

My Big Fat Greek Outreach

American missionary Jerry Winter has returned to his forefathers' homeland to spearhead a massive evangelistic effort at the 2004 Olympic Games.

Jerry Winter* grew up separated from his family in Greece by what he describes as "90 years and an ocean." But during a family reunion in a small Greek town not long ago, he reconnected. In less than an hour newly formed relationships with his relatives had closed the decades-old gap, while depositing in Winter a keen sense of God at work.

Today Winter's homecoming, with its focal point of relationship, has proved to be a working model for how a widespread evangelistic effort taking place during the Summer Olympics in Greece this month can be successful.

When the California-born Winter took his wife and children with him to Trikala—the Greek town his grandfather had left in 1910 and never revisited—a banquet was held in his honor at the local fort. The mayor presided, long-lost cousins wept, unknown grandmas and aunties lovingly pinched his face, and newly met uncles delivered speeches. There was dancing, singing and celebrating for hours—a Big Fat Greek Party for the returning "prodigal."

For Winter—a third-generation Greek who couldn't speak the language, had never known a single relative in Greece and had not enjoyed much contact with his Greek relatives in the United States—the enthusiasm and grandeur of the welcome he received beat with the pulse of God Himself.

He recalls a local Member of Parliament walking up to him

during the banquet and saying: "This is a significant moment. You cannot even guess what you have started today."

Others also could see that God was up to something. Pastor friends in Athens told Winter his family-reunion experience was not just for him. It was also "a message for the nation of Greece," they said.

"Most people in this country need to reconnect just like you did," the Greek church leaders stressed, "to each other—and to God."

Friendship Evangelism

The importance of relationship to the Greeks that Winter had felt so deeply in Trikala took on new meaning when a year later, in July 2003, he moved to Athens with his wife, Lea, and their four children. He had returned to Greece to prepare to direct the evangelistic outreaches of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) during the 2004 Olympics, August 13-29.

Winter had done the same job with YWAM during former Olympic Games, but this time he sensed that God wanted a distinctly new approach—one shaped by his personal experience with his Greek relatives.

"To experience connectedness with the Lord, the Greeks need to experience human connectedness first," Winter says. As a result, he started telling young YWAM workers around the world: "Come to Greece—and make a friend!"

By the time the Summer Games open August 13 at the Olympic

Stadium in Athens, hundreds of YWAM volunteers and thousands of Christians from around the world will have arrived to share their faith with participants, international visitors and Greeks alike.

"If you make a friend, you will be invited to his or her family," Winter explains. "Once you are in a family, you are at the heart of Greek life."

Randal Weidenaar, a Chicago believer who has lived in Athens with his family for more than five years, agrees.

"The key to revival in Greece is *parea*," Weidenaar told Charisma.

Parea is Greek for "circle of close friends." The Christian concepts of friendship-evangelism and home-based care groups may be big around the world, but they are even bigger in Greece, Weidenaar notes.

"The *parea* is the center of Greek life," he says. "The way to reach the many seekers out there is to invite them home."

Informal home groups, also, in Weidenaar's opinion, bridge the gap that exists between the predominant Greek-Orthodox religious culture and the charismatic, Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Greece. Ninety-eight percent of the 10.7 million Greeks are Orthodox. The Protestants number 15,000-20,000, or no more than percent of the population, and their churches are commonly looked upon as foreign, even culturally alien.

Weidenaar explains that the Orthodox Church “requires close to nothing in terms of attendance or moral standards.”

“The one thing you should not do is to give up [your church membership],” he says, “and that is the first thing most Protestant churches are after.”

The membership issue, he adds, “creates a chasm that seekers need to jump over to find spiritual life,” and to many Greeks, that gulf is too wide. Even the young and secular Greeks see “no point in making their mothers upset and risking social alienation by leaving a church that doesn’t ask anything of them anyway,” Weidenaar notes.

In contrast, home groups fit into the parea culture and resolve the age-old tension between the Greek mentality and the Greek religious traditions, Weidenaar reasons. “The Greeks are very relational, very warmhearted and very real,” he says, “and their church is very formal and very institutionalized!”

Outreach teams visiting for one or two weeks during the Olympics, or longer, will not have time to start Greek house churches, but Weidenaar points out that team members can make friends, possibly visit families, establish friendships by e-mail and help connect Greek seekers to Greek believers.

