

God's Mission Among the Roma

By Melody J. Wachsmuth



Listening to God's Story

In the 1960's, a Romanian glass seller set off from Timișoara to a village of 10,000 Roma 500 km away. He was not going just to sell windows—he

felt that God sent him to share the gospel. Little did he know that his act of obedience would have a ripple effect completely transforming the village for decades to come. By the late 1980's almost the entire village had converted, many changing their business practices to honor God. Over the next couple decades, families moved out of the village for economic reasons and went to Bucharest, Germany, France, Spain and England, forming churches in each of these places.¹

In the 1980's, a 7-year-old Roma girl in Bulgaria desired to know God. She eventually began attending a Bible study—made up mostly of children—in her mahalle. The children all prayed in tongues and had dreams and visions—she had a continual vision of her mother and father being in a church, despite their unhappy home life. Eventually, her mother turned to Jesus and then finally in 1995, her father converted. Around 2006, they began to build a church, with the help of the very poor around them. God had told them that their church would be for the rejects of society, “the Roma that even the other Roma rejected.” Now this church is one of around 800 churches in Bulgaria.²

Chances are, you have never heard of these stories, and they are just two stories among hundreds. In fact, perhaps the stories you do hear about the 10-12 million Roma in Europe only confirm negative stereotypes, portraying them as either poor victims or perpetrators of crime.

These types of images and stories come to us through the media, government agencies, and through societal stereotypes—and often these images are divorced from any personal relationship between Roma and non-Roma.

But these stereotypes are not the story that God is writing in Roma communities all throughout Europe. In fact, God has been quite active in Roma communities for decades, and his spirit continues to move, speaking to people in dreams and visions, manifesting in miraculous healings, and calling Roma leaders to serve their people.

After God directed an Albanian couple to evangelize a small Roma village of 150 families in rural Albania, one young Roma man had a vision. As a pastor prayed for him, he saw himself wandering in the darkness and then being led into the light. He soon gained a burden to serve his people. He was sent to Bible school in Tirana in 2013—but the first year was very difficult since he had never finished high school. Many times he wanted to quit and go back to the village, but people continued to encourage him and he felt Jesus was with him. He finally graduated and his desire to serve his people is stronger than ever.³

Movements of Mission

Roma churches have been growing and multiplying for decades. In the 1950's, a 'Gypsy Awakening' began in France. Under the initial leadership of Clément Le Cossec, Roma leaders were trained and missionaries were sent out so that the movement spread to fifty countries in fifty years.⁴ In Eastern Europe, a Roma Baptist church began in the 1930's in Bulgaria, and during the 1940's and 1950's, Pentecostalism began spreading among the Roma.⁵ In Romania, after the fall of Communism in 1989, Protestant Christianity spread rapidly among Roma communities—now there are hundreds of churches.⁶ A revival began in Leskovac, Serbia in the late 1980's, early 1990's, which led to a church planting movement throughout Serbia.

In the 1950's, a Roma man in the Ukraine came to an Adventist Church to beg for food. He eventually became a believer and started going every Sunday. Eventually, many in the Roma village converted, but struggled with the rule against eating pork meat. The man continued to eat pork in secret, and once someone saw him buying a pig. Because of that, that church forbade the Roma from coming so they started a home group. Some Pentecostals came and connected with the group in the late 1970's and began preaching in the villages. Eventually a 'great awakening' began throughout the Transcarpathian region and many converted to Christianity. Now there are numerous Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Baptist churches in the region.⁷

This is not a uniform movement, but rather movements, and the fastest growing are in Pentecostal and charismatic forms. In places like France and Spain, Roma Christians number over a hundred thousand. In places like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia, Christians number in the thousands and tens of thousands. Most countries in Southeastern Europe, however, have newer movements and small churches. Because of the work-migration flow from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, churches in Central and Eastern Europe (such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia) have started newer churches in Western Europe in places like Italy, England, Germany, and France.

The Challenge of Holistic Transformation

Part of this story involves the immense challenges that Roma leaders and communities face: persistent poverty, need for holistic ministry, lack of education, equipping new leaders, Islam in Roma communities, the negative relationship between the majority culture and Roma communities, and lack of unity between different churches or movements.



Even with these challenges, however, there are organizations and churches that are addressing them. For example, Community Health Evangelism (CHE), which addresses transformation from a holistic community perspective, has recently begun spreading in Eastern Europe. International movements like the Gypsies and Travellers International Evangelical Fellowship (G.A.T.I.E.F.) continue to train Roma leaders and missionaries. Ministries such as Project Ruth in Bucharest provide education for children and job training for adults.

