CBC Short Term Mission Trip to Greece Report
March 20, 2020

The Team: Dr. Harry Gibson (dentist) and his wife, Mary Susan (dental assistant)
Dr. Alfonse Javed (pastor)
Dr. Thomas Jensen (general practitioner)
Jim Pingel (radiographer) and his wife, Judi (RN)
Dimitris Tsoukalas (missionary) and his wife, Ioanna (missionary)
William Work and his wife, Jennie

Mission Outreach: Medical & Dental Support
Targeted People: The Pomaks of Greece
Date of mission: March 7-14, 2020

A Brief Background on the Pomaks

For thousands of years, the Pomaks have lived mainly on the slopes of the Rhodope Mountains which are in Bulgaria and north eastern Greece. In Greece, the Pomaks live in the regions around Xanthi, Rhodope and Evros and consider themselves descendants from the ancient tribe of Thrace. For many years the Greek government turned a blind eye to the needs of these people. In fact, in the 1950s King Paul of Greece visited the Turkish Head of State and summarily signed an agreement with Turkey stating that the Muslim minorities in Greece are Turkish minorities. From then on the Turks claimed the Pomaks in Greece as their own. The Pomaks converted to Islam during the beginning of the Ottoman occupation (15th century) to the end of the 18th century. In modern times, Turkey has been sending their teachers to educate the Pomak children who continue to be neglected by the Greek government.

Today, the Pomaks speak their own dialect at home. Elementary students up to 6th Grade are taught in Turkish. Until 30 years ago, education stopped at 6th Grade. Now schooling is mandatory for children until 15 years of age (10th Grade). In high school the children are taught in Greek and sometimes in English as well.
Historically, the Greeks treated the Pomaks as foreigners from ‘another country’, even though they were located in Greece. Until 1994 the area where the Pomaks live was controlled with barriers and checkpoints. The Pomaks had to show their IDs and observe curfews whenever they travel outside their area to another part of Greece.

Even today, medical services are scarce and the people have to ‘come down’ the mountains to the nearest town for any medical help. For those villages that we visited the nearest town is Xanthi which is about forty-five minutes to an hour away by automobile.

Prologue

CBC missionary Dimitris and his wife, Ioanna, have been ministering to the Pomaks for the past eight years. As they started their ministry, they were introduced to Emine who is the president of a Pomak club. She in turn introduced Dimitris to two Pomak village leaders, Orhan in Glafki and an Imam in Kentaurus. The team visited and ministered at both of these villages during our trip.

The team arrived in Thessaloniki on Sunday morning, March 8th, and attended the Tsoukalas’ church, Evangelical Church of Thessaloniki, whose pastor, Dr. Katsarkas, is also the director of the local St. Luke’s Hospital. Dr. Katsarkas planned to give the team a tour of the hospital the next day and share what the Lord is doing there. At the same time he planned to donate whatever medical supplies and medicine that our team needed. However, as the coronavirus was impacting Greece at that time, he thought it wise to cancel the hospital visit. Our team would now have to go on without any supplies or medicine. Though our team was disappointed and caught somewhat unprepared, we pressed on regardless with faith and trust in our Lord.

On Monday, we drove up to the Pomak region and stayed in the quaint Agriani Hotel nestled in the mountains outside Xanthi. That evening we went for dinner at a restaurant in Xanthi. We drove there in two vehicles, one of which was the van that was donated by CBC for use in medical missions. In the middle of dinner, Dimitris got a call from a young Pomak man, Benjamin, asking if he could help with our medical mission. He had seen the van parked on the street of Xanthi where he lived. He happened to be home as his university closed because of the coronavirus. He is studying to be a nurse and speaks not only his native Pomak dialect, but also Greek and English. He is also the son of Emine and knows Dimitris and his work.

Tuesday, March 10, Pomak village - Glafki

Early in the morning, right after breakfast and a group devotion, the team piled into a rented 9-passenger Fiat van with Dimitris leading the way driving the medical van. We headed further up the mountains on a drizzly day along narrow, steep, and extremely winding roads. It took us over an hour to get to Glafki.

As soon as we parked, Harry, Mary Susan and Dimitris went about setting up the van’s fully equipped mobile dental clinic. Harry had also brought along a hand-held dental x-ray machine. Inside the van there’s an EKG machine, a sonogram and a folding exam table, all of which were moved into the building where we set up the medical clinic. We were all busy getting the place ready for patients, setting up the two exam rooms and sterilizing the equipment, etc. Three patients were already there waiting to be seen!!

