



Albania: A window of opportunity by Loren Cunningham

[Ed. note: Although this is a reprint of an article from several years ago, consider what God has done in Albania in the intervening years. Is there a message in this for us today concerning this land that has gone through much turmoil and transition in the last decade or so?]

I stood at the thick wooden door and knocked. There were no signs of life inside, and heavy metal bars covered the windows. Only the small bronze plaque revealed it was the Albanian Consulate. I knocked again, harder. A small shutter in the door slid open, and dark wary eyes peered at me. He didn't say a word.

"Uh...hello! My name is Loren Cunningham and I want to know how I can visit your country...."

In an instant the peephole slammed shut.

That was my first attempt to inquire about visiting Albania, twenty years ago. I knew this country bordering Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia had declared itself "the first atheistic country" in 1967. All churches, synagogues, and mosques were closed. Believers who refused to deny God were sealed alive into barrels and rolled into the Adriatic Sea. Enver Hoxha, the country's ruler, even had his henchmen go into the cemeteries and hack off crosses, stars of David, and crescents from the tombstones.

However, outside the country people were praying. While some YWAMers were interceding for Albania, two young workers felt called to the country. Evey Muggleton from Britain and Reona Peterson from New Zealand joined a tour group of mostly Marxist youth in 1973. The two girls smuggled in Albanian Gospels, taped underneath their clothing. Despite their caution inside the country, they were caught and sentenced to die before a firing squad. Instead, they were dumped at the border. Reona wrote a book about their experience called *Tomorrow You Die*, causing more to pray for the tiny country.

Still, Albania seemed locked in impossible chains. Its isolation was almost



complete when they broke with the Soviet Bloc. Their only allies were China and North Korea, and later they broke with China when they began dialogue with the West.

In 1988, my son David and I were in Yugoslavia. We went as close as we could to Albania...right up to the border. As Americans, it was impossible to go in. So we went to a nearby hillside and sat down to pray, looking into the country.

Then, in 1989 the walls of communism began to topple in Eastern Europe. Hoxha had died in 1985, and now his successor soon caved in to pressure. Albanians rose up and burned their Marxist books, including all the textbooks of the schools. Thousands fled the country, including many of the doctors and other professionals.

For the past two years, Albania has descended into near anarchy, with a vacuum of values, lawlessness, and the disappearance of almost all consumer goods. They are desperately reaching out to the West for help. Consider the following recent happenings....

* [U.S.] Secretary of State James Baker visits Albania in August of 1991. Albanians fall down and kiss the ground as he passes.

*A YWAMer, Al Akimoff, tries to pass out Albanian New Testaments on the street. The eager crowd nearly crushes him to death. He has to get down and crawl out from the mob.

*In the villages, school children sit at desks but they have no books, no paper, and no pencils. They struggle to keep adult shoes on their feet. It is impossible to find shoes for children in the countryside.

*A young American on the street is approached by an Albanian who says, "I want to believe in God. Which should I be, a Moslem or a Christian?"

Despite the chaos, this is a time of unbelievable opportunity for the Church. This past summer, ten organizations held the first evangelistic crusade in the capital city, Tirana. Five nights of rain turned the sports arena to mire, yet thousands came and heard the Gospel. The leaders of the event didn't dare have an altar call until the fifth night, because of the people's ignorance of the Gospel. Finally, they gave an invitation and several hundred knelt in the



mud to pray the sinner's prayer. Converts were formed into home churches.

I got to visit Albania this past week, after trying for twenty years. It was my privilege to meet with a core group of 100 brand new Albanian Christians in the Palace of Culture. I told them Christians all over the world had been praying for them all these years. And now their isolation has ended. Their faces glowed with hope and joy.

Outside, I saw thousands milling in the streets, unemployed and still without hope. Who will help them? A recent election chose a leader who said he would go to America and get them to help Albania "like they helped Europe after World War II." I am afraid America will disappoint them. The U.S. has earmarked a pitiful \$3 million for Albania--hardly enough to rebuild a ruined country.

Their only real help will come from the Church. Already, 25 foreign Christian organizations are working in close unity to extend the love of Jesus to Albania. Everyone is doing evangelism, with different categories of practical help divided among the agencies. YWAM is helping with training and consulting in the schools, in new businesses, and with the government, helping rewrite some of the nation's laws. We are calling for volunteers of all kinds. Language is not a problem, since many Albanians speak English. Christian businessmen, educators, medical personnel, and constitutional lawyers are needed, for as little as two weeks or up to a year or more. Also, we need six thousand Christians to come for ten days and help us put a Bible in each of Albania's 600,000 homes. They have burned their books. They are looking for answers and values. We need to wash the country with the Word of God. We need to fill the vacuum with news of Jesus!

This is a remarkable time of opportunity. It reminds me of when the Emperor of China asked Marco Polo to bring Christian missionaries to convert China. Marco Polo was unable to get even one to go. Centuries later, General Douglas MacArthur asked America to send 10,000 missionaries to Japan after World War II. Again, the Church did not respond. Now God has given us another chance to disciple a whole nation. I pray with all my heart that this time we will not fail.

by Loren Cuningham

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