Most recently, a new grassroots movement began to address the issue of ministry isolation and lack of information. In 2014, the Great Commission Center International, a Chinese Mission organization, hosted a European Roma conference in Budapest, Hungary. At the conference, many Roma leaders realized the value of connecting and encouraging one another. Out of that, Roma Networks began, having the vision to network, connect, and research for the sake of sharing the gospel and seeing transformation in Roma communities throughout Europe. Currently, Roma Networks is researching, building bridges to promote unity, and planning the next European conference that will be on September 21-24, 2016 in Békés, Hungary, entitled, "Building God's Kingdom together."

From the Roma to all peoples

The spread of Christianity among the Roma is not just for the Roma. Rather, God may use the Roma to help revitalize Christianity in Europe. Many Roma leaders have this vision: "I want this to be a church for all peoples, not just the Roma," said Đena Nikolić, from his small church in Darda, Croatia. Roma Christians are an important part of the global church and as God continues to write this unique story, we can all be encouraged and challenged in our knowledge of God's mission to the world.

► To P. 4

A thought on the Serbia Visit

Chris Yam



I didn't even know what people the name 'Roma' referred to before I decided to go for the trip to Serbia. In English, the word 'Roma' might at the first sight suggest the people

in Rome. Its Chinese translation is even more of a trouble to me. But after having recalled the homeless Gypsies I saw in major European cities and known more about their origin, I felt an urge to go for the mission trip. And it was my first mission trip ever.

We have visited several Roma villages in Zrenjanin, Apatin and Subotica. Honestly, their living conditions did not quite surprise me; perhaps it is because I have seen something even worse in some remote and secluded areas in mainland China. What really caught me by surprise was the faith seen in one of the local pastors we met, Pastor Tibor. I have never seen anyone living such a faithful and joyful life as him. I was particularly amazed at his joy in God. He is a father of seven children. You may wonder how Pastor Tibor raised the family in times of economic difficulties and at the same time devoting himself into Roma ministry. Yet, God has never stopped blessing him. From Pastor Tibor's life I saw how God has made something possible out of the impossible. For instance, when he prayed that God would open a door to some financial support, some days later some money just reached him without him even knowing where it came from.

Pastor Aaron Chui from our Hong Kong team has delivered several sermons on Matthew 6: 25-34 to the local churches in Serbia. Without a second thought we would agree that Pastor Aaron deliber-



ately encouraged the Roma people there with these scriptures to consolidate their faith in Christ: "25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ..." We have been hearing that some Roma people could not stand firm in the face of hardships in life. True, some of them fled to Germany for better jobs, some of them misused the resources the churches gave them and backslid into a desperate life. Interestingly, God has shown me something more, apart from the Romani in Serbia – the unwavering faith of Pastor Tibor. I felt a great joy to see Pastor Tibor living out the scriptures. Somehow Matthew 6:25-34 does not just speak to new believers and faith seekers, but also those who are determined to put God's kingdom first. Tibor puts the Roma ministry way before himself and his family. Putting myself in his shoes, I am ashamed to say that my faith in the Lord does not really measure up. Yet, the Lord has always caught me by surprise; other than seeing the needs of the Roma ministry, I was grateful for the chance to review my

life through that of the local pastors.

Pastor Tibor has been doing Roma ministry for about 16 years and he is about to reap the fruits of his efforts – seeing some Romani lead the Roma church in the coming years. Praise the Lord that He has provided for Tibor everything he needs. Tibor’s life brings to my mind how God manoeuvred to raise his servant Zerubbabel to help in rebuilding the temple. No one would ever expect the holy work of the reconstruction of the temple would begin amidst political turmoil, a time of huge uncertainties. Moreover, the damaged city walls of Jerusalem were also allowed to be repaired under Nehemiah, as God mysteriously moved the heart of even a pagan king. “And the king granted them to me [Nehemiah] according to the good hand of my God upon me.” (Neh 2:8b) In recent years Serbia has suffered various kinds of uncertainties: the stagnant economy, outflow of the educated, influx of refugees from the Middle East, not to mention the war with Kosovo in the 1990s. But God’s power is never bound by what we perceive as hindrances. I believe it was not solely the effort of Pastor Tibor to bring the Roma people to God, but it was our gracious God who brought the people out from the dirt to Tibor and gave him and his church the opportunities to take part in the ministry.

For centuries Romani have been stigmatized as the condemned and the cursed. But in recent years we are seeing some important Serbian Romani stepping onto the world stage: Sani Rifati, an activist; Rajko Đurić, the leader of Roma Union of Serbia; Džej Ramadanovski, a modern folk singer, to name but a few. I believe Romani have the power to have a say in the world, God willing. I saw the pure faith in the Romani we visited. Like many remote villagers in China, their trust in God usually does not come with

too much consideration as city people do. It’s a huge contrast to what we see in Hong Kong people who have plenty of funny excuses not to get to know the only God: having friends to meet, TV to watch, school to go to, you name it. Of course, we have to pray for a change in the mind-set of the Romani as most of them do not see the impor-

tance of schooling nor a well-planned life. Many parents just push their kids to work as early as possible. However, I believe God can turn what we deem as desperate into opportunities. Perhaps their hardships and pure faith are just what we should go after? What if one day this third largest ethnic group in Serbia is no longer labelled as the cursed but the faithful followers in Christ? What if one day they all praise the Lord with their renowned gifts in music and dance? We pray for the revival to come.

