ.

In Katerini, Elias Hatzieleftheriou pastors a historic church with a high percentage of refugees, primarily from Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. But refugees leave, making it difficult to have a stable congregation.

“We desperately need missionaries,” says Hatzieleftheriou, “not just to Athens, but to all parts of Greece.”

Between Katerini and Athens is a road to Veria, built on the site of ancient Berea, where the study of God’s Word was so important in the Acts narrative. No remnant of Berea remains today.

In Athens, Krystal Harrison is a missionary associate with Students for Christ, a campus outreach similar to Chi Alpha. Harrison originally came to Greece in 2004 because of ministry opportunities created by the Olympic Games that sum-

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mer. Prior to and during the Games, student teams went to university campuses in Athens and Thessaloniki to pray and engage students in conversation. Since then groups of Chi Alpha students have come regularly to minister. Harrison was elated when the first university student came to Christ in this difficult field last summer.

Harrison has completed her missionary associate assignment and wonders who will come to minister on the campuses. "We need mature Christians to come and give a school year," she says.

Craig Mathison, AGWM area director for Eastern Europe, considers the university outreach strategic. Mathison and his wife, Dana, moved to Athens in April 2004 from Barcelona, Spain, where they had ministered for 14 years. They are currently the only resident Assemblies of God missionaries in Greece. In addition to his responsibility as area director, Craig acts as liaison to the Greek Pentecostal fellowship. The Mathisons emphasize the need for resident



missionaries called to serve exclusively in Greece.

Former missionaries Bob and Becky Creel have recently returned to Greece to help short-term. They originally sought missionary appointment to Greece in 1978 after being touched by an article on "the Macedonian need" in the *Pentecostal Evangel*. At that time, the Pentecostal fellowship was in decline. They re-started the Bible school and ministered in the country until 1991.

"We need missionaries to come long term," says Bob, "and just love the Greek people." With all of the biblical surroundings, "the Greek people are very close to the reality but have little real experience," according to Creel.

Nearly 2,000 years have passed since Paul made two missionary journeys to this country. The spiritual need is as serious today as it was in the early days of apostolic ministry. Paul considered himself a debtor to the Greeks (Romans 1:14). He fulfilled that debt by preaching the gospel.

This land so replete with biblical history desperately needs workers — missionaries and Greek nationals — to assume the role of debtor to the Greeks. The church is longing for men and women who, with the apostle, will say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16, NKJV). **tpe**

KEN HORN is managing editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



*From left beginning on page 24: an Athens park; Gypsies singing in the Kavala church (Pastor Sidiropoulos at pulpit); Philippi ruins; author Ken Horn at ancient Corinth.*