YWAM, which is expecting some 750 young people from more than 20 countries to assist its effort, does not have a set agenda for the outreaches during the August Olympics, campaign coordinator Holly Poteet told Charisma.

“We assign the locations but leave it up to each team to seek the Lord for what to do,” Poteet says. “There are many

possibilities—doing sports with Greek kids, presenting dances from your country of origin, Christian drama, interceding—or simply talking to people.”

Hellenic Ministries, a major Greek missions organization, takes a stricter approach than YWAM. Its international teams all will follow the same program: three days of prayer and fasting, three days of literature distribution, three days of street evangelism.

Unlike most ministries operating in Greece during the August Olympics, Hellenic Ministries will not be targeting the Olympic sites, director Jonathan Macris told Charisma. In August Greece will be turned upside down, he says, with most tourists flocking to the mainland and “all Greeks who can fleeing to the islands.”

“Our goal is to reach the Greeks, so we are sending teams to some 80 islands,” Macris says.

In addition, the teams will come together for joint outreaches during the opening and closing ceremonies in Athens. Altogether, Hellenic Ministries claims its operation is the biggest-ever outreach to Greece.

‘I See God Working’

During the last several years Hellenic Ministries and others have increasingly been mobilizing intercessors around the world to pray for Greece in preparation for the Olympics outreaches. Macris says God is now answering those prayers.

"I see God working on people's hearts everywhere I turn," he says excitedly. "Earlier this year I was served a parking ticket ... and ended up conversing with the policeman. He just opened his heart and told me about the corruption that is everywhere and that he might lose his job because he was trying to stand for righteousness.

"'I am no longer proud of being Greek,' the policeman said, and added: 'Do you know who is ruling this place? Satan and his demons!'

"This was just a normal young officer," Macris adds. "Tell me—had God been working on his heart or not?"

Macris also tells the story of an Orthodox priest in a mountain village who used to be so closed-hearted that he forbade his parishioners to buy bread from the village baker, who was an evangelical believer.

"But then the priest had an accident, and obviously God touched him," Macris says. "Last time we sent a team to the village the priest walked up to our people and spent two hours with them reading the Bible. In the end he asked one team member, a guy from Florida, to preach to the villagers, in the street."

Such an occurrence is revolutionary in a country where non-Orthodox believers are typically viewed as foreign spies or Greek traitors and are routinely harassed and persecuted. It is still forbidden by law to proselytize in Greece—that is, to persuade someone to change his or her religious affiliation.

Poteet and Weidenaar confirm that God has begun to reveal

Himself supernaturally to many Greeks. Once while eating out, Poteet talked to a waiter about Jesus being a “personal” God. She asked the man if he would want Jesus to reveal Himself to him.

“Would He?” the waiter asked.

“Pray, and see if God responds in a personal way!” she replied.

The waiter said he would if Poteet agreed to come back to find out what had happened.

“I did,” Poteet says, “and the man had had a dream from God!”

Weidenaar tells how, for an elderly woman in his parea group, God “revealed Himself ... in a blinding light, without anybody testifying to her or her praying. It just happened.” A man who is now in Weidenaar’s group once went to the Caribbean for a few days of vacation. He had no particular interest in religion, Weidenaar says, but during his vacation he was suddenly overcome with a strong desire to read the Bible and became a believer.

Changing a National Pastime

Still, the typical Greek “may know about Christianity but has no individual connectedness to the living God,” Winter points out. And the traditional family fabric that made such an impression on Winter in Trikala is being ripped apart in Greece like it is in the rest of the world.

“There is still less social disconnectedness here than in most Western countries, but materialism is taking over,” Winter observes. “Divorce is becoming more common.”

There are also longstanding characteristics of the Greek psyche that are contrary to the parea mentality.

“Greeks like each other and love having a drink together, but they cannot work together,” Winter says. “That is why you see hundreds of little shops, but no chains. Suspicion is a national pastime, resulting in an overdose of independence and a lack of cooperation.”

Weidenaar adds that “everybody wants to be his own boss, in politics and business and among Greek Christians.”