(The author is a member of the C & MA Grace Chapel in Hong Kong.)



► From P.2 References

1. Story told by Pastor Puiu Onriu in Bucharest Romania, as it had been passed on to him (2015).
2. Story told by Danijela Mincheva in Kyustendil, Bulgaria(2015).
3. Story told by Andreas Avdiu in Morove, Albania (2015)
4. Laurent, Régis. 2014. “On the Genesis of Gypsy Pentecostalism in Brittany.” In Thurfjell, David and Adrian Marsh Eds. *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
5. Slavkova, Magdalena. 2014. “Prestige” and Identity Construction Amongst Pentecostal Gypsies in Bulgaria.” In Thurfjell, David and Adrian Marsh Eds. *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
6. Gog, Sorin. 2009. “Post-Socialist Religious Pluralism: How do Religious Conversions of Roma Fit into the Wider Landscape? From Global to Local Perspectives.” in A. Boscoboinik, F. Ruegg Eds. *Transitions: Nouvelles identites rom en Europe centrale & orientale* Université libre de Bruxelles.
7. Story told by Sergej Latkso’s father who claims to be one of first Pentecostal believers in the region in Ukraine (2015). Sergej is now trying to unite the different denominations of Roma churches.

(Melody J. Wachsmuth, based in Croatia, has been researching and collecting oral history from Roma communities in Eastern Europe since 2011. To find out more about Roma Networks, or to help the grassroots movement by donating towards Roma leaders attending the conference, go to the website: Romanetworks.com.)

A Reflection on our Serbia Visit: A New Perspective of Missions

Angie Au

Before going, I shared with the group that it was going to be my fourth mission trip and I did not really have high expectations for it. Previous experiences of short term missions had made me think of it as a lot of services, and I was expecting that I would have a lot to do this time as well; interactions with the people would be minimal or I would only get to know them very superficially. In other words, I was expectant but not anticipating much of learning or revival during the trip. Little did I know that this particular mission trip would be enlightening to me that: being a missionary is a lifelong journey without borders.



Missions is Living

Upon arrival, we were sorry to hear that Pastor Jovica had injured his spine and was bedridden. Perhaps because of that, we did not make too many visitations to the Roma people but settled down at a Zrenjanin local church for the first three days. To me, those three days were the highlight of my trip. We had the opportunity to lead the Sunday adult congregation and the youth camp in worship services, share with them our testimonies and present the “Everything Drime” (the silent drama of a salvation story with background music). On the first day of the youth camp, we were startled by how young they were while all that we had prepared for before the trip were for older youths. However, our team, who were from different churches and age groups, was softened by the very affectionate and ingenuous nature of the kids. We engaged in games, drawing, and playing sports with these children and they became very attached to us.

Many of them could not even answer simple personal questions in English. Language was a barrier. But our whole team experienced the beauty of communicating with body language and spending quality time with them. For instance, one of the boys who was aggressive towards us at the start became softened towards us. He came into our fellowship circle one night and made us all hold hands and pray for one individual in our team. So touching!

This mission trip allowed us to experience the joy of living in the Christian community. As one body, we counted on each other’s strengths and received the help of others in our limitations and weaknesses. Thinking back, God had purposely allowed us to spend time with the church for several days. Even though over half of the mission team were from C&MA Chapel and belong to the same fellowship, other members of the mission team actually came from six other different churches and we flew from three different cities. We were also in different stages in life; some of us just started working and others had recently retired. At the beginning, we were not quite affiliated with each other yet. However, by having the common goal of breaking the ice with the youths, the ice amongst the team broke too and towards the end of the trip we found ourselves having meaningful conversations as if we had been in the same church for years.

These three days of spending time with the youths and their leaders also allowed me to solidified the idea that missions is more about living amongst the people God cares about and learning about their culture first before all else. We think that we brought songs, a drama and the gospel message to their pulpit, preached to them, and brought about some meaningful changes in the mission field. In the Chinese culture, we would like to be one giving rather than the receiving. Yet, I believed the children have given us so much more in showing us that “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

Missions is Trusting

We sadly said goodbye to the kids the fourth morning of our trip and set off to Subotica to visit Pastor Viktor. Around the dinner table that evening, we heard about



► To P. 8



the Roma people (for the first time on the trip) from Him. He shared about the joys and struggles in ministering to them. As a pastor, he was highly respected in the Gypsy community and was often called upon to resolve conflicts within families. It was actually a very tricky kind of business; yet by the grace of God, Pastor Viktor could deal with them wisely each time, gaining the trust of the people. He explained that the Roma people in Serbia were generally open towards the gospel; yet at times, the lack of persistence, or the lack of stability of work amongst the young people would make it hard for the pastor to develop church leadership from among the people, which is a crucial first step in fostering a self-sustaining church. We could feel the pastor's helplessness at his sharing.

