

In the Shadow of the Mosque

In most Muslim nations, sharing the gospel is forbidden. But observers believe that Turkey—where the New Testament church flourished—may be the key to reaching all of the Middle East.

The first time that Ali Pektas had an encounter with Jesus Christ was in Mecca, Saudi Arabia—the spiritual heart of Islam.

“I was working in Saudi Arabia and joined a hajj, a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca—without being in any way religious. It was the first time in my life that I prayed,” says Pektas, who comes from Malatya in central Turkey.

“One night [during the hajj] I had a dream. I saw Jesus, and He was very bright and reached out to embrace me. He then touched my forehead and said, ‘You belong to Me.’”

Pektas—being from a communist family who lived in a Muslim country—had heard the name of Jesus but knew nothing about Him and had never met a Christian.

The next morning, one of his friends asked him: “What happened to your forehead? It looks phosphorous!” Unconcerned, Pektas got into his car to drive back to the center of Mecca to continue the hajj.

“The car was brand-new, but it did not start,” he recalls. “The ignition was dead, and I heard a voice saying: ‘You cannot go.’” Pektas made a decision to leave Mecca instead—and immediately the car started.

Later he heard the voice again, telling him to return home to Turkey. Today at age 45, and 12 years after his Mecca experience, Pektas is a student at the two-year Istanbul Bible Training Center, preparing for full-time ministry. Larry Mills, his pastor and the school’s director, confided in

Charisma that he just might turn over his church to Pektas in the near future.

Determined to Grow

The number of ethnic Turks associated with charismatic and evangelical churches is still minuscule in Muslim Turkey—about 2,000 in 50 million. The population of Turkey totals some 66 million, but about 13 million are Kurds, and 3 million are of other minorities.

The mere fact that an indigenous Turkish church has been established in the last 15 years and Turkish church leaders such as Pektas are now emerging has unnerved the government. It is under constant pressure from nationalist lobbies and popular opinion to preserve Turkey's traditional identity as a Muslim nation.

In the most recent wave of discriminatory measures against Christians, local authorities notified 15 congregations that their buildings were not "licensed for worship" and ordered them to abandon their services. A Christian school in Ankara was closed, and seven of its foreign staff members were deported. Ankara believers have received bomb threats, and a series of national TV talk shows have stirred anti-Christian sentiments.

Turkish pastors who met with Charisma in Istanbul explained that the latest wave of harassment has not caused the country's Christians to lose heart, but has actually revealed a determination not previously displayed by Turkey's believers during periods of government pressure.

They pointed out that not one church has bowed to the threats or complied with the close-down order. Instead the pastors hired a lawyer and appealed the ruling in a concerted legal action that is unprecedented in Turkey.

The Anadolu Protestant Church in Istanbul, pastored by Levent

Kinran, wasn't among the 15 ordered to close. But in a decision that reflects the new willingness of the Turkish church leadership to face the current challenge head-on, the Anadolu congregation actually reported itself by notifying police that their church was unlicensed.

"We are determined to live in the open and to gain recognition," Kinran told Charisma. The congregation's boldness was rewarded. Although Kinran's church gathers in a building that is quite "unlicensed," the authorities assured the pastor that "everything is OK."

"What we are up against is not persecution," Kinran says. "Some time ago a pastor from Iran spoke in our church. When he returned home he was killed. That is persecution. Compared to the Iran believers, we are doing fine."

Pastor Behnan Konutgan, president of the Turkish Evangelical Alliance, also stresses the positive influence the current difficulties are having on the nation's Christians, saying that "it has brought the churches together, to protest and to pray."

In Turkey, religion traditionally is defined in political rather than spiritual terms. Christianity is viewed as the religion of Turkey's historical enemies in western Europe and the United States.

Christianity is also associated with the blatant immoralities of the West, which in the last 15 years have invaded the Turkish mass media and youth culture, fanning opposition from faithful Muslims.

The 80-year-old Republic of Turkey is, constitutionally, a secular state granting religious liberties. Its predominant political force, however, always was and still is a ruthlessly aggressive brand of nationalism that claims the only acceptable citizen is an ethnically Turkish Muslim.

Consequently, Turkey's ethnic minorities, Christian and Muslim, have been subjected to discrimination that has ranged from harassment to genocide. During the years 1915-1916 and 1922-1923, 1.5 million (out of 2.5 million) Christian Armenians living in the eastern provinces around Mount Ararat were killed. To this day Turkey denies the genocide occurred.

The estimated 13 million Muslim Kurds in Turkey still live under martial law. Some 3,000 Kurdish villages have been destroyed, and the Turkish army has displaced about 3 million Kurds since the 1980s.

