
Greece: The Gospel to Macedonia and Beyond

by Leland Yialelis

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

—Paul, *Epistle to the Romans*

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has designated evangelism to be more important than any other church program for the three years preceding the 1985 General Conference Session in New Orleans, La. We want “one thousand days of reaping” from our “unprecedented worldwide soulwinning thrust, placing unquestioned priority on evangelism in all forms.”* We hope to convert and baptize 1,000 souls a day for 1,000 days. I see this as an affirmation by my church that we are not ashamed of the gospel.

Evangelism has special meaning for me as I serve the people of Greece as a member, pastor, and administrator of the church. I believe that the church, by proper planning, will see the power of the gospel work among the Greeks. But factors in the society and

in the church combine simultaneously to make this a moment of great opportunity and of frustrating stagnation. I have suggestions to seize the first and overcome the latter, suggestions that are based on factors unique to Greece, and on a realistic use of the church's resources, which will allow us to grasp the special opportunity now opening.

Greece In Transition

Recent history has changed the fabric of Greek life and thought. Traditionally, Greece has been a bridge between East and West. Though it is the source of Western culture, Greece itself has always stood in the middle, neither Western nor Eastern. But since the war for independence from the Turks began in 1821, modern Greece has been oriented toward the West.

As a result, Greece developed a Western tilt that has increased in this century. In the late 1970s and 1980s, that affinity has become the avowed program of the government. Greece's entry into the European Common Market strengthened its ties to

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*voted at Annual Council, 1981.

Europe and placed pressure on the Greek government to grant the personal and religious freedoms found in other Common Market nations. It has served to hasten the development of Greece as a modern secular state.

In 1975, Greece overthrew its dictators and adopted a constitution granting religious freedom. A socialist government was elected in 1981 and continued the trend away from an Orthodox to a secular, religiously nonaligned, Greece. For the first time, a prime minister and a party have as their goal the further separation of church and state. This has already been demonstrated by the institution of civil marriage. Though bitterly opposed by the Orthodox church, secular marriage is now a legal and practical reality.

It is now legal to hold lectures about religious matters (but not worship) in public halls without obtaining a permit for such gatherings. There are still statutes against proselyting, but these are rarely if ever enforced, and we now expect the socialist government to further separate state and church interests. I have seen Pentecostals preaching and passing out pamphlets in

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public squares unmolested, even by priests passing by.

This secularization reflects changes in popular thought. Very few people under 50, and virtually no young people, are more than nominally Orthodox. It is understood that most Greeks consider themselves to be Orthodox, yet this is a cultural definition, not one of private belief. Few Greeks are well-versed in the theology and beliefs of Orthodoxy. They are familiar with its traditions and saints but with little else. They

respect the Gospels and Scripture, though Bibles are not owned by many and are read by few. In thought, lifestyle, and attitudes, most Greeks more closely reflect the modern, materialistic ways of thought of the West than those of the Orthodox religion or church.

Greeks realize that their culture is in transition. They speak about the changes which are coming in their lives and in their country with a sense of anticipation. The socialist party, PASOK, ran on the slogan, "The people want—PASOK can bring—the change." Change is the popular word, concept, and desire. I sense this on all levels, among people in the government and in business, from laborers and the young. Greece is emerging into 20th century Western thought.

The rapid growth of other Protestant churches testifies to the Greek's response to Western religious appeals. By far the most active and the largest of these groups is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who now number more than 30,000 members in Greece. The government has even granted them non-combatant status. The Pentecostal movement is a relatively new movement, but already they number several thousand members and are rapidly increasing. They have active groups in Athens (one church has more than 1,000 members) and in Thessalonica, and they are spreading. There are also active Evangelical church groups throughout Greece.

It is clear that, officially, there now exists a great degree of religious freedom in Greece, that people are changing their cultural attitudes and lifestyles, and that this change makes them responsive to Protestant evangelistic efforts such as those of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals. This suggests that Adventists, too, face an era of unparalleled opportunity in bringing the message of the three angels to the Greek people.

