

Evangelists Embark on Big Fat Greek Mission

Hundreds of thousands of anxious men and women, making their way from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, view Greece as the gateway to the West. Many analysts believe there are 1 to 1.3 million immigrants in Greece, making up as much as 10 percent of the population. With Greece suffering its worst economic crisis in recent history, the tendency of many citizens is to blame foreigners.

Neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn has taken advantage of the rising xenophobia. Members flaunt black shirts, Nazi salutes and a stylised swastika as their logo. With such extreme proposals as forcing immigrants into work camps and planting landmines along the Turkish border, this party won 21 seats in the Greek parliament in last year's election.

People Trafficking

The anti-foreigner climate has done nothing to discourage the import of human beings for prostitution. Approximately 20,000 women—1,000 of them between the ages of 13 and 15—are caught in Greece's lucrative sex industry.

Operation Mobilization (OM) Greece supports the local ministry Nea Zoi (New Life) which reaches out to people involved in prostitution. Last year, OM Greece team member Rose* met Joy*, a woman smuggled from Nigeria and forced to work in brothels to pay back her traffickers. Learning that Jane's bosses would be away during a specific period, the Nea Zoi team succeeded in getting her out of that situation. Rose took Jane to the International Organization for Migration and helped her through the process of reclaiming her life.

Rita* was also trafficked from Nigeria, with the promise she could work on obtaining her master's degree in Athens.

Instead, the young woman found herself forced into prostitution and soon became pregnant. Once free, she hoped to get a passport for herself and her baby, so she could pursue her studies in Belgium. OM Greece—with funds provided by the Freedom Climb project—partnered with a shelter, A21, and Nea Zoi to finally make Rita's dream possible.

OM is also using funds from the Freedom Climb to partner with the Evangelical Church of Volos, which began in January to renovate a building to serve as a shelter for abused women. Freedom Climb money channeled through OM Greece is also helping to fund a cloth bag-making project in Nea Zoi, which will generate income for the women.

Re-defining Missions

OM Greece Field Leader Gabby Markus is himself a foreigner from Papua New Guinea, but he is accepted through his marriage to a Greek woman, Evie, whom he met while doing relief work in Sri Lanka.

"When I went into Greek homes I learned that they don't like 'missionaries', which is what they call evangelicals," he says. "They have the mentality that missionaries are tourists living at other peoples' expense. After World War II, the missionaries who came to Greece found the language and culture difficult, so they tended to develop ministries outside existing churches.

"Missions that come and try to drag the churches into their vision just don't work," he adds. "Greeks are proud and patriotic. They feel this way of doing things shows a lack of respect for churches. That's why OM's approach—partnering with the church to witness to the world for Christ—seems most acceptable."

Last summer a Transform outreach team came to Greece for 14 days and formed close relationships with the people. Seven young Greeks also went on a Transform outreach to Italy.

Churches Taking Ownership

"A few weeks ago, an elder in my church got up after the Sunday service and told everyone, 'When I became a Christian, I thought mission was a business. But now I know that God want us all to do missions,'" Gabby says. "That's exciting!"

Gabby says when OM Greece partnered with a Greek church to feed unemployed, homeless people and refugees last year, the church members took it over and ran it.

"This is an amazing transformation," he says. "Just two years ago it would not be possible to see foreigners welcomed into the churchyard to be fed. Now they feed up to 130 people from Syria, Iran, Bangladesh, Eastern Europe and many other countries each day."

As part of the food outreach, Gabby says, OM Greece lays out books and Bibles in different languages for people to take—and they disappear. Last September OM Greece, in partnership with the church, raised funds to add a kitchen in the back of the church, so that people could get hot food instead of cold. This February they launched a second feeding programme in Piraeus port, in partnership with another church that oversees the day-to-day running of the programme.

As an extension of the feeding programme, adds Gabby, the church now also runs a drop-in centre for homeless people where they can get tea or coffee, do their laundry and take showers. OM contributed to the start-up of this project and will continue to support it as they raise more funds for the operating cost.

Birth of Migrant Church Network

Greece's migrant believer population now exceeds that of all the Greek evangelical believers put together. Last June a Migrant Church Network was formed, with over 80 churches participating.

"OM has been gaining access into these churches, and they have

asked us to do discipleship training,” Gabby says. “Twenty-six Filipinos just graduated from the first course and a second course is planned soon. We are hoping to organise an international worship and prayer event that promotes Greek and migrant churches working together.

“The ‘ends of the earth’ has come to Greece,” finishes Field Leader Gabby with a smile. “God brought them to us! I believe He is doing a new thing.”

**Name changed*