“The question is always who is in control,” he says, “which makes it hard for interdenominational initiatives like YWAM to grow roots in Greece. If you cooperate with one church, the others back off.”

In Winter’s opinion, Protestantism worldwide might be diagnosed with a similar handicap—one that impedes missions in Greece and elsewhere. He believes his life-changing experience in Trikala revealed God’s cure.

“If Christians [in Greece and internationally] could capture the depths of what took place when I was reconciled to my Greek family it would impact our approach to Protestant missions!” Winter exclaims.

“In my limited experience, Protestantism everywhere is based

on calling out differences. But what do we gain by pointing out the wrongs of others, even if we are right?" he reasons.

With Greece, Winter thinks the Protestant churches tend to base their identity on how they differ from the Orthodox Church or even on the opposition they trigger from it.

"We should never base our identity, as individuals or churches, on how we differ from others," he adds. "[What unites us] is more primary. There is a time to fight but also a time for peace—and right now is a time for peace."

Good News for Greeks

Winter's Greek relatives in California were always dominated by what he calls "an orphan spirit." Winter's grandfather had been raised in a foster home in Trikala, and when he immigrated to the United States in 1910 he was, in addition, orphaned from his Greek roots.

"The orphan spirit tends to replicate itself, and Grandpa's children in the U.S. lived fairly successful, but rather disconnected, lives," Winter reflects. "My father and his brothers and sisters had very little to do with each other. I knew one uncle only, and very superficially. On my mother's [American] side I always knew everybody."

Not surprisingly, then, the experience that he had on his first visit to Greece in 2000 was so different that Winter, while describing it to his wife over the phone, called it "out-worldly."

"I walked into the mayor's office in Trikala and explained that I was looking for my family. Immediately three secretaries were ordered to drop whatever they had been doing and start calling around.

"After 45 minutes I was shown to one of these secretaries. The translator pointed at her, and said: 'I want you to meet your first relative!'

"All the secretaries started crying. Within 10 minutes the local paper showed up, and relatives started pouring into the mayor's office! One cousin was an army officer, and when he heard about my appearing he told his commander that he needed a leave of absence because of a family emergency.

"'A death?' the commander asked. 'No,' my cousin responded. 'We found somebody alive!'"

Two years and a few short visits later Winter brought his family to Trikala and organized the banquet at the fort, realizing that his return was indeed considered a significant event. Millions of Greeks have left their country—Winter was one in a million who returned.

"The greatest miracle perhaps was that I was reconnected to my grandpa's biological family," Winter says. "My grandpa's father lost his wife when Grandpa was 5, and he was given to another family to be raised. Now, almost in the twinkling of an eye, a family that had not been together for a century was reunited.

"It dawned on me that this experience, as my pastor friends had pointed out, was not just for me. The family is a picture

of something transcendent. It points to and embodies the communion between man and God. When it is broken it destroys our ability not only to connect to other people, but also to God."

That is why Winter concludes that the thrust in missions should be relational, conciliatory, based on "connecting to people" rather than trying to persuade them. Greeks in particular, he says, are trained "to argue and call out differences" and "cannot be won on that level."

"Do not tell people [what is right], but share about your life and be genuinely interested in theirs. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

In the meantime Jonathan Macris of Hellenic Ministries is already looking beyond the Olympics and the thousands of Christians coming to Greece from all over the world. His vision boldly pictures dynamic Greek churches involved in evangelizing their own country and in sending out evangelists all across the Middle East.

"What is the quickest way to see Greece evangelized?" Macris asks rhetorically. "I believe it is to start sending out missionaries. The measure you give is the measure you get. Bless others, and you will be blessed."

Hellenic Ministries has been involved in 17 countries already, and Macris prays for and foresees a post-Olympic spiritual wave stirring up a "passion for mission" in many Greek churches.

"The Greeks will make for the best missionaries yet," he

exclaims. “There is our social competence and our tradition of hospitality—and also we are neither Westerners nor Muslims. We have very strong [historical and cultural] links to the Middle East.

“It won’t happen by strategizing,” he stresses, “but by our seeing the longing in the Father’s heart.”

*Not his real name

Tomas Dixon is a journalist based in Sweden. He has reported for Charisma from numerous cities across Europe, including Madrid, Vienna, Stockholm and Berlin. He visited Athens in the spring.