Also as part of our trip, we visited two households of the Roma people and listened to the compelling stories of how, one by one, each of the family members came to Christ. We could see that the Roma people are so family-oriented, just like the traditional Chinese; when one member is saved, the entire household will likely be saved as well (Acts 16:31). As part of the trip, we visited an old property which went through major transformation this past year and now is a new place of worship for the Roma people and their neighbors. God allowed us to see that He had been pouring His blessing upon the ministry and He desires that all nations will be restored to Him and worship Him.

Towards the end of the trip, we had a surprise visit from Pastor Tibor whose leg had been in excruciating pain. He seemed to be just well enough so that he could drive out to our hotel. He met with us in one of our bigger hotel rooms, with all 18 persons or so meeting in that room making the conversation very intimate. In Pastor Tibor's sharing, we could see how his steadfast trust in God leads to a persistent joy even though things may not be going as planned. Like Pastor Viktor, he shared about the many struggles in the Roma ministry and we

witnessed some difficulties with our own eyes when he brought us to a Roma neighborhood afterwards. Every day, Pastor Tibor faces resistance that could discourage him enough to give up. He could have when a house owner agreed to lend part of his house to be reconstructed as a soup kitchen but later changed his mind and sneakily removed the stoves that were just installed for it. He could have been discouraged when the Gypsy people are not only the marginalized minority in the mainstream society, even Serbian Christians of other ethnic backgrounds are not willing to share a worship space with them. He shared that it was really difficult to get rid of racial discrimination, even within the church. He could have been really discouraged when a stone stove that was built with his own hands last year (to help a gypsy family get through the cold winters) was taken apart. He could have been discouraged in experiencing all that. However, his genuine faith and his joy in the Lord have time and again helped him keep going.

Another secret he shared with us is that he never explicitly asks for any financial support but God never ceases to show Himself as His sustainer. He told his friend that he had the best boss (God) in the world. He believes that his boss owns the best insurance company in the world and Pastor Tibor himself is richest because he always has all that he needs and what he has to provide for his family. Wow, Pastor Tibor's faith touched our hearts deeply and his life resonated with the message in Matthew 6: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added to you."

Now what?

Missions is living amongst the people, and learning to understand and to love them with words, and without words. Missions is a continual journey of trusting God. However, this mission trip was to me too short that we could barely call it a mission trip. Towards the end of the trip, a more matured member of our team shared with us his calling to be involved in missions and how his psychology background plays a part in it. Furthermore, he challenged us with this question: would you envision yourself to be on long-term missions? Before going on this trip, I would probably throw out a "no" right away. I cannot imagine myself preaching the gospel because I am not that articulate and I usually don't sound convincing in any conversations. However, this trip has shown me it's not so much about persuading people to believe in the gospel, but by God's guidance, in living with them, providing for their needs and, in this way, showing God's love to them. That is how Jesus wants us to live out the gospel.

(The author is a member of the C & MA Grace Chapel in Hong Kong.)

Blessed Roma family of Mica's

By Agnes L.P. Yeung



In a village in the city of Zrenjanin, Serbia, lives an extended Roma family of 7 persons (from 3 generations): Mica (the grandfather and head of the household), his wife, their daughter, son-in-law and 3 grandchildren in their teens. The village is inhabited by around 1,200 people, among whom there are 4 to 5 Roma families, including Mica's. According to Mica, there used to be more Roma families; but due to the economic downturn in Serbia, many people have gone to other countries, such as Germany, where there are better job opportunities.

It was a sunny afternoon when we went to visit Mica's family to hear his story and see his farms. Mica used to be a fisherman, but his income from fishing had progressively dwindled due to changes in the Government policies which posed various limitations on fishing activities. And so it became difficult for Mica and his family to make both ends meet. Nevertheless, at that critical juncture of needs, God sent Pastor Jovica from a local Serbian church to be their "angel." With the spiritual support and encouragement of Pastor Jovica, they successfully changed from fishing to farming plants and animals. Furthermore, with the financial aid brought to them by the GCCI short-term mission team last year, they started a greenhouse for farming some of their fruits and vegetables. They have reaped substantially richer produce this past year. Mica deeply feels that it is all

God's blessings upon his family. By his smiling face and grateful words, we all saw clearly his gratitude toward God!

