

The Story of our Sister Church Relationship
With the *Disciples of Jesus Fellowship* in Shkodër, Albania
by
Tom Lewellen

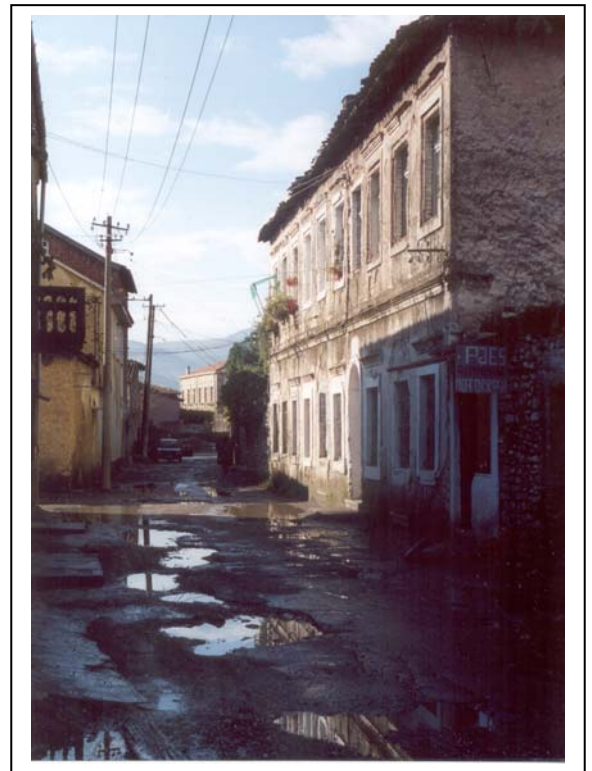
One of the unique things you will notice about Grace Countryside Church is that we talk a lot about Albania and our love for the people of that country. On a Sunday morning you may hear one of our pastors use an illustration about a person he met or an experience he had in Albania. In a small group, you may hear someone share an experience of helping in a Refugee Camp in Albania during the 1999 Kosovar crisis or working on a church building in the city of Shkodër. You may even meet one of a handful of immigrants from Albania who attend Grace, some of whom are not yet able to communicate in English.

Let me share with you how our interest came to be focused on Albania.

In June and July 1991, my wife, Laura, and I were sent by our church to work for three weeks with some missionaries in Athens, Greece. Scott and Vicki McCracken minister to the thousands of refugees and illegal aliens who enter Athens every month. Some of them stay for a few months and then move on, usually to Western Europe, the US, or Canada.

One of the things we did during our visit was to help at a Soup Kitchen run by the Sisters of Charity. After we helped with the meal, the sisters would allow us to show the “Jesus film” about the life story of Jesus. After that we could preach the gospel. At that time, communism had just fallen in most of the former “Soviet bloc” countries and refugees from countries like Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania flooded across the border into Greece.

One night in July, after the message, I met a 24-year-old Albanian man named Gregor Menga. Communism had fallen in Albania just five months earlier, in January of 1991. Gregor and his sister Laura and her husband Leon, had gotten a three-week visa to visit Greece... and then overstayed their welcome. When I met him, Gregor was working in a pizza restaurant twelve hours a day where he earned twelve dollars—three times what he could have earned in Albania *if* he



could have found a job there. He was spending \$6 a day to live and sending the remaining \$6 to his parents in Northern Albania.



Little did I think that this encounter would change not only the course of my life but the direction of our church.

I asked Gregor if we could meet and talk further about the film. It happened that he had the next day off and he invited Scott and me to come to his apartment. The next day we met in a dingy “common” room in the apartment building where Gregor lived and I took the opportunity to explain the message of Jesus to Gregor.

Gregor knew very little English, but could speak both Albanian and Italian. He had an English-Italian dictionary and, when I used an English word he didn’t know, he would stop and look it up in his dictionary, then translate the Italian word into Albanian in his head. It was slow going! We talked about God’s holiness, the disaster of human sin, the coming of Jesus Christ—the God-man, Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins, and salvation from the penalty

of sin through faith in Christ. As I was walking him through a verse from the gospel of John (John 5.24), he suddenly sat back in his chair, look at the ceiling and began to moan softly to himself, deep in thought. I asked him what he was thinking and finally he said, “This is a very important day for me. I never understood that I could have eternal life through faith in Jesus! This is a *very* important day for me.” Indeed, it was. By faith in Jesus Christ alone, Gregor received eternal life that day as a free gift.

