

AEM 35 year Anniversary: April 1986 to April 2021

The Founding of the Mission

April this year saw the 35th anniversary of founding of the Mission, and it seems appropriate to look back at the why, who, how and where of its birth. If you wish, feel free to download to keep or distribute this short article.

Why

What faced us – that is, people concerned for religion, and especially for Christianity - in the 1970s and 1980s, regarding Albania, was that: Albania had previously been the only predominantly Muslim country in Europe; after 1945 under Enver Hoxha it became the severest Communist régime in eastern Europe, allied to China because Russia was too soft; it practised the most ruthless religious persecution in Europe; in 1967 it declared itself the world's first atheist state; and it contained no Evangelical believers known to us.



Enver Hoxha, commons.wikimedia.org

The Prayer Movement

In October 1976, ten people met to pray for Albania. The first was held in the cottage where David Young and his wife Margaret were living in Borough Green, Kent.



the venue of the 1976 prayer meeting



Nicky Crane, now living in Turan, Albania, was at the 1976 meeting

Other prayer meetings were held later in different homes in the south-east of England; then in a church in central London. Later, because people were travelling long distances (someone even came once from Paris), the meeting split into regional centres.

It was felt that the prayer meetings should continue to be linked together. A prayer conference was arranged in 1979, but few attended and the praying was largely done on the slopes of Moel-y-Gaer near Llangollen. In October, 1983, a brother from Preston arranged a second prayer conference, at Cloverley Hall in Shropshire. Thereafter a conference was held each autumn, and people attended from various countries and missions.



weekend prayer conference, 1991

Who

As founders' names will be mentioned in the events that led to the foundation, here are in alphabetical order the four founders:

Matthew Fitter, in the police force in Guildford. In about 1984 a profile on Albania was presented at St Saviour's Church, through which God spoke strongly to Matthew, and from

then on he had a concern in his heart for Albania. The quarterly prayer meeting for Albania which had been held since 1976 was now meeting regularly in the London area. He began attending it; later, with David Montgomery, he began a local prayer meeting in Guildford. In the period 1985-1987 he went twice to Albania, once on the first English-speaking Christian group, led by David Montgomery, then on a trip organised by Rev. Dudley Powell of Stoke Gifford, Bristol, who later became a missionary in Berat, Albania.

David Montgomery, whose interest grew out of a wider concern for eastern Europe. He saw a notice of the London prayer meeting in *Open Doors* magazine, attended for about a year, and in time felt the Lord calling him to a more active part. He led a group five others in 1982, on a tour arranged by Albturist. Alan Hall, of Open Doors, asked him to lead an Open Doors group. He agreed, and in doing so, he saw the value of such trips, but he felt they should be part of the outreach of local churches. It was the church at Stoke Gifford that became the base for future trips, and David went on three or four, including leading one.

Sali Rahmani, an Albanian from Ferizaj in Kosova, born to a Muslim mother and a Communist father. To please his Muslim relatives and neighbours he celebrated Islamic festivals and sometimes fasted during Ramadan. To please his father he observed Communist celebrations. But he was never converted to either of these creeds. After finishing his studies in Economics at his home town, he worked for a year, but decided to emigrate to Australia via Vienna and left Ferizaj in 1972. Whilst in Vienna waiting for his papers, he happened across some Christians testifying in an open air meeting. After a few weeks, the same Christians visited him and invited him to church. Their testimonies, lives and love attracted him, and he went every Sunday for about three months.

As the pastor read from different Bible passages, Sali felt that every verse explained a piece of his life. "How could this book know about me and my past?" He read further, "The wages of sin is death," and he thought, "for sure I deserved such a wage." He had to consider how he could take Christ and deny Mohammed and Communism, which meant denying his parents and relatives. His struggle continued for about another month, till 14th of August 1972, in a short and simple prayer, he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

He lost his desire to go to Australia, and a year later the Lord called him to full-time ministry to preach to his own people. Thus in 1973 he went to Bible College in Berwick-upon-Tweed, where he studied till 1976. Immediately after the course, he went to Munich in association with the European Christian Mission to pioneer a Serbian and Albanian church, though his major personal interest was the Albanians. In 1973 he undertook radio ministry with Trans World Radio. Literature work also began. In 1980 he moved to Vienna, joined the European Christian Mission team, and continued the radio ministry and evangelism among Albanians and others.

David Young's call began in 1965. He writes:

Having recently left school, I went to Backnang, near Stuttgart, to work as a postman to improve my German. There I met Christians from eastern Europe. Through the church I attended, Zion Methodist, I found lodgings with a family, who had fled from eastern Germany at the end of the War. In the homes of other families linked with the church, I

met elderly relatives who were allowed out on visits, for, being old, their possible escape was not considered important. They told us about life under Communist rule.