Adventists in Greece— Yesterday and Today

There are, however, factors in the church which affect our ability to respond to this popular responsiveness to aggressive evangelism. In Greece our problems lie not outside the church, but within. The problems we must overcome lie both in our local field and in the church's administrative structure.

Though the first Greek Seventh-day Adventists were baptized before the turn of the century, and though the organized work in Greece is more than 50 years old, the present church numbers less than 250 members. If we are realistic, it is closer to 200 in the entire nation. This membership is divided into eight congregations. About 50 percent of the members are in the Athens area in three church groups; 40 percent are near Macedonia and Thessalonica in four churches; and 10 percent are scattered through the rest of the country.

In the 1950s, average annual baptisms were slightly fewer than a dozen, and the average membership gain was 10. During the 1960s, average annual baptisms were about the same, but the average gain in membership slipped to 6.8. In the 1970s, average annual baptisms dropped to just under nine people, while the average gain in membership was .9 members!

These numbers indicate why the church is composed primarily of adults and older people with very few young members. Approximately 30 percent of the membership is older than 60. About 58 percent is between 30 and 60 years old. Only 12 percent is under 30. The membership is approximately 70 percent women and 30 percent men. Though accurate statistics are hard to obtain, it's fair to say that most of the members are poor.

Of the eight full-time employees of the Greek mission, four are engaged in full-time pastoral-evangelistic work. The other four are engaged in the office or the school. For

250 members nationwide, there are seven church buildings (in addition, there is one which is rented, for which the mission pays), one office building of five floors, and a camp site with improvements. Of these eight churches, not one is fully self-supporting, in the sense of being able to operate and maintain the local church. For five of the churches, the mission must subsidize the operating budget as well. These few numbers reveal that the Adventist church in Greece is small and has few resources.

Beyond the numbers, I find members who are passive when it comes to church life and witness. My analysis is that for years, all church authority has been in the hands of a very few. Congregations have not had regular church boards, or, when they have had boards, they weren't operated according to principles in the church manual, especially in regard to lay participation and authority. Lay initiative has been discouraged, in fact. No local constituency meetings were held before 1980.

Thirty years ago, a rift developed in the Greek membership. This division still affects the small church, making it prey to gossip and innuendo. Such an unhappy climate is the significant factor in the annual average membership gain of less than one person a year during the 1970s.

Evidently, leadership in upper organizations of the church has failed to understand the crisis in the Greek Mission. When the local leadership explained that the work went slowly because it was difficult to work among the Greek Orthodox, the upper organization accepted this explanation, even though our work was declining as measured against its own previous effectiveness. We must wonder why, in the light of this situation, there were no changes made as year after year the church slowly slid downward into decay.

The top level leadership was ignorant of specific local problems and failed to communicate with the Greek laity so that when new workers were brought to the field, and failed to work in, the situation was not appreciated

for what it was, nor was any *thorough* study made to ascertain the causes. Likewise, an answer for worker training was sought in a Greek seminary in Athens, without first making a careful study of all the relevant factors, such as local resources or support for such a project. Several hundred thousand dollars were spent building the facilities in an area of legalized prostitution, and the church was further divided about the seminary before the plan was abandoned.

Now, as it has in the past, failure to assess the church's needs and problems will lead to failure for our evangelistic purpose. The church in Greece is extremely limited in its ability to witness, both in pastoral leadership and in members' participation. The church structure in Greece is weak and struggling to survive.

However, there is an increasing sense of expectancy in the Greek church. There is hope here—a sense that something good will happen. We must capitalize on this desire and provide the leadership to create changes and foster a living, evangelistic church in Greece. Without the members' hope, it would be sad to contemplate "One Thousand Days of Reaping," even in a field so full of opportunity as modern Greece.

Adventist Greeks Tomorrow

If we look at our church, I believe we see two models of church growth, both of which are intended to be evangelistic. I call these two models the historical and the institutional. By "historical," I refer to the way in which our church first grew and developed in North America. By "institutional," I refer to the modern, highly structured, departmentalized approach to church organization and evangelism which is common in North America and Europe, the two areas where I have personal experience.

