

Modern-day Pauls in Athens

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MIXING WITH THE LOCALS — Athenians love to mix and mingle in plazas and street-side cafes, a custom that suited Amber Cockrell, Ann Howard and Rachel Little well as they looked for ways to share their faith. (IMB PHOTO)

Sixty modern-day Pauls singing on Mars Hill draw a crowd of Athens tourists snapping pictures and shooting video of the impromptu worship circle. As the students' voices rise over the city of 4 million, a Persian man on the fringes presses forward to ask for a copy of the lyrics.

"Do you understand what's going on?" Jerry Southern asks. The man replies: "Yes, you are Christians."

As Southern segues from the song's lyrics to the story of Christ, the Persian interrupts. Motioning to his daughter, he instructs her to tape record their discussion for later review.

"God sometimes takes me from America and a guy from Iran and we meet in Greece," says Southern, who is Baptist Collegiate Union minister at Georgia Southern University. "That's God's timing."

Proclaiming 'the unknown God'

The Persian man is among one of more than 43 people groups that heard the Gospel through a weeklong International World Changers missions trip this past spring. Abandoning typical spring break plans, students from Tennessee, Georgia and Mississippi converged in the Mediterranean, ministering alongside Southern Baptist workers to proclaim a God as unknown to Athenians as He was in the Apostle Paul's days 2,000 years ago.

In Athens, past meets present and biblical meets secular. The city is the home of Socrates, the Olympics and Greek salad. It's also a modern metropolis with pockets of its history remaining as renovation work on the Acropolis can be seen from McDonald's and the subway runs beneath ancient ruins.

Churches dot the downtown skyline of this historical city. Their bells chime daily. But faith is not per-



sonal for most modern-day Greeks. Many identify with the Eastern Orthodox Church — a connection sustained through Easter and Christmas masses.

“They need to experience God,” Athens worker “Scott Wicker” told the student missions volunteers. “We need you to help us do that.”

Through trash collection, drama, movie production, basketball, English lessons, Gypsy ministry and a coffeehouse, the IWC ministry teams answered that call to help Athenians — Greek and immigrant — experience the God still unknown to many.

Street sweeping for souls

Donning orange vests and carrying trash pickup tongs, one group of IWCers took to the streets to draw conversations about their faith. The team filled a need for targeted neighborhoods as Athenian city workers held a trash, metro and bus strike the week of the mission trip.

Many conversations took place over black garbage bags. One woman asked IWCers: “You came all this way to tell me about Jesus?”

Curiosity was an entry point as the short-term trash collectors handed out Bibles to shop keepers and residents. Holding open the Book’s cover, IWCers pointed out the Orthodox Church’s seal of approval to avoid being seen as Protestant heretics. For many, it’s the first modern Greek Bible they have read.

Driving through Athens’ winding streets, trash pick-up claws also became a distribution tool as team members passed Bibles through car windows using the mechanical hands. Getting dirty through trash collection and later through pick-up basketball games, the ministry team gave “trash talk” new meaning in reaching Athenian neighborhoods.



STREET EVANGELISM — Pausing from picking up trash in Athens, Greece, two students from First Baptist Church in Clinton, Miss., hand out Bibles. (IMB PHOTO)

Actions, then words

Guitar riffs from Lifehouse’s song *Everything* filled town squares throughout Athens as IWC drama teams traveled the city performing the “Redeemer” drama. The skit is an 11-minute wordless portrayal of man’s relationship with God. As the music faded, students fanned out into the applauding crowd to start conversations about the drama’s meaning.

Despite the language barrier, students used high school and college studies in Spanish, French and German to share God’s love with Athenians. In one setting, students found a native French speaker with tears trickling down his face. Calling over another IWC French major to interpret, they shared the message of the cross.

Worship leader Sam Banfield also crossed the language barrier using his German language skills.

“God continues to show me how He uses us,” Banfield said. “I never thought I would use German (after college), and here I am speaking to an Iranian man in German.”

Mission to minorities

A single light bulb illuminates the crowded cement-block room where Roma (Gypsy) families and their newfound American friends watch a Greek version of a film about Jesus' life.

Children's attention spans are notoriously short, but tonight all eyes watch the film. The group celebrates the moment of Jesus rising from the dead with a round of applause.

One worker who focuses on Gypsy ministry has seen six Roma make decisions of faith in several months' time. All six have agreed to be baptized soon.

Throughout the week, IWCers assisted the worker's mission by playing baseball, singing and dancing with the children. The youth returned the love with flower petals and slips of paper inscribed with the word *agape* (love). These Roma children are illiterate; one child wrote the word for others to copy.

Most Roma make a living selling produce and flowers. Many live in poverty, but their greatest need is hope through salvation in Christ.

Vision casting

Hundreds of immigrants find refuge from war, poverty and injustice within Greece's borders. One IWC team spent the week handing out food and clothes at a refugee center.

The last two nights of the trip, IWCers transformed the center into a coffeehouse — converting the fluorescent-lighted, tiled room with floor lamps, throw pillows and square tables. As other teams ministered during the week, they invited newfound friends to come for an extended conversation and free coffee.

The games, songs, testimonies and movies shared over coffee deepened the students' relationships with Greeks and immigrants. The first night, a man accepted Christ. The other contacts provided fertile ground for future IWCers.



HILLTOP WORSHIP — A group of 60 International World Changers lead a worship service on Mars Hill in Athens, drawing onlookers into conversations about Christ. (IMB) PHOTO

“IWC is our top strategic partner,” Wicker says. “Every year they give us a push.”

Through annual trips to Athens — first through the 2004 Olympics outreach and now through ministry-building efforts — IWC teams strengthen the ministry in Athens. This past summer an IWC team served through refugee youth camps, soccer camps, a construction project and a nursing home ministry.

“I would encourage a church that hasn't found its niche [in missions] to use IWC to make strategic partnerships on the field,” Wicker says.

Name is quotation marks has been changed.

Act

- **Go:** International World Changers is a ministry of the International Mission Board, providing student groups with packaged missions opportunities. Check out upcoming opportunities at <http://thetask.org/youth/IWC>.
- **Learn** more about ministry in Central and Eastern Europe at <http://hope4cee.org/index.php>.