Some while after the time in Germany, I saw a film showing Richard Wurmbrand, who had been imprisoned and tortured in Romania. I heard Haralan Popov at a conference - he had been imprisoned in Bulgaria. I read *God's Smuggler* by the founder of Open Doors—and other books about the suffering church behind the Iron Curtain. In 1973, about the time I met Sali, I began to ask the Lord how to narrow down the concern for eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, to get really involved with one people.

I had recently been commended to the ministry among the Strict Baptists, and was circulating among the churches waiting for a call to a pastorate, whilst teaching Scripture part-time in a local school. No homework was set for Scripture, so I had free periods with no marking to do, and I decided to use the time to learn an eastern European language. The one I felt led to would indicate the people to whom God would narrow down my concern. The Albanian situation, and the sense of God's call in my heart, directed my mind to Albania, and I came to believe that Albanian was the language God would have me learn, and that the Albanians were the people he would have me seek to work for.

I began teaching myself Albania in 1973 from Stuart Mann's *Grammar* and a Russian radio, and was given much help and encouragement from Col. Dayrell Oakley-Hill, a retired British army officer who spent the years 1929 to 1938 in Albania. He travelled the entire country on horseback, seeking to establish law and order and settle blood-feuds. He became King Zog's personal interpreter. In Albania he was deputy to General Percy, who with a team of British officers ran the Albanian Gendarmerie (Police) from 1929 to 1938. On the outbreak of war he was appointed head of the SOE office for Albania, in Belgrade, and for two and a half years was a prisoner of war. Released on medical grounds, he was asked in 1944 to head the UNRRA mission to Tirana, based in Bari, Italy. You may see more about him in YouTube video *British Christians in Albania*.



Col. D. Oakley-Hill in the mountains 1941

A 1981 Visit

David Young continues the story:

In July 1981 I flew from to Thessalonica with an American believer. A few days before we left, I felt God spoke to me through Genesis 12:1: “Get thee out of thy country... unto a land that I will show thee.”

We met an American missionary, Mark Diavastes, serving in Greece. He took us to the border at Kakavia, where he bribed the Greek guards with gifts so that we could stand on their look-out platform and look over the panorama into Albania. “*A land that I will show thee.*”

Mark also took us to Molivoskepastos, a village on the slope above the confluence of the rivers Vijosa and Sarandaporos. On a spur at the northern end of the village is the Church of the Holy Apostles, from which at night the lights of Leskovik are seen, eight miles away in Albania. A slope spreads downwards, and some 250 yards from where we stood begin the fields of Albania, and we beheld a view to far horizons in Albania. “*A land that I will show thee.*”

Mark also took us to Janina, once the capital of southern Albania, now in Greece, where the pastor of the Evangelical church invited me to preach on the Sunday morning. During the journey, a conviction came over me that Albania would one day open to us, and I wrote: “In due time I shall ‘go up... as the Lord, the God of my fathers, has told me.’”

Towards Founding the Mission

David Young visited Sali in Vienna in 1981, and from that time Sali felt interested in seeing something totally Albanian develop. Later he visited David and—partly among the clouds on the tops of the Berwyn Mountains—they talked and prayed about the possibility of forming what ultimately came to be AEM.



Sali Rahmani, probably on Moel Ty Uchaf in the 1980s

In Britain there never had been a mission specially for the Albanian people. Before the War, from America, there had been the Albanian Evangelical Mission, and it was a privilege to have two of their American missionaries speak at the 1984 weekend prayer Conference, Edwin and Dorothy Jacques, and AEM valued its association with them over the ensuing years, including permission to use the names Albanian Evangelical Mission and Misioni Ungjillor.



Edwin Jacques, pre-War baptism, Korçë, Albania

We knew of no Evangelical community or individuals continuing within Albania, but some years later, before the final fall of Communism, Edwin Jacques shared with us the names and addresses of the remaining Evangelical believers who were still meeting secretly in Korçë, Albania, and it was at their invitation that AEM began its ministry within Albania in 1991 under missionary Mike Brown: we did not go uninvited by local believers.

But to return to the 1984 prayer conference weekend, David Young spoke of the need for a body to be set up that would finance the work of making the situation and needs of the Albanians known to the Christian public especially by visits to the churches, and which would devote all its resources and efforts only to Albanian ministry.

By April, 1985, it seemed the right time for closer co-operation between David Young and Sali, and they drew up a list of tasks which could be committed to David if time could be made available for them - mainly connected with follow-up of Sali's radio listeners, and with strengthening the interest in Albania around Britain.

