

Highland's Relationship With the Albanian People

On World Mission Sunday 2001, we were transfixed by the words of Rick Shaw when he described his ministry to Albanian people residing in Macedonia and Kosova. These Muslim Albanians were victims of violence, refugees, homeless, cold and hungry. And their plight was the result of ethnic cleansing by a "Christian" nation. The Shaws and other missionaries, through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, were the voice and hands of Christ to the Albanians. The challenge issued by CBF and Rick and Martha Shaw was for Highland to join other churches in the U.S. to become "partners" in service to the Albanian people - - part of the *Albanian People Partnership*. The Albanian people presented not only humanitarian needs. Less than 2% of Albanians are Christians, and while most Albanians identify themselves *culturally* as Muslim, most do not practice Islam except to recognize certain high holy days. These are a people who have largely lost contact with God.

In April 2002, Geoff Hale and Joe Phelps traveled to Macedonia to be Highland's "eyes and ears" and report back to us so that we could decide whether to become mission partners. Geoff and Joe returned with an energizing message that encouraged us to accept the challenge. Highland "officially" agreed to "adopt" the Albanian people as part of our family in May 2002 and Rick Shaw heartily affirmed our decision during a visit with us while on furlough in June 2002.

Since that first trip in April 2002, Highland has sponsored four mission trips and one long-term missionary intern to Macedonia and Kosova.

August 2002 – church construction in Rahovec, Kosova.

August 2003 – purchasing and distributing school textbooks and school supplies for 500 Albanian orphans in Macedonia (Skopje, Konjare, Raovic, Gllumova).

August 2003 to May 2004 – Highland sponsors Kristen Connolly as a "student.go" CBF missionary intern with the Shaws.

October 2003 – church construction in Rahovec, Kosova and clothing distribution in Konjare, Macedonia.

October 2004 – medical and spiritual "hospice" training provided to Macedonian medical care professionals, and hospice care clinics, in partnership with Hospice and Palliative Care of Louisville.

Highland is about to send another team of member-missionaries to Macedonia and Kosova April 1-10, 2005. They will teach conversational English, present a sports camp, share their faith and work with orphans. Including the upcoming April trip, Highland has sent 18 members to the Balkans in the past three years.

But Highland's ministry with Albanians is not limited to "foreign" missions. Beginning in November 2003, we have reached out to Kosovar Albanians in Louisville, most of whom fled

Kosova as war refugees in 1999. This relationship has grown under leadership provided by Terri Connolly and Angela Dennison from the initial Thanksgiving banquet to a current initiative providing assistance in preparing applicants for citizenship tests. There are between 20 to 30 large extended Albanian families here. Our outreach has included two Thanksgiving banquets, a summer picnic at Tyler Park, two women's teas, a six-session Albanian-English language and cultural exchange, a youth ski trip, an evening of dialogue with well-known Albanian human rights advocate Sami Repishti and many acts of help and kindness by Terri, Angela and others to build relationships.

Our next steps? Supporting and blessing the Youth mission team on their upcoming April 2005 mission trip. Join us on the journey.

HBC Albanian People Task Force

Macedonia Primer.



Macedonia is a democratic republic that was first recognized in 1918 and became an independent republic for the first time in 1991, when Yugoslavia disintegrated. It is located in Southeastern Europe (the “Balkans”), bordered on the south by Greece, on the east by Bulgaria, on the north by Serbia (including the province of Kosova) and on the west by Albania. It is slightly larger than Vermont and it is chiefly mountainous territory with deep basins and valleys. Its 2.1 million citizens include ethnic Macedonians (64%), Albanians (25%), Turks (4%), Roma (3%), and Serbs (2%). The population is 70% Macedonian Orthodox Christian and 29% Muslim.

Macedonia is in the middle of an identity crisis. It has an ancient name that has the

Greeks in a frenzy because the Greeks think Macedonia is basically “northern” Greece. The spoken language and alphabet, Macedonian, is a Slavic language and both the language and alphabet is almost identical to Bulgarian, its eastern neighbor (but please don't say that to a Macedonian!). Ethnic Macedonians are not all that happy about the United States because of their recent and continued support for the Albanian people and U.S. opposition to Serbian policies. But Macedonia has been trying to curry favor with the U.S. by participating in the coalition forces in Iraq, and it seems to have worked since the U.S. recently agreed to call Macedonia “Macedonia” rather than the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (“FYROM”).

The three BIG issues in Macedonia right now are: (1) learning to have different ethnic groups live together in a tolerant multi-cultural representative democracy only 4 years after a violent uprising by Albanian guerillas in the north and west of the country (see the Ohrid Agreement); (2) the uncertain status of their neighbor to the north, Kosovo (a concern because of the large Albanian minority in Macedonia, some of which want to unite all Albanians in a “Greater Albania” which would include Kosovo and northwestern parts of Macedonia); and (3) economic recovery from the dislocation caused by the 1991 separation from Yugoslavia’s central planned economy, and the lack of any real industries and poor infrastructure. Macedonians believe that the “cure” would be membership in the European Union (their membership application is still a long way from acceptance).

Primer on the Albanian People.

The origins of the Albanian people are not definitely known, but they are probably the direct descendants of the ancient Illyrian people (an empire on the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea). The Illyrians, later known as Albanians, were conquered sequentially by the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Bulgarians, the Serbians and the Ottoman Turks. After millennia of occupation, Albania became a “country” for the first time in 1919 when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, along with others, insisted that Albanians be granted territory for their own country in the Versailles Treaty negotiations that followed World War I. Sadly, the territory that was carved out only included about ½ of the Albanians in the region, with the remaining Albanians left to live in greater Serbia (Kosova) and later Macedonia. This has led to many of the problems in the Balkans today.

One would think most Albanians live in Albania. However, at least 50% of all Albanians do not. In addition, HBC has never sent a group to Albania. The Shaws’ work is not in Albania. Please do not confuse Albania with (a) Macedonia; (b) Kosova; or (c) “Albanians” who live in Macedonia or Kosova. There are two chief dialects of Albanian, Gheg (northern Albania, Macedonia and Kosova) and Tosk (southern Albania).



Unfortunately for Albania, it was occupied by the fascist Italian regime in World War II and then “freed” by Stalinist leader Enver Hoxha. Hoxha ruled the world’s only officially atheist regime with an iron fist, ringing the borders of the country with concrete “pillboxes” and creating a strange cult of personality, writing bad poetry and putting his poster on every corner. As a result of his leadership, Albania became the poorest country in all of Europe.

When Hoxha died, a revolution wrested power from his cronies. However, the government which inherited Albania is full of corruption and Albania is now poorer than most countries on the African continent - - both Macedonia and Kosova are in better economic shape than Albania. Albanians in Macedonia and Kosova often view Albanians from Albania as unsophisticated, poor bumpkins. Nevertheless, there is an increasing degree of economic and cultural exchange between Kosova and Albania, which, in addition to its positive attributes, has the questionable consequence of encouraging pan-Albanian sentiments.