The discrimination against the new churches is also nationalistically motivated. Turks turning to Christianity are suspected of political and cultural treason and are marked as "hirelings of Western powers."

This applies to evangelical and charismatic churches in particular because of their Western-style worship and close ties with (and often financial dependence on) U.S. and western European churches and missionaries. Pastor Konutgan, who is evangelical and an Assyrian—not an ethnic Turk—has been arrested 20 times or more since his conversion 24 years ago, always on spy charges.

Pastor Carlos Madrigal, a Spaniard ministering in Istanbul since 1985, is the president of the church-planting Silas Network. He says police questioned him frequently in the first years of his ministry and arrested him once. They always insisted he must be an enemy agent hired to "divide" Turkey.

"But in fact I supported both my family and my ministry through a normal secular job in those days, so there was no way a case could be built against me," he says.

In spite of the resistance, the charismatic and evangelical churches in Turkey are growing in number as well as Turkish identity. Madrigal says that until 1995, foreign workers were taking the spiritual initiative to spread the gospel. After

that time, Turkish church leaders started developing a vision for their nation and taking the lead.

Kinran confirms that the situation has changed entirely during the last 15 years. He became a believer in 1987 and joined Istanbul's first ethnically Turkish church, which had been planted a year earlier.

"Today there are 24 evangelical and charismatic churches in Istanbul, and many have a Turkish identity," he says. "Three months after my conversion, the New Testament in modern Turkish was published. A revision of the Old Testament was published in 2001.

"Two Christian radio stations are on the air," he continues. "You find Christian ads in Turkish papers. Back in 1987 there were very few Christian books in Turkish. Now we have translated and authored many titles."

Kinran is himself a translator, as well as the author of a Christian novel and one of the editors currently working on the first Turkish Bible dictionary. <P > **Key to the Muslim World**

Kinran was born to a Muslim family in Istanbul in 1967, and his testimony illustrates how Turkey was confronted by the full gospel for the first time since the days when the apostle Paul planted churches along the Mediterranean coast.

"My father was a nonreligious alcoholic, but my mother was a practicing Muslim," he explains. "I did not question Islam, but it was never my religion."

The same could be said of most young Turks. Secularization is racing among the youth, with cities adopting a loose Westernized lifestyle at an incredible pace. "Most young people have grown indifferent of religion," Kinran claims.

At 17 he studied British and American literature at Istanbul

University and says he was inspired by the classics to “start asking the hard questions about the meaning of life.” Looking for answers, he turned to Islam.

“I prayed five times a day, studied Arabic and read the Quran, but I could not find God,” Kinran recalls. “Being surrounded by atheist fellow students, I also read Freud and Nietzsche. But altogether I did not seem to get anywhere.”

By age 19 “life seemed pointless,” Kinran says. He was desperate enough to seek comfort in alcohol and drugs. But one day he ran into an American Christian at a bus stop, made friends and was given an American Bible.

“What really struck me reading it was the person of Jesus,” he says. “I read the Gospel of John over and over again. Jesus’ claim to be God was so overwhelming that I ended up crying.”

There were very few Christians in Turkey in the mid-1980s, but Kinran met with one new believer who was able to help him clarify the basics of his newfound faith. Realizing why Jesus had come to die on the cross, Kinran says, became “a transforming experience, and I started feeling God’s touch.”

Kinran joined the Turkish Protestant Church, planted by Campus Crusade for Christ and later heavily influenced by the Vineyard movement. Today the group consists of three congregations in Istanbul, and Kinran says half the members became Christians through “power encounters” with the Holy Spirit.

The reaction by Kinran’s family to his conversion was traumatic. It is still common that even nonreligious families disown children who leave Islam.

“I lived with my parents, the way we do in Turkey,” Kinran explains. “I chose not to mention Christianity at home, but after some time my mother started receiving bomb threats! ‘Your son has joined an organization that is conspiring to

divide Turkey—beware!’”

One day Kinran’s photo, accompanied by slanderous text, appeared on the cover of one of the leading newspapers. His mother had contacted the reporter. Later she asked the police to arrest her son.

“The police didn’t arrest me, but it was awful,” Kinran says. “I felt hate for my mother and wanted to leave home. But the Lord told me no! A few years later my father died of a heart attack, and my mother said my betrayal caused his death—and threw me out.”

Family relationships of Muslim Turks converting to Christianity are often tested, even severed. Today Kinran sees his mother again. “We are not close, but at least we visit,” he says.