Among the Romani, Mica's family is arguably one of the most blissful. Their living standard and conditions have improved a lot. Their house, though unimpressive on the outside, appeared very clean, tidy, and well-furnished; and their lawn was neatly mowed. We were served with delicious bread baked by Mica's wife and fragrant coffee brewed by his daughter. Evidently, their livelihood is much better than many other Romani. Mica told us that his daughter had high expectations for her 3 children. She hoped that they would study diligently at school and achieve successes in society. The 3 teenagers (aged 12, 14, and 16) are all still in high schools, unlike many Romani who quit school early. Hence all 3 of them know how to use the computer and the internet, just like ordinary Serbian youths, who are not out of touch with the world.

As Mica joyfully counted God's blessings, he shared with us how God had changed his life. He recounted that when he was just 6 years old his parents were separated and his father became an alcoholic. Subsequently, he and his sister became unattended street kids. In his early teens, Mica already started smoking, drinking and fighting. Then he got married at just 17 and became a father of 3 children. With the passage of time, his sister was converted to Christian- ► To P.11

Transformation Markers of the Middle East

By Luis Bush



Initiative of Transformation in the Middle East

Less than one month prior to the Istanbul airport terror attack at the end of June, Doris and I had spent about seven hours in that very same place on route from the Middle East. We had come from a Transform World Poverty Challenge Middle East gathering to focus discussion, planning and training to end poverty and bring hope for all the unreached villages in the region. It was based on the premise that empowering villagers to meet their own needs builds strong bonds of trust offering opportunities to share hope. Over the next week we were moved as we reflected on five potential transformation markers of the Middle East. The first transformation marker of the Middle East is an . . . Initiative of Transformation in the Middle East.

On the final day of the consultation we visited a transforming community village among the majority community which offered medical care, English language learning, crafts and more to six other villages. Could this model of a transformational, self-sustainable community be replicable throughout the region?

The Middle East Million Village Challenge consultation was a gathering of local leaders along with some who came from the region.

Hal Jones, Transform World 2020 Poverty Challenge facilitator and President of Global Hope Network International (GHNI) based in Geneva believing that acting to see transformed lives, is what motivates them to create an organization determined to help the isolated villagers. Today GHNI and teams are working in thirty villages in Africa, Asia and the Middle East more than 100 projects. They launched the Million Village Challenge in 2012 with a goal to build transformational, self-sustainable model communities among the fifty largest unreached people groups and the fifty largest unengaged people groups in all 78 countries of the 10/40 Window.

Delegates came from nine countries where there are Arab speakers. Most amazing was that, in spite of the fact that Christians were being severely limited or persecuted in many of the countries, the delegates, whom we called HERO'S shared amazing stories of God's moving. In one country in many of the churches there are more M (Muslim) converts than historical Christians. The Lord is using this chaos of the times to reveal the real love and truth and peace of Jesus! At the end of the conference thirty-two model villages were committed to. Since the average model is in a cluster of ten villages, this means approximately 320 villages were committed to!

A vision is born for the refugees! MULTIPLICA-

TION! In Jordan we had eight Iraqi and two Syrian refugees participate. All of them have suffered greatly and survived to make it to Jordan. Relief workers found them and discovered if they asked them to volunteer to help others, many would join! From that time many have come to the Lord, volunteer and now have taken the TCD (Transformational Community Development) training so they can train others from their country, both in the camps and also later back in their own or other countries. They have gone from being simply refugees to multiplying disciples!

One of those refugees called Shadar is a graduate of a technical college. When power to the village was cut off, he used his generator to power people's houses in exchange for a small fee. On the 5th of August, 2014, ISIS was approaching the area. At around 11 A.M., three children from the village were killed. When ISIS was only 200 meters away from Shadar's farm, his wife called him, asking him to come home.

Shadar dropped everything and went to his family, gathering up travel documents and leaving all other possessions. They piled into the car and took to the road. The ten-kilometer stretch of highway between Mosul and Irbil was stuffed with cars, some driving beside the road instead of on it. Passing through Khazer presented another challenge. Thousands of cars were forced to bottleneck onto a one-lane bridge. When the family arrived in Irbil, northern Iraq, they were given a tent so that they could sleep in a yard. They stayed in the tent for two months, in the August and September heat. At the end of September, they finally left for Jordan.

Shadar has now been in Jordan for a year and a half. He attends Pastor Rami's church and goes on home visits with Global Hope Network. His hope is to be a farmer again. Pastor Rami had reported a five fold growth in his congregation in the past two years at the Transform World 2020 Global Leadership Summit in 2016 in Incheon, Korea last year.