The next day we met at an outdoor café for lunch. As I often do, I began to explain the gospel message to Gregor again, using some different verses to help him further appreciate the promises of Christ to those who trust him for eternal life. As he opened up a spiral notebook, I noticed four or five pages of writing in Albanian. Obviously I couldn’t read any of it except the last three words which were, “JESUS. HALLELUJAH. AMEN!” I asked him what he was writing and he said, “I’m writing to my friends back in Albania to tell them about eternal life through faith in Jesus.” “What do you think they’ll say?” I asked. “I think they’ll say, ‘Yes, we want to have eternal life through faith in Jesus, too!’” I remember turning my head and looking at a building so he didn’t see the tears in my eyes. In the United States I have never seen someone respond to the gospel with such understanding and enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, I had to leave to return home a few days later. Gregor began to meet with Scott McCracken. Over the next year, he grew rapidly in understanding and in ability to

communicate his faith to others. He also begged a missionary that he met to travel through Albania on his way to Britain and to speak to his parents about the Lord. Through the witness of this man, Gregor's parents, Zef and Roza Menga, became Christians. Later that year an Italian missionary started a Bible Study in their home.

Growing up under Communism had left Gregor with deep anger against Albania. The "independent" Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha was not aligned with any other country and was the harshest Communist government in the world. Hoxha had completely suppressed all religion in Albania. In fact, there were literally *no Bibles* in Albania from 1963 to 1991! When Gregor left, he never intended to return—his hope was to go the West to make a life as a painter since he had graduated from an art school in Albania. But during that year, God began to soften his heart, and the time came when he told Scott that, though he didn't know what God wanted him to do, he knew that he had to return to Albania.

In the fall of 1992, Scott drove Gregor back to his hometown in the city of Shkodër in northern Albania. Gregor joined the Bible Study led by the Italian missionary. Later the missionary took some of the people and started a church (now called, the "Brethren Church") in Shkodër while Gregor stayed with the others and formed, "The Disciples of Jesus Fellowship." As I have spoken to missionaries and Christian leaders in Albania, I have concluded that these two churches share the distinction of being the first evangelical Christian churches in northern Albania in modern times.



There is much to the story that can't be told here about the growth and ministry of the "Disciples of Jesus" in Shkodër. That story will have to be told at another time. For our purposes here, we need to jump to 1995 when the paths of our two churches intersected.

In 1995, Gregor came to the US (with Scott McCracken's help) to speak in churches. That Spring, Gregor stayed for three-weeks with my family and spoke at Grace. It was an amazing experience for our church to hear someone who was only five years away from living under the world's harshest Communist dictatorship. His stories of people coming to faith in Christ and experiencing joy in the midst of family persecution were very moving.

After Gregor left, I felt impressed that I should take all of our elders to Albania to meet with these Christians. For the next year, we prayed, learned about Albania and planned a one-week trip to Shkodër. Even though the trip eventually cost \$10,000, I never lost a sense of conviction that this was something God wanted us to do.

The week that the eight of us spent in Albania in late May 1996 was life-changing for each of our elders. We stayed in the homes of Albanian people (not all of whom were believers) and experienced first-hand the kind of hospitality that is unknown in American culture. We worshipped with the twenty-five believers, prayed with them, wept with them. The highlight of our time was participating in a baptism at Lake Scutari—a picture taken that day of one of our elders, Terry Woychowski, baptizing a lame man hangs in our lobby in our church building. We saw people who have so little but who love God so much. We saw well-thumbed Bibles carried by teenagers—children who hadn't ever seen a Bible before they heard the gospel from Gregor or one of the other believers in the church. We saw so much life and passion for God. And we brought some of it back with us to the US.



Before we left, the believers in church asked us to continue our relationship with them. We returned to the US determined to establish a sister-church relationship with the *Disciples of Jesus Fellowship* in Shkodër. That fall, I took Steve Adriansen (who was unable to go on the elders' trip) and my wife, Laura, to visit the church. One of the things we did was to dream with Gregor and the other church leaders of how we could mutually benefit each other.

There is no way to communicate completely all that has happened in the years since our first visit to Albania. Let me just give you a brief outline of the relationship of our two churches since 1996.