Konutgan explains to Charisma: “Our problem is not with the government as such. Turkish law does not forbid Christianity. But the government is not free. It is afraid of the people.”

Konutgan came to the Lord at a time when there were “no more than 10 believers in all of Turkey,” he says. His Christian roots reach back to the third century, when missionaries from Antioch (Turkish Antakya today) planted churches among Assyrians in Haran, the ancient homeland of Abraham—also located in Turkey, just north of Syria.

With conviction, Konutgan exclaims to Charisma: “As Christians we love Turkey and its government, but we hate these nationalism and fear!” If they were overcome, he says, thousands would come to know the Lord.

There are now some 50 charismatic and evangelical churches in Turkey that comprise some 4,000 believers. Ali Pektas’ pastor, Larry Mills, is a graduate of Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and a missionary to Turkey, Germany and Bulgaria since 1986. He agrees with pastor Konutgan that

Turkey is ready for revival.

"Something has softened up the hearts of the people," Mills says. "I am convinced that the many prayer initiatives—the prayer during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month; the prayer through the 10/40 Window—have played a major role. If we find ways to spread the Word to the masses—for example, by employing mass media—we will see a major revival.

"I believe Turkey is a key to the entire Muslim world," Mills continues. "Christianity is not illegal in Turkey, and the ambition to prove itself a democracy and a worthy candidate for the European Union keeps the country from yielding fully to the nationalist lobby."

Mills emphasizes the importance of the ongoing legal infighting with the authorities for full recognition. But the main focus in the next years, he says, must be the training of Turkish leaders.

Mills reflects: "We keep asking God, 'When?' I perceive God is asking us, 'When?'"—but then adds: "As soon as we see to it that there are many more Turkish pastors like Ali Pektas, revival will come!"

The Turkish Challenge

Ministers inside Turkey say sensitivity is crucial for those who are called to share Christ there.

Old-timers in Istanbul joke that there used to be "one [foreign] missionary for each believer" in the ancient Turkish city—hearkening to a time when Turkey was hardly seen as a promising mission field. Today, instead of one missionary for every believer, the new ratio is half of that—300 foreign missionaries for the city's 600 charismatic and evangelical believers.

There is, however, a renewed and accelerating interest in

Turkey as a mission field. Mission activity is on the rise in the wake of the 10/40 Window international prayer movement, the involvement of Christian agencies with the victims of the 1999 Turkey earthquake, the long-term work of Phoenix-based International Turkish Network, as well as other initiatives. Turkish leaders and missionaries working in the country agree that international backing for the church is still vitally needed.

Yet cultural issues, as well as issues of attitude that Turkish leaders hinted at, continue to cause tensions between the national and the missionary Christian communities in Turkey.

Pastor Behnan Konutgan, president of the Turkish Evangelical Alliance, told Charisma he could tell “many, many stories” of “missionaries behaving in an insensitive [and disrespectful] way” toward the Turkish people. He counsels the international church to support Turkey through prayer, and he advises foreigners who want to live in Turkey to consult the local leadership for ways they can help.

Long-term, experienced missionaries such as pastors Carlos Madrigal of Spain and Larry Mills of the United States both stress that Turkey does not necessarily need an influx of missionaries. Short-term teams in particular tend to tie up rather than add to the resources of the national church.

Mills says he would welcome “to help train national leaders.” Madrigal says missionaries have to “invest their lives to produce fruit” by staying long term and learning the language and culture.

Phoenix-based Beyond the Borders cooperates with national leaders such as Konutgan and seasoned missionaries such as Madrigal and Mills to inspire and facilitate cross-culturally sensitive mission work in Turkey. Twice a year the organization’s director, Joy Wright, who moved to Istanbul in

January 2000, invites American charismatics to her new hometown if they have an interest in praying for Turkey or helping the church there. In that setting, she introduces the visitors to national leaders.

“You cannot love people without knowing them,” Wright stresses. “While the need in Turkey is great and the Western church has something to offer, our contribution may be more acceptable if we court the Turkish church rather than trying to dominate it.

“We should feel free to present our ideas, but trust the Turkish leaders to reshape them to fit their culture,” she adds.

A few years ago, while on a shopping tour in Istanbul, Wright says she was overcome with a longing to see the country won to Christ. Today, traveling from Istanbul several weeks out of each year, she visits charismatic prayer groups in the United States to inspire ongoing intercession for Turkey.

Notes Wright: “Independent charismatic churches are still not as aware of the importance of Turkey as they should be”.

Tomas Dixon, a journalist based in Sweden, is Charisma’s correspondent to Europe and the Middle East.