Under the title of "Seeing beyond their needs" Terry Dalrymple taught in the Middle East MVC (Million Village Challenge). "It is very important to see the people we serve as made in the image of God, and they are stewards of resources, not victims of circumstance. Transformational community development workers must look beyond the need. People are equipped to identify needs and resources, put together a plan, and mobilize volunteers to accomplish their vision. People are continually reflecting on what is happening in order to learn how to be more effective. Terry differentiated between two approaches: Needs Based Approaches which focuses on what people lack, results in services delivered by outsiders, creates passive recipients or consumers, reinforces negative



mindsets. The other one is Asset Based Approaches which focuses on what people have, results in sustainable development. People movements are the answer. They create active participants or producers, restore dignity and builds confidence.

The keys to Successful Transformational Development include the following: Worldview: A Vision for Transformation; Integration: A Holistic Approach; Local Ownership: Everyone is Involved; People before Projects: Building Capacity rather than Doing Projects and Multiplication: Sweeping the Country-side rather than Changing a Single Village.

Some participants of the Middle East Million Village Challenge consultation ended up together with a joyful raising of the hands with the backdrop of Mount Nebo, a high mountain located opposite the northern end of the Dead Sea, where, after 40 years leading the headstrong Israelites in the desert, Moses stood on the windswept summit of Mount Nebo and viewed the Promised Land of Canaan.

Ideological Transformation in the Middle East

A Recent Interview with a Respected Servant of God in the Region

John and I met for the first time in many years. We discussed a number of topics including his health issues, his ministry highlights, an assessment of what is happening in the Arab World and some conclusions. John began with some conclusions. As I have watched him over many years I have observed that he has been faithful to God's calling upon his life and has been used as one of God's choice servants with spiritual perception and unusual gift to proclaim and present God's truth focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

"The conclusions may shock you," John said: "We are at a crossroads in the Middle East. If the Christian community in the Middle East continue keeping their distance from their ideological neighbors, we will all miss God's moment. It is my conviction that more MBB's (Muslim-background believ-



ers) have come to faith in the last fifteen years than in fourteen centuries combined. If that is not the work of God then what is? Could this be the moment in history when an ideological transformation in the Middle East is, in fact, taking place before our very eyes?" However, "most Christians seem to want to meet other Christians only," John went on. "This is a crucial time for the Arab Christians to realize the incredible spiritual opening at the present time. It is very strange that this new reality doesn't seem to affect the average Christian in the Middle East. Earlier this year I met with some 200 Arab Christian leaders to talk about the need to make a major move to reach out to the majority population and seize God's moment. I believe the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully in our midst as we talked and prayed together." John has been invited to speak in many forums in the Middle East and beyond on this topic. One of the ministry highlights he describes was the opportunity to preach to some 75,000 people in a single meeting in Khartoum, Sudan. 5,000 Sudanese came forward to receive Jesus into their lives in a single night. God moved in an amazing way.

John wondered how to seize this Kairos moment of God's "appointed/approved time" (Mark 1:15, 2 Corinthians 6:2, 1 Peter 5:6) described as "The hour which is the God-given moment of destiny not to be shrunk from but seized with decisiveness, the flood-tide of opportunity and demand in which the unseen waters of the future surge down to the present." (Os)

At the Transform World 2020 Global Leadership Summit in Korea in October 2015 as we heard the reports of the delegation from the Middle East we were listening carefully as stories were told about the unprecedented migration from Syria and surroundings and openness of hearts to the Gospel. Again the testimonies suggested that an ideological transformation was in the making in the Middle East. One of the delegates from the Middle East said: "This is the time to demonstrate the power of Christ's love. As migrants came through our country they saw love in

action and responded as they witnessed and experienced the transforming power of Christ's love." And so it was. One of the persecuted cultural Christians from Iraq said to him: "The Jesus that I have never known is now in my heart."

In that gathering last year we received a report from our brothers and sisters in Christ from the Middle East about how they had a growing sense that the number of believers in Jesus from the majority community had not only doubled in one country but in the whole region. John, constrained by the love of Christ, has been used by the Lord to proclaim Him as Lord and personally witnessed around fifty thousand people come to Christ in a North African country according to one reliable source.

L (Luis): *Has the numbers of MBB's doubled in your view since the uprising as some of your colleagues reported a year ago?*

J (John): "Yes, I certainly believe so. In the last four months my wife and I were ministering in the Gulf State of Qatar. There is a hunger for God--the likes of which--I have never seen before. God is moving and we need to move along with God, not stand in His way."

L: *What is stopping Christians from witnessing?*

J: "The fear of pain. Every convert from the Majority Community needs a personal disciple and that is time-demanding and we are busy people. A convert has all kinds of basic questions which he or she would like to ask. They have mental and spiritual blockage and they want satisfying answers. On the other hand, Christians are afraid of pain because they may actually stand to lose their personal freedom if they are imprisoned for converting members of the Majority Community."