A few basic elements characterize the historical model. Members are active in personal witness, and the pastor/evangelist leads Bible study and makes direct evangelistic outreach through public meetings. A heavy emphasis is placed on developing and nurturing groups of believers as they develop. Members are committed to spreading their faith. Their sense of identity and

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responsibility to the movement is fundamental. Pamphlets and periodicals are used for personal evangelism. A circular is used to communicate between the groups of believers and further develop a sense of participation in a larger movement.

Aside from these basic essentials there is very little structure. There are no complicated programs requiring special skills or special materials. Administrative procedures and details are few and require a small percentage of time, money, and energy. Thus the members and pastors can dedicate themselves to their primary goal: sharing their faith. It is true that, as the groups grow in size and number, there is corresponding development of structure and organization. But in this model the structure develops as the groups develop needs which an organization can meet. There is always a balance between the structure and local ability to sustain that structure.

The institutional model, on the other hand, depends for its evangelistic success not so much on the voluntary and volitional contributions of the membership, assisted by the activities of a pastor/evangelist, as on various programs to accomplish its work. The focus is on the complex interaction and the smooth functioning of a series of projects coordinated to produce results.

The church's summer camp program is an example of the institutional model. Generally we have chosen to own and operate our own campsites, providing facilities, improvements, equipment, and maintenance. The camp program requires a diverse staff, making the program, time, money, and energy intensive.

Yet the results, in terms of church growth, may not depend on the success of the program. In an area where we wish to begin new work, it is possible to create a "successful" summer camp program. Children will be found to attend and for two weeks they will be exposed to the ideals and spiritual guidance of the church, but what then? Unless there are local, active church groups capable of providing a continuing program geared to the young people who attend, the results in terms of church growth will be minimal.

This same scene represents our schools, colporteur work, medical work, and media. All of these programs, which are useful and successful in church work, are heavily dependent on relatively complex and costly support structures to operate effectively. Above all, they all depend on strong local churches for their ultimate success.

These programs grew out of a church which had already reached a level of sophistication capable of using these complex tools for its evangelistic purpose. Our church grew and developed for some years before we founded our first institution. It was a church which had reached a certain level of membership, organizational stability, and financial resources, and which then began to institutionalize. It was then that the church was able to capitalize on the interests which this institutional activity produced. Institutions are most effective when they fill the needs of and are supported by the local membership and organization.

Which of these two models fits the Greek work best? The unfortunate history of 30 years of church activity in Greece provides the answer. Our greatest need is to focus on the basics of the historical model. It should

also be noted that this is what is being followed, essentially, by the two fastest growing Protestant groups in Greece.

Based on the historical model, at this stage of our work among Greek-speaking people, we need to develop pastor/evangelists to support the growth of local groups. But we don't need to build an institution to train the pastoral workers we need. There aren't enough young Adventists in Greece to establish a seminary here. I believe there is an efficient alternative to the institutional approach. The habits of Greek migration can provide a source of pastors and evangelists.

A significant pattern of Greek emigration is the common occurrence of immigration, or repatriation. The practice of leaving Greece for a time and then returning is not at all unusual. Emigrants maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity and often look forward to returning to the land which they or their parents left. Thus, *the Greek population worldwide forms a single community*. This is recognized and encouraged by the Greek government, as it allows Greeks to carry dual citizenship—living and traveling with two passports.

The church can yet act in Greece. If the evangelic imperative is believed, the Gospel still has the power to save the Greek.

There is absolutely no prejudice on the part of Greeks in Greece towards Greeks returning from abroad. As evidence of this, they just elected as prime minister such a man, Andreas Papandreou. It is well known that Mr. Papandreou lived in the U.S. for many years.

From 1970 to 1976 (the last year for which complete statistics are available), approximately 290,000 Greeks emigrated. In those same years, approximately 190,000 Greeks repatriated. The three primary countries of emigration during this time were the United

States, Australia, and Germany.

