

Albania: The country that banned Christmas. We report on two important initiatives.

Sarah Germain tells how a link between junior doctors and students from Oxford and Tirana is helping change lives.

Students find faith

How can a country, that was declared the world's only atheist state until ten years ago, where the regime even banned Christmas, be turned to Christ?

In the mid 1990s there were only two Christian medical students in Albania and no Christian doctors. Edvin Selmani was one of those students. Today, Edvin is working part-time as a staff-worker for BSKSh (the Albanian IFES movement), whilst training in orthopaedics. He and his colleague, Eralda Turkeshi, now lead a growing number of medical students and doctors who meet regularly for Bible study and prayer, and are actively witnessing to their friends and colleagues.

Edvin attended the CMF student conference in January 2001. During this visit the idea was sparked to hold an evangelistic summer camp in Albania, and to invite a team from the UK to help run it. Over the past few years CMF have been encouraging links between regional groups and a number of countries abroad.

CMF General Secretary Peter Saunders suggested to some of us in the Oxford region that this would be a great opportunity for us to be involved. How could we say no! Over the coming months we saw many answers to prayer as God brought nine individuals together to form the team – doctors, medical students and one teacher. It included Willemina, a Dutch GP, who already spoke fluent Albanian. We were especially grateful that Bernard Palmer was able to come, at relatively short notice, to be our main Bible teacher.

Raising the money needed to finance the trip seemed like an impossible task in the time we had available. Again, God was very gracious and touched many people's hearts to help support us financially and in prayer. Team members played our part too – raising sponsorship to complete the Three Peaks Challenge – Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike, and Snowdon in 23 hours and 53 minutes.

Before we knew it, 17 August had arrived and we were being met at Tirana airport. What a joy. After all those months of preparation and prayer, we were finally in Albania.

There were 21 medical students at the camp held in Durres, a resort on the coast, about 40km from the Albanian capital Tirana. These students quickly became our friends, as we shared in a programme of Bible study, discussion in small groups, ethical seminars, and medical teaching. We covered topics from 'What is the evidence that Jesus existed?' through 'Science and faith' to 'What are the causes of right lower quadrant abdominal pain?' We learnt traditional Albanian dancing, were thrashed at volleyball, and managed with running water for only six hours a day.

What we will remember most, though, is the way God worked in individual lives. At the start of the week we had comments like: 'Christianity is not part of my culture. I don't know anything about it and it doesn't fit into my life' and 'I'm not sure Jesus even existed'. However, after hearing the evidence for the Christian faith presented and the Gospel explained, many were struck by the truth of the message.



WHAT WE WILL REMEMBER MOST, THOUGH, IS THE WAY GOD WORKED IN INDIVIDUAL LIVES

Bernard Palmer described the process of investigating the Christian faith like a series of stepping stones across a river. When you reach the last one, you have to make a decision whether to go forward or back. You can't just stand still. One student told how he was overwhelmed by this: 'I'm in an intolerable position – worse off than when I was on the land behind. I'm scared to make a commitment, but can't deny the evidence'. There was much rejoicing when, on our last evening, this student announced he had made the decision to follow Jesus.

Five students made commitments and were given Albanian Bibles to take away and read. Many others left promising to continue reading and thinking about what they had heard. Some even turned up at the church we attended in Tirana on the following Sunday.

Many of us came away feeling we had learnt as much as we gave. The Albanian Christians had such a desire to combine their medical work and Christian faith. Eralda shared her vision for Albania with us, using Nehemiah 8. She likened the rebuilding of the wall to providing an adequate and fair healthcare system in the country. She fervently believed that her people would hear the Word of God and respond in repentance. I was challenged as to whether we have such a vision for Britain.

We hope this will be only the start of an on-going partnership between Oxford and Albania. If you have the opportunity to be involved in a venture like this then go for it!

Sarah Germain is a research fellow in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Oxford and chairman of the CMF Junior Doctors' committee

How doctors from the UK are sharing a vision of Christian medical practice and consultation skills with Albanian colleagues. **John Caroe** reports.

One small mustard seed



The total isolation of three million people for 30 years is very hard to imagine. Enva Hoxha succeeded in creating an atheistic terror state to rival North Korea. Totally denied all outside contact, many really did believe the propaganda that they were the happiest people on earth, in spite of the repression and persecution.

It was students who led the bid for freedom in 1991, 18 months after other Eastern Bloc countries. The release was a huge culture shock for the Albanians who had never heard Western ideas before and who could not understand what Coca Cola was when they first received TV. Subsequent years have been marred not only by chaos, materialism and the Mafia, but also the collapse of the fraudulent pyramid money scam which led to bullet-ridden anarchy in 1997. The Albanian Christian Medical Association, led by Eralda Turkeshi, now has a strong core of ten young doctors in Tirana. They meet regularly for both professional and Christian support, and encourage medical students to share their small library set up by faithful American friends. ACMA invited three UK doctors from PRIME (Partners in International Medical Education) to spend six days in Tirana teaching the vision of Christian medical practice and consultation skills. The sadness of their previous experiences of medical learning is perhaps best left to the imagination. However, one might contrast the symbolism of an ancient pot-holed and useless blackboard in an utterly characterless hospital lecture hall, with the sight of such a keen group sitting forward on the edge of their chairs to absorb the excitement of learning basic consultation and examination techniques. Our sense of being at the right place at the right time was enhanced by two important meetings. The tutor who is heading up the embryonic 'GP Training' course in the teaching hospital came to share in the course for some hours and was genuinely enthusiastic about what he saw, committing himself to supporting the group in ongoing learning. We were also very privileged to spend a short time with the impressive Dean of the Medical School who is a neurosurgeon. He was remarkably open about the training situation, and acknowledged the ongoing

need to rethink the style and content of the whole of their medical training. This underlines the importance of praying for these contacts at high level to achieve local official accreditation. Without this the fruit of any visit abroad remains solely within the group that we meet. Far greater leverage is possible when one can invest in teaching that will be passed on within an official training program.

Without being specifically Christian, one can still share the vision of Christian care, and the value of the humanity and sensitivity of the one who is sick. While this may seem obvious to us, it is not a concept that is portrayed within the didactic factual teaching of a mechanistic approach to disease, inherited from cold communist days. In such brief encounters between doctors of very different cultures whose resources are at the opposite ends of the spectrum, it is a delicate task to avoid western academic imperialism and to offer genuine humble friendship and support for the mountainous task they face. We see the possibility of very fruitful ongoing quiet Christian influence as doctor training is reformed. Two particular moments of true Christian hope stand out in the memory. The first was the privilege of standing as a group in the middle of a recently discovered Roman amphitheatre where Christians were forced to be gladiators and to fight the lions. We sensed that the pain of those spiritual memories had already been soothed by the worship in later underground churches found in the ruins, where traces of ancient frescoes still remain. Paul and Titus were once in that seaside city of Durres. Then we were all touched by the sense of the Lord's prophetic presence as we prayed together, after a last supper on the roof of a pier cafe, over a smooth sea with an idyllic sunset. We are certain that the Lord's hand is watching over these delightful Christian friends who blessed us so much with their faithfulness, courage, enthusiasm and driving vision. The small mustard seed that we have sought to plant will surely grow into a tree that will shelter and care for so many 'birds of the air', the Albanian people who have suffered and survived these post-war years in a manner that is unimaginable and awe-inspiring.

John Caroe is a General Practitioner in Eastbourne

IT IS A
DELICATE
TASK TO
AVOID
WESTERN
ACADEMIC
IMPERIALISM
AND TO
OFFER
GENUINE
HUMBLE
FRIENDSHIP
AND
SUPPORT