L: *How do You overcome this kind of fear?*

J: "You need to recognize that God is real. This is the time for Ms (Muslims). I (Islam) is slowly but surely giving up the ghost. Ms are victims of their own religion. If one commits a sin, there is no remedy in I other than that it tells you to go and pray, give alms, go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Sin, however, continues to pound on you with its devastating effects with no real way out. The ONLY way out is through Jesus who paid the full price for the remission of sin through the Cross. Ms are stuck with a religion that CANNOT help them.

"How tragic! A Sudanese lady in the center of Khartoum, Sudan, summed it all up one day. She was so fed up with I that she shouted at the top of her voice in the center of the city at noon and said: 'God: Don't you have anyone else to send us but the prophet Mohammad. We don't want him. Take him

back.’ Well known writers from a M background have been increasingly critiquing I more than ever.

“One way to interpret night is persecution the other is closed door. More and more people like R anchor of Al Hayat TV are very apostate of I and say so openly. Born the son of a M Imam in Morocco, Brother R memorized one-sixth of the entire Koran by age 6. He attended Hassan II University in Casablanca, where he studied economics and computer science. A careful self-study of the differences between I and Christianity led him to take correspondence courses for four years. This, in turn, led him to give his life to Jesus Christ in 1990. Also what’s happened in my understanding is that well known writers ‘from within’ are beginning to critique I. They are the intellectual class.”

L: You said you thought ISIS did not only represent Jihadist I but that it is an expression of I. When I asked your brother Y, who pastors here the same question he said precisely what you did.”

J: “ISIS is I and I is ISIS. If you become a true M you must become ISIS because everything ISIS does is in the Koran. This is the correct conclusion because it represents everything Muhammad said. The only solution for them is to come out of I to receive Christ like in the case of R.”

L: Why are more and more people like R turning to Christianity?

J: “The reasons are, 1.) because of M extremism, 2.) It’s not making sense anymore. That’s true, it’s not making sense anymore. Of the two million M refugees who have come recently from Iraq and Syria most are insecure in their faith. They are asking the question, ‘why is this happening to me?’ Many are finding the unconditional love extended by Christian

ministers in the country compelling. Also what’s happened, in my understanding, is this, well known writers ‘from within’ are beginning to critique their own ideology. They are the intellectual class.

“As I discussed this with other Christian leaders in the region we believe that since 1990 until now the numbers of MBB’s have more than doubled in the Middle East. It is my conviction that more MBB’s have come to faith in the last fifteen years that in fourteen centuries combined. ‘If that is not the work of God then what is.’ These are the Golden Harvest times. It’s a climactic time.”

L: How do you explain the nature of your prophetic role?

J: “I have asked myself that question many times. I believe it is the gifting by the Holy Spirit, since 1983, not only prophesying, but speaking the Word of God with power. My father’s role in my life was very important. He served the Lord for over 55 years.” John said his father’s testimony would be like this: “I would wake up normally around 3:30 am, go to Jesus and sit at His feet. I speak to Him and He speaks with me on so many things while my Bible is open. At day break I tell Jesus: ‘Please lay your hands on me and send me on a mission for today.’”

L: What is your advice to Christ followers today in the Middle East and around the world?

J: “You must work while it is day. Night is coming when no man can work. One way I interpret that night is the night of persecution. Another way to interpret the night is ‘a closed door.’”

(Luis Bush is the Catalyst of Transform World.)

►From P.7 ity and began to preach the gospel to other people. She also visited Mica’s family and shared her testimonies with them. Around 1999 to 2000, Mica, his wife as well as their 2 daughters received Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Praise the Lord! After having believed in Christ and got baptized, Mica felt that his life had been significantly changed. He has since quit smoking and drinking and would not want to tread the same old path. Relying upon the Lord, Mica has been able to live a new life. Now he often seeks God’s guidance to walk the right paths, in his pursuit to be a good father and grandfather. He is thankful because the Lord Jesus has been caring for his whole family.

Mica’s family is so blessed not only in their improved living standard and conditions but also in having the constant spiritual nurturing by Pastor Jovica, who comes to visit the family every Thurs-

day to pray and study the Bible with them, giving them tender pastoral care. By virtue of such constant spiritual nurturing, they have developed commitment to their pursuit of faith and spiritual growth. Even when occasionally Pastor Jovica could not come to visit them, they themselves would pray together as a family. What a beautiful picture!

Apart from Mica’s family, Pastor Jovica also pastors one to two Roma families in the same village. Through his persistent and tireless ministries, the Romani have gained steady spiritual growth in the love of Christ. May the Lord continue to use Pastor Jovica to build up many more Roma families, amen!