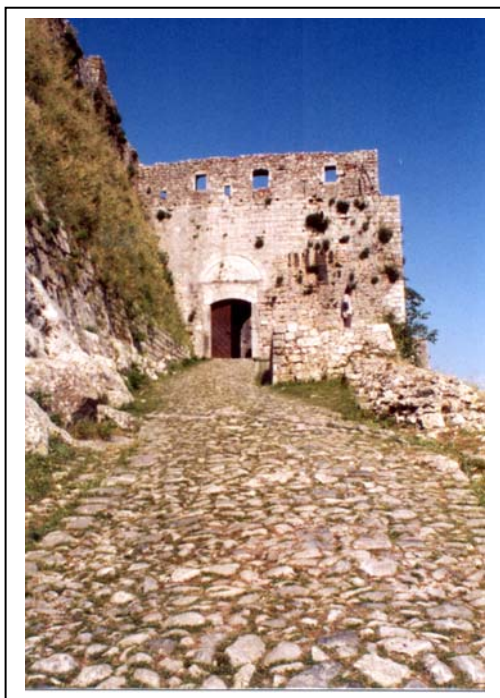
In 1997, the country of Albania descended into chaos for a brief period of time. Many people were killed and great disillusionment with the west began to spread. The Albanian people had anticipated that capitalism would immediately bring the things they saw on television (on shows like "Dallas," "Dynasty", and "Baywatch"). When it didn't happen, the people became disheartened and angry. Obviously, they had to learn that capitalism and democracy are delicate things that take a long time to develop.

During that time of chaos, Gregor's father, Zef, died as a result of a bicycle accident. Shortly after that, a young man in the church, Ergi Kopshtari, was caught in the crossfire of a feud and killed. Along with the national struggles, the believers in the church in Shkodër experienced a great deal of grief and pain.

As soon as we could, we resumed our trips to Albania. Slowly, over the years, we have built many relationships and helped our sister-church in many ways. On our trips we have...

- Sent our pastors to teach at seminars and special church meetings;
- Led a "student retreat" for the college-age believers in the church;

- Led a leadership retreat for the leaders of the church (this included the leaders from other churches as well);
- Helped a young woman named Sibora Gjeçovi, who has lived with my family since 1997, to receive a college education;
- Sent fifteen of our people to work in refugee camps in Shkodër and Tirana (the capital) during the 1999 Kosovar refugee crisis;
- Helped at Gregor's wedding to Markela at the Rozafa castle (also during the refugee crisis);
- Sent a couple from GCC, Hugh and Ginny Gullede, to live in Shkodër for three months and assist in discipleship, teaching, and evangelism;
- Sent teams to work on the building in which the church meets;
- Brought Gregor and Kela and their two sons to the US to travel and raise prayer and financial support for their ministry in the US and Canada.
- Raised over \$150,000 to accomplish the above tasks and others not written here!



In the last four years, one of our members, Hugh Gullede has taught himself Albanian. At Gregor's urging, Hugh and Ginny began to make contacts among the 60,000 Albanians in the Detroit area. Miraculously, in a short time, Hugh has developed relationships with Albanian families, started Bible Studies for both evangelism and discipleship, and invited Albanian believers to church. The Gullede's ministry is just getting started, but we are praying for kingdom expansion to take place among the expatriate Albanians in Detroit.

Most Americans don't even know where Albania is located (it borders Greece on the south and is directly across the Adriatic Sea from Italy). If they happen to know where it is, it seems very far away and completely unrelated to our concerns. But each of the 33 members of GCC who have gone to Albania no longer think that way—Albanians are real

people with real needs and Albanian Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ to us. We feel a responsibility to them and, when we have sleepless nights, we are apt to be thinking about and praying for people who may not have enough food, heat, or clothing.

If you attend Grace Church regularly, we invite you to become part of this project with us. Obviously, our ministry in Albania is not *all* that we are about—but it is an important *part* of what we are about. As we look into the future...

- We see Gregor and Kela moving to Gjiilan, Kosovo, to start a church in a completely unreached city with no Christian witness.
- We see ourselves helping the leadership that will stay behind in Shkodër to grow in strength and ability.
- We envision an evangelical Albanian fellowship starting from GCC in the Albanian community around us.

Outside the city of Shkodër, the Rozafa castle stands on a mountain. When I am in Albania I never fail to go to there. The castle (really a fortress) was first built in 500 BC, and was used continuously for over 2,000 years. Now it is in ruins, but if you look at it, you can see the faint outline of the grandeur it must have once had. The castle overlooks the city of Shkodër—a city of nearly 100,000 people with only 200–300 Christian believers! Like the castle, the city also is in ruins, ravaged by centuries of foreign rule, internal disputes, and Communist oppression. But as you look at it, you can also see the faint outline of the greatness the apostle Paul must have seen when he visited the region in New Testament times (Romans 15.31).



We want to be a part of returning Albania to God. We have an unprecedented opportunity as a church fellowship to influence a generation of Albanians for Christ. Pray with us that we might take advantage of the opportunity for the glory of God, for the progress of the gospel message, and for the good of the Albanian people.