

Churches Offer 'True Sanctuary' For Immigrants Fleeing to Belgium

Charismatic congregations are reaching refugees in Brussels

Thousands of asylum-seekers from such hot spots as Kosovo, the Middle East and former Soviet republics are making their way to Brussels, Belgium, seeking sanctuary from political and economic turmoil, religious persecution, torture, or death threats.

They come to Brussels looking for political refuge, but many are finding a spiritual sanctuary, thanks to two charismatic churches that are reaching out to them with the gospel.

Of the 390,000 asylum-seekers who made their way to the European Union (EU) last year, Belgium, a country about the size of Maryland, received 42,000 applicants, the highest rate per capita among EU members.

"With its central location, ports, open borders and welfare state, this country is thought to be popular with asylum-shoppers—migrants looking around for the best deal," according to an article in *The Bulletin*, a Brussels newsweekly.

Although their escape to the west is a dream come true, most encounter nightmares in the process: asylum denials, separation from family and friends, or a life of poverty after having sold their possessions to pay human traffickers for safe passage.

It is during these dark days of disillusionment and disappointment that Christian Center, an international Assembly of God church, and Praise Center, an independent charismatic church, seek to help.

Christian Center, a 500-member congregation south of the city, transports refugees to Sunday services, feeds them after church, and offers them language-specific fellowships they can attend during the week.

“Over the last couple of years, people’s stories have drawn more on Christian compassion,” said Terry Hoggard, pastor. “For example, the Kosovo crisis is a European issue and touches the whole continent.”

Praise Center, in the heart of Brussels, has just purchased a 1,000-seat auditorium to accommodate its growing congregation of 600, half of them refugees or former asylum-seekers.

“People told us that after the refugees were accepted into society they would stop coming to church,” said Bert Phagan, pastor. “But that’s not been true. We’ve shown them love when they were down and out, and they’ve kept coming.”

Both churches began their outreaches at the Petit Château refugee center, a converted 19th-century military barracks that holds 650 asylum-seekers. Evangelos Evangelides, Christian Center director of church outreaches, has been leading a weekly evangelistic service at the Petit Château for more than 10 years.

“I’ve lost count of the number who have accepted Jesus and started churches in Belgium and, literally, all over the

world," the Brussels layman said.

According to Hoggard, Christian Center's refugee ministry has birthed at least 25-30 churches.

"And those are just the ones we know about," he said. "In Belgium alone our church has helped start a number of fellowships for indigenous groups including Ghanians, Koreans, Albanians, Russians, Spanish-speakers and others."

To meet the growing demand of the refugee community, Christian Center recently spent more than \$20,000 to add five translation booths to their existing two, enabling translation of up to seven languages by headsets and two by microphone.

Christian Center's newest outreach is a joint service with Southern Baptist missionaries. Its Sunday afternoon "Open Doors" service emphasizes salvation and simple Christian teachings.

Praise Center provides transportation for refugees from three centers. The church also staffs a coffeehouse near the Petit Château, offering free coffee and one-on-one evangelism.

During one recent month, 780 visitors from 43 countries attended. Phagan also uses music as a bridge, offering free lessons to build relationships and evangelize.

The church hosts Filipino, Russian, Iranian and Brazilian services, as well as English-speaking and French-speaking services throughout the week.

Like most asylum-seekers, Nikolla Fikaj had never read a Bible or heard about Jesus before coming to Belgium. The 23-year-old Albanian was staying in Antwerp when a friend invited him to the Petit Château service led by Evangelides.

“At that time, many Albanians were leaving Kosovo because of the war, and they needed a translator for the Petit Château service,” he said. “Evangelos asked me to read the Bible and to translate his messages. This is how I learned about Jesus.”

A legal resident of Belgium now, Fikaj takes his faith to the streets, sharing Jesus with refugees, especially Albanians, and has seen more than 30 accept Christ.

One 27-year-old who wished to remain anonymous was fleeing political and religious persecution in Uzbekistan when he came to Christian Center.

“I’ve found many openhearted people here who have taken time for me and cared for me,” he said. “It makes a great difference.”

-Jeff Slaughter in Brussels, Belgium