The statistics further reveal that emigration to Germany is probably more temporary than emigration to the other two countries. There is about an equal flow between those Greeks going to Germany (often for work) and those returning. The statistics suggest that emigration to Germany is undertaken temporarily.

In this six year period, approximately 26,000 Greeks emigrated to the U.S. and approximately 10,000 repatriated. In the same period, approximately 25,000 emigrated to Australia and approximately 16,000 repatriated.

These patterns of emigration and repatri-

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ation have meaning to the church and our evangelistic program. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, some Greek immigrants converted to Adventism in the U.S. They worked among their countrymen there and for a short time there existed a Greek church with a Greek pastor in Oakland, Calif. Also for a short time, a Greek layperson was employed by the church to work among Greeks in the Chicago area. But unfortunately, although there were conversions, these opportunities were not developed.

But from those few Greeks who did join our church came a significant part of the workers who have since carried on the church's work at home in Greece. The impact is greater in that Greek lay members from America have carried the gospel back to their homeland and have influenced friends and families to join the church. A similar pattern is developing in Australia today, where a Greek worker has started a Greek church in Melbourne. When people leave their homeland it is often easier to

approach them with the Gospel. The patterns of Greek emigration and repatriation, and our own history as a church, together suggest that evangelizing Greek immigrants worldwide may and should be tied together with our evangelistic outreach in Greece.

Greeks of the World Unite

Greek people at home and abroad give us an opportunity to view the worldwide Greek work as a single unit which can be coordinated, planned, and developed as a whole. Comprehensive planning would prevent the territorial and hierarchical fragmentation that currently exists. Now, potential Greek workers can be blocked from leaving another division. Greece and Cyprus, the two largest areas of Greek population, are not even in the same division, in spite of their cultural, linguistic, historical, and geographic proximity.

Beyond this obvious management efficiency, a unified Greek work could have an impact on Greek people everywhere, allow us to use available Greek workers immediately, increase the potential field from which to draw future workers, and provide greater efficiency in developing Greek-language materials.

I suggest the General Conference organize a central committee to develop the Greek work worldwide as a single administrative unit. Such a committee would include representatives from Greece and Cyprus, Australia, North America, and Germany, who could meet at the times of regularly scheduled committees to minimize travel and time expense. Such a body would be responsible for placing and transferring Greek-speaking workers worldwide, and would serve as a clearinghouse for Greek evangelistic literature and media programming.

As a church, we should make an assessment of Greek personnel currently

employed by the church who would be capable and willing to transfer to Greek work. Then we can transfer them as quickly as possible into active work for their fellow Greeks—at home or abroad. If we wait for new workers to develop in or out of Greece, we will wait four or five years, at the very least, before such workers are ready to serve. I don't think we can afford to wait in the face of our current opportunities.

When a unified program for Greek evangelism is in place, we can recruit men and women who are fluent in Greek to train as workers. Their training should be supervised by the central Greek committee so they can receive assistance for their training and so they don't develop conflicting commitments. This could be extended to people training in medical fields.

The Adventist church also needs a study/research program to help us understand Greek Orthodox faith, its similarity to and divergence from Western Christianity. We need a much clearer understanding of the Orthodox mind. This is absolutely critical

if we are to expand our evangelistic thrust among the Greeks.

As planning and budgeting begin for a Greek work, I think the planners should emphasize personnel resources rather than physical resources. People will have the most direct effect on outreach, and a pastor/evangelist has the potential of generating income, whereas a building is a continuing expense.

Other groups of Christians, who do not have the message we have to share, are experiencing growth in Greece. They are reaping a harvest we could and should be reaping. This is the time to cast aside those things which hinder us, allowing us to approach the question of our commitment to proclaim the gospel without the impediments of unproductive traditions, practices, and antagonisms.

The church can yet act in Greece. We have a duty to act if we believe in our evangelistic imperative. We face a challenge to create a new approach to evangelism, for the Gospel still has the power to save the Greek.