

Remarkable Turkey



Turkey is not just an odd country on the other side of the globe; it is a remarkable land struggling with its social, political and spiritual identity.

There are tensions between its overwhelming Muslim population and its secular tradition; its desire to join the European Union and its place in leadership in the Islamic world; and its stunning economic development and its lingering internal conflict and poverty. Like almost every country, Turkey is a nation full of contradictions, where one can experience the image of God in the love of people and the joy of hospitality and then encounter the full fury of the Fall in the abuse of women, the ongoing civil conflict and the blatant injustice to minorities.

Turkey is rich in Biblical history. Haran

(where Abraham's father died), Mount Ararat, the seven churches of Revelation, and the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, are all in Turkey. The Cappadocian Fathers, most notably St Basil, articulated the doctrine of the Trinity in Turkey and the majority of the early church councils took place here. The apostle Paul was born in Tarsus in Turkey and travelled extensively here on his missionary journeys.

But the Biblical history is in the remote past and irrelevant to most of today's Turks. Turkey has a population of nearly 75 million people, and fewer than 70,000 of them are Christian. Of those, the majority are nominal Armenians, Syrian and Greek Orthodox or Catholics, and those communities are all in danger. The local government of Mardinis is trying to claim part of the property of the 1,600-year-old Mor Gabriel Monastery. The only seminary for Greek Orthodox priests has been kept closed by the government since 1972 and

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

- ★ Turkey is the 17th largest economy in the world?
- ★ Turkey has the oldest flag still in use, dating back to the early days of the Ottoman Empire?
- ★ Turkey is a secular republic with constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion?
- ★ Turkey's Christian population in 1900 was 25% but today is less than 0.1%?
- ★ Turkey has one of the smallest church populations in the world, but one of the largest, strongest and freest Muslim-background churches in any Muslim-majority country?
- ★ Turks consider Kiwis to be special, bonded to them by the blood spilled at Gallipoli and the promises made to the ANZACS by Atatürk?

their community is now numbered at less than 3,000 souls.

On the other hand, the small Muslim-background Protestant church has been growing slowly and steadily since the mid-1960s. The constitution of the Republic guarantees freedom of religion and the Turkish courts have upheld numerous challenges to this through the years. There are now dozens of legally recognised Christian meetings and, unlike most Muslim-majority countries, Turkey allows its citizens to change their religion and permits Muslim converts to Christianity to meet freely for public worship.

While the church in Turkey is among the oldest in the world, dating back to the church in Antioch as described in the book of Acts, the modern Protestant church only began in the 1960s, after a small number of western evangelists started distributing literature and making the good news known among Turks. Progress was very slow and difficult in the early decades, but perseverance paid off: the Bible was translated, small house fellowships were started, books and videos were made available in Turkish and the convert church began. By the late 1980s there were an estimated 200 Muslim-background converts in the country and about the same number of full-time expatriate mission workers.

In 1988 the government decided that things

were getting out of hand. They concluded that these 400 people, half of them Turks and half foreigners, must be up to something dangerous because their actions were mysterious and made no sense. So they deported the foreigners and arrested the national believers, in the hope of stopping

the work while it was still young. However, thanks to prayer from around the world, all of the foreigners who were deported returned and all of the nationals who were arrested remained true to the faith – and the church began to grow. There were difficulties, but slowly the government and society began to



The library of Celsus in Ephesus, built 110-135 AD

recognise the rights of people to consider a different faith, and in 1990 the first legally recognised church meetings began, testing the Republic's stated freedom of religion.

One of the biggest issues was that for Turks (and most people in the world), religion is closely tied to social identity and ethnicity. "Turkish Christian" is viewed as an oxymoron, a contradiction of terms – Christians are the people of the Crusades; the immoral people who swim at the Turkish beaches; Armenians, Greeks or Europeans; and therefore they are the enemy. They can't be Turks. Turks are Muslims and Christians are Foreigners. Even if they're citizens

of the Republic, they are still foreigners: they are different, they are dangerous. Or so the popular thinking goes. Turkish converts still sometimes ask, after they've been baptised, whether they are still Turks.

There has always been pressure on the Christian community here in Turkey, from the pogroms of the late 1800s to the abuse of the minorities during WWI and then on through the population exchanges of the 20th century and the various atrocities. In recent decades the small Protestant community has also undergone attacks – stones thrown at buildings and the occasional unjust court case – but in April 2007 things escalated significantly when three Protestants (two Turks and a German) were brutally murdered

in the city of Malatya because of their evangelistic activities.

The murders in Malatya have changed everything. Society is now aware of the convert church as it never has been before. Ultra-nationalists are horrified that the church exists, but sincere Turks of goodwill are equally horrified at the abuse heaped upon the small church. The church itself has responded with anger and alarm, but not with fear. There is a confidence in the church that God is in control, and a determination to stand up in society and claim the rights of citizens, much as Paul did before Agrippa. The Turkish church leaders have a fresh appreciation that the issue is theirs and is not to be left to foreigners.

Today we have over 4000 Muslim-background Turkish Christians living in varying degrees of safety and acceptance in their families and communities. We have a growing number of small fellowships and there are significant efforts to help people grow in Christ as individuals and as communities of believers. We also have a growing understanding in society that things must change, that xenophobic attitudes are not fitting for a modern, secular republic trying to join the European Union.

In addition to the 4000 or so actively participating in fellowships, there are many thousands who have attended and subsequently left, or who have heard the Gospel but been afraid to respond. Every month there are stories of people who have



Famous statue of a Turkish soldier carrying an ANZAC soldier to safety.

chosen to follow Jesus but who have no idea how that can happen. They may have listened to the radio, watched a television programme or visited a Christian website, but the closest fellowship is hundreds of kilometres away and they don't know what to do next.

The church in Turkey is now working on growth in two directions – horizontal growth (increased numbers) and vertical growth (increased depth). Discipleship is a key issue here because the prevalent worldview is so very different from anything taught in the Bible. The change is hard and people need individualised help. There are also deep social problems that must be addressed by the church: injustice, poverty, abuse, corruption, and the trafficking of women. All of these are appropriate issues for the followers of Jesus to address.

Turkey is blessed by a heritage of unity from the early foreign workers. There is a council of church leaders that meets regularly to discuss common issues, not with ecclesiastical authority, but as brothers and sisters working to pool their gifts and resources for the advance of the kingdom. This council has identified seven priority areas: prayer; holistic discipleship; children, youth and families; evangelism and church planting; leadership development; social action; and media and the arts.

All things are possible for God. We have seen phenomenal growth, that has taken the church in Turkey from nothing just a



few years back to the gloriously insignificant position in which we find ourselves today. Four thousand out of 75,000,000 is a rounding error. Even when we include the nearly 70,000 members registered with mainstream churches, Christians make up less than 0.1% of the population. It will take a miracle for the church to survive and a hundred miracles for it to grow. That's why we know we must start and stop with prayer, for this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Please pray with us for this country and consider joining us in the labour: there remains so much more left to do! ☞

The author works as a tentmaker and in business as mission in Turkey. He and his family have lived in Turkey for over 20 years.

PASTORS' TOUR OF TURKEY **9-27 APRIL, 2012**

Interserve invites pastors to experience first-hand the vibrant and biblically-rich nation of Turkey. Participants will tour historical biblical sites, learn about modern Turkish culture and meet with local Turkish pastors. There will be many opportunities to learn about the Turkish church, its challenges, and how we can partner with it. The nations of NZ and Turkey are uniquely linked, so a special highlight will be attending the ANZAC Day Dawn Service at Gallipoli. Call 0800 446 464 for more information or email talk2us@interserve.org.nz