David continues the story:

Over the next few months, I came to feel that "something must go", for a number of things I was involved with were all growing:

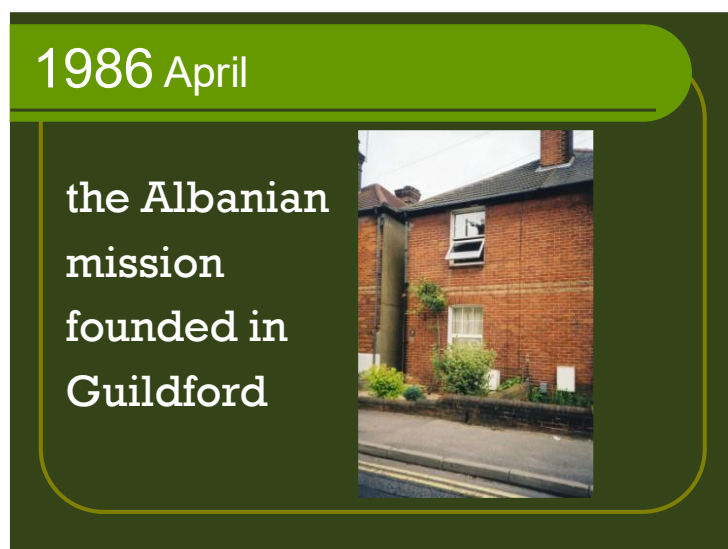
- I was teaching French and German at a boarding school. This involved, as well as teaching, being on duty till 11 pm at least once a week, and perhaps four to six times a term at weekends.
- In June 1983 the Baptist church of ten members in the village of Llay, 2½ miles from home, invited me (a return to the Baptist ministry) and become their pastor, and the church was growing.
- The Albanian work seemed to offer almost endless, but where was the time for it?
Something had to go, and I began testing various possibilities and trying various doors, to see which God would open.

By the end of 1985, other people were feeling that Britain should have an evangelical organisation whose sole focus was the Albanian people. A new headmaster told David that he planned to reduce language teaching, and wanted David to work only three days a week from September 1986. In God's providence, the time for decision was approaching.

In March 1986 David was offered a post teaching German and French at a school in Yeovil. Should he work as a full-time schoolteacher in Somerset? Or stay in Wrexham and earn money part-time? A number of people connected with the prayer movement encouraged him to give the extra two days to Albanian work in cooperation with Sali. After prayer, discussion with his wife, and seeking advice, it seemed right to accept the part-time work at school and to work with Sali.

The Founding: how and where

Then, against all of this background, on 1st April, 1986, the four founders met in the house in the picture, in Guildford, and established the Albanian Evangelical Trust (later renamed Albanian Evangelical Mission).



David was appointed the Trust's secretary. Sali wrote one of the cheques with which the new Trust's account was opened. He continued his ministry with the European Christian Mission and Trans World Radio, and wrote to David in April 2021:

David my beloved brother, I remember, the Lord's will of the start of Albanian Mission was confirmed in April 1986 on the top of your favourite hills you took me to walk and pray. I remember we started praying whilst April showers and blowing wind stopped as soon as we agreed at the end of our prayers and said "Amin". The sunshine was a sign! We walked down hill and went to open a bank account depositing £5 and trusted God to provide the rest for the work of Albanian Evangelical Trust (mission) and He did to the Glory of our Divine Master, and He will continue. I pray AEM continues to be blessed and reach many more souls for His Kingdom.

David Montgomery declined publicity, partly because he was also linked to ministry in the Arab world. It was said that Matthew Fitter left Guildford and the police force and went to work among drug addicts in Glasgow, though we have not had first-hand confirmation of this.

The mission's Trust Deed was written subsequently to include a clause forbidding amalgamation with any organisation unless, like AEM, its only purpose is Christian work among Albanians. Nonetheless, we hoped that eagerness to cooperate with other evangelical ministries would always characterise AEM.

Books and YouTube videos

AEM initially requested 2000 copies of the book *Mission to Albania* (published by Christian Focus, 2001), but the publisher sent 5000, which means we are happy to post a copy free of charge within Britain if you would like one. It relates the first fifteen years of the Mission's development and work. Other books about the work have been published and, if sold out, should be available in libraries. We can supply a full list of titles.

There is also a 15-minute YouTube video entitled *Albanian Evangelical Mission: its birth and early development and ministry* with other videos, varying in length from 2½ to 23 minutes, which can be found on the YouTube channel "David Young Wrexham and Basingstoke".

We close this narrative with some lines from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* published after his visit to Albania:

Land of Albania! let me bend mine eyes
On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men! ...

Now he adventured on a shore unknown,
Which all admire, but many dread to view.