We met the venerable Qur’an teacher of the village. He wanted the doctor to check him and his wife. That day we saw about 21 patients, of which three were children plus 20 dental patients.
Tom and Judi worked well as a team with Judi triaging; taking all the necessary medical history information and physical statistics like blood pressure, temperature, even EKGs. Jim helped with the sonogram and, at one point, a patient complained of foot pain and was wondering if she had broken a bone. Jim borrowed Harry's hand-held x-ray machine and took an x-ray of her foot!! Thank the Lord there were no broken bones. The Pomaks were very impressed with our use of technology. Tom was the epitome of a caring and patient doctor. After the patients' time with Judi, they would go to see him. Tom found that most of the patients have high blood pressure and other issues that had been previously diagnosed. They were coming to him for a second opinion and guidance. He was happy to give counsel and recommend medications. In Greece patients are not required to have a prescription for medications. Tom found that many were self-medicating, sometimes with the wrong medication, like Valium which they used to treat any ailment, and without any understanding of how or when to take it or what the medication is for.

Harry and Mary Susan were busy in the van with dental patients. Harry did a lot of fillings, extractions, cleaning, x-rays, fluoride treatments on children. He also took time to educate them on how to take care of their teeth.

Benjamin, our Pomak nursing student, was there and so was the granddaughter of the venerable Qur’an teacher. She is studying Biology at the university and was now home due to the coronavirus outbreak. They both helped Dimitris and Ioanna with the translations.

**Wednesday March 11, Pomak village - Glaflki**

Greece closed all the schools today and discouraged any gatherings. When we got to the village no one was there except Orhan who owns the building and is a leader in the community. He is also the son of the venerable Qur’an teacher. He wanted to be checked by the doctor and the dentist. Seeing the place empty, he called his mother-in-law and family to come to be checked. Later he drove his car into the village and, using his megaphone, he encouraged everyone to come. At the end of the day, we had 18 medical patients (four children) and 15 dental patients.

The patients Tom saw today had more complicated issues. One patient was in kidney failure and was taking 9-10 medications. We were so thankful for Benjamin because a few patients only spoke the Pomak dialect. God is so good. He knows. Late in the morning, two Greek army personnel stopped by and asked Ioanna if we needed help since they have an army doctor with them. She told them yes, we would love his help and they responded that they would come back in the afternoon. Wow, the army knew we were ministering in this village. Somehow the army did not come back. We were relieved.

**Thursday, March 12, Pomak village - Kentaurus**

Pastor Javed joined us Wednesday night around midnight and at 4 a.m. we got a call from his wife, Sarah, in a panic because President Trump announced the closing of the US borders for anyone coming in from Europe for the next thirty days. This meant the team had to get back to the US as soon as possible or else be stuck in Greece. It was a
very tense couple of hours for everyone wondering what we should do and trying to find flights to leave the next day. Since most of the team had planned on leaving Greece on Saturday, we decided to change the two that were not to Saturday also. Sarah worked hard on our behalf and, thank the Lord, she was able to find a flight out on Saturday, the same flight as the others and without penalty!!! Praise the Lord!! She is one special, hard working and tenacious lady!! We love her!!

After the early morning excitement, we headed to another village, Kentaurus, which was further east up on another mountain. The roads there were extremely steep and narrow which made it very difficult to drive around. Kentaurus has a medical clinic which was built recently, but on this day it was closed and the village Imam allowed us to use the facility. Here we saw 21 medical and 17 dental patients.

**Epilogue**

On Friday we headed back to Thessaloniki. On the way we stopped at Philippi and saw where Lydia in the Bible was baptized (Acts 16:14,15) and where Paul was imprisoned (Acts 16:23). The actual city that Paul and Lydia were is now in ruins, destroyed by wars and a devastating earthquake. Today it is an active archeological site.

The team was impressed with how well the Pomaks, especially their leaders, knew Dimitris and Ioanna and they knew they were Christians and how much Dimitris and Ioanna loved the Pomaks and cared for them. Dimitris has arranged for a Christian teacher of psychology to visit the villages after Ramadan. He is praying for their salvation and concerned for their well-being, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Dimitris shared that the Pomaks expressed their surprise that people would come all the way from America to help them. There were seeds planted and certainly a work to be continued and pursued.

We are so grateful for the medical personnel that volunteered for this short term mission trip. They came all the way from Wisconsin and Indiana. We thank the Lord for them especially as they worked so well together and nothing fazed them because of their faith and trust in the Lord God Almighty.

A couple of days before we had to leave for Greece when the coronavirus was just becoming rampant in Europe and there were border altercations between Greece and Turkey, the situation looked dire. Dimitris expressed that he would understand if we decided not to go. The team met over the phone on Friday, March 6th, the day before we were to leave, to discuss whether to cancel the trip or not. After much prayer and debating the pros and cons, we all came to an agreement that we would trust the Lord and proceed as planned.

The Lord kept us all safe and we were able to do ministry there within a small window of opportunity before Europe
and the US closed their borders. We are very thankful and blessed to be able to minister to the Pomaks and work alongside our CBC missionaries, Dimitris and Ioanna.

View overlooking the village of Glofki

Please continue to pray for Dimitris and Ioanna, and their work among the Pomaks.

“Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among all the peoples.” Psalm 96:3

May our Lord be glorified,
Jennie Work