(The author is studying at Yan Fook Bible Institute in Hong Kong. She was a 2016 summer intern at GCCI Hong Kong Office.)

World Mission News

Compiled by Samuel C.Y. Ling, Agnes Young

United Kingdom: There are almost two million adults living with a learning disability and 1.2 million more with a severe visual or hearing impairment. They are often viewed as the least evangelized group in the world. Many of them in the church feel excluded and embarrassed because they are commonly provided with a children's Bible. Biblica has started the "Accessible Bible" — a Bible that utilizes special fonts, illustrations and layouts for easier reading and comprehension.

<Mission Network News, www.mnnonline.org, 7/8/16>

India: Due to poverty, women are tricked, forced or even sold by parents into sex slavery. Christian agencies have collaborated in providing drop-in centers within the red light district, to develop relationships with them, gain their trust, renew their sense of self-worth, and share the love of Christ with them. Homes are provided for those who want to leave including their children, where they can get an education and learn a trade.

<Mission Network News, www.mnnonline.org, 6/9/16>

Ukraine: The Ukrainian military has been in conflict with separatists since 2014. More than 9,000 people have died in the fighting so far. In tumultuous situations where soldiers' emotions and mind may fail them, and all comfort is gone that they feel the greatest need for the Gospel. Faith Comes by Hearing (FCBH) so far has given out over 1,100 audio Bibles (of the New Testament and select Psalms) in the form of Military BibleSticks. Many have felt incredibly encouraged and strengthened.

<Mission Network News, www.mnnonline.org, 5/26/16>

Columbia: A violent guerilla group, National Liberation Army, has repeatedly threatened pastors in the area they control. Pastors refusing to pay "protection money" were given a list of demands and new restrictions: no more house meetings for Bible study, prayer, or other activities; no new churches built; no foreign guests; and no new pastor from outside of the area.

<Voice of Martyrs, www.persecution.com, 7/22/2016>

Cuba: Believers cannot evangelize publicly. A team of evangelists conducting outreach programs was arrested and detained for hours, though a second team did finish their work. The government has threatened to close thousands of churches. Existing churches are forbidden to add on to their buildings or have a sign on their front doors. New churches are denied building permits. Churches are precluded from buying building materials in traditional market, and evidence of 'illegally-obtained building material' has led to churches being closed. Authorities actually have the right to destroy the entire building. Some churches are denied basic utilities like electricity. Christians, however, are standing firm.

<Voice of Martyrs, www.persecution.com, 7/26/2016>

Nigeria: The 7-year rebellion by the Islamist group Boko Haram has left 20,000 people dead and more than two million displaced. Many internally displaced people (IDP) are facing malnutrition. The crisis is particularly acute in Borno State, but other neighboring states like Adamawa and Yobe are also affected. A catholic-church-run IDP camp in Yola, which has about 1,000 people, has not received any external support for over a year. The church's resources are over-stretched to feed the people, at the expense of other programs. "We may probably run out of food in the next four months, if help does not come..." said Father M. Kweirang.

<WorldWatch Monitor, www.worldwatchmonitor.org, 7/26/16>

Nepal/Senegal: World Mission is committed to making disciples and that requires raising up effective, trained, competent leaders. Its specific targets are Nepal and Senegal. Nepal has a population of about 28 million, and 80 % Hindus. Senegal has 12 million people, and 90 % Muslims. Many pastors have no access to any kind of training. WM invests in the Shiloh training centers, as requested and run by local believers. Dozens, even hundreds of pastors from these countries can come to be equipped and receive training from spiritually mature nationals who pour out their lives.

<Mission Network News, www.mnnonline.org, 7/29/16>

Moldova: In this one of the poorest countries in Europe, an agency is helping farmers to improve their lives by providing micro loans through local churches and training in farming technique. A woman in her 20s got a loan to start a greenhouse growing peppers that bring a good income through a contract with the local pizza place. She has a zeal for evangelism leading most of her family to Christ with one brother becoming a pastor. She is building a small center for abused children and wants to build one for elderly people. As per rules of the interest-free loans, after her loan was paid back she tithes to the church promoting its outreach program.

<Farms International, www.farmsinternational.com, 6/30/16>

Digital or hard copy scripture: In many countries, people prefer the latter. It doesn't require any power, and it can be hidden in many places. An agency has created a machine compact enough to transport secretly, and yet able to print thousands of copies of the New Testament. A Print On Demand system is being used in areas like the Middle East, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and north-eastern Nigeria. Believers in the Middle East in the past year printed over 190,000 copies of booklets. Early this year in the Middle East a system was discovered at a location, and four believers were killed there. One survived. The system will be replaced in a new location, because they are so hungry for the scripture and willing to risk their lives for a paper copy of it in their own language.

<Wycliffe Associates, www.wycliffe.org, 7/1/16>