

WITNESS TO FOLLOWING JESUS IN ATHENS, GREECE

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When one takes a 360-degree view of Athens today from the heights of the Acropolis, crosses fill the landscape adorning the top of churches across the city and marking every Greek flag waving in the breeze. Although Greek Orthodox Christianity is still the official religion of the nation and most Greeks have a deep cultural attachment to Orthodox Christianity, the Greek people are becoming increasingly secular and unengaged in the religion of their nation. Active participation in the Orthodox Church is in decline even though a majority of Greeks believe in God.¹ In this environment dominated by nominal Christianity, the small minority of Evangelical Protestants desire their fellow Greeks to experience a vibrant personal faith in Jesus.

In addition to the decline of religious practices among Orthodox Christians, Athens has been in the throes of both the ongoing Greek economic crisis and the European refugee crisis. The Greek economic crisis is now in its ninth year. Dramatic reductions in jobs, pensions, and small businesses as well as the exodus of Greek young people to find work in other countries are deeply affecting the lives of numerous Greeks. Extreme poverty in Greece has risen from 2.2% in 2009 to 8.9% in 2011 and on to 15% in 2015.² On top of this economic crisis has been the strain of the European refugee crisis with hundreds of thousands of refugees flowing through the city of Athens in the last three years, with many getting stuck there on their journey to other parts of Europe. Assisting this desperate mass movement of people in the midst of an ever-deepening economic crisis has been a tremendous weight for a culture of hospitality and generosity.

In light of these present social, economic and religious realities, qualitative data was gathered from a sample of Protestant pastors and para-church leaders in Athens in May 2017 on the subject of witness in their city. The purpose was to explore what God might be doing evangelistically in Athens given these environmental factors. In May 2017, interviews were conducted in Athens with fifteen ministry leaders over a period of ten days to explore what has been happening evangelistically through Protestant churches and ministries over the previous two years. Each interview used a set of ten questions and was recorded and transcribed. The interviewees included ten local church pastors and five leaders in para-church ministries. In addition to the qualitative questions in the interview, each interviewee completed a ministry

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leader questionnaire to gather data on their ministry and outreach. Furthermore, each interviewee was asked to fill out a “new follower of Jesus” questionnaire for each new follower of Jesus in the past two years in their ministry. Eight of the fifteen interviewees completed and returned forms on the “new followers of Jesus.”

Interpretation of the interviews and questionnaires suggest three provisional shifts in the witness of Protestants in this dynamic environment. First, there is a shift from hit-and-run evangelism to compassion ministry that is facilitating authentic relational witness. Second, migration over the past decade has fueled church growth among Protestants. Third, secularization among Greeks in this Orthodox nation seems to be opening hearts to new birth experiences in Christ. Orthodox and Protestant traditions differ on what constitutes a Christian and how witness happens. However, both can agree there is a need for spiritual renewal and witness among people in Athens.

Before discussing each of these shifts, it is helpful to understand the religious context in Greece. The long history of Christianity in Athens as well as certain Greek cultural dimensions affect the way Christianity intersects with the lives of people in Athens today. These concepts will be explored in the next section. Furthermore, an analysis of three components of religion (believing, behaving, and belonging) will also be examined to shed further light on the religious context in Greece. After unpacking these components, the three shifts apparent in the interviews and questionnaires will be fleshed out. Finally, given the specific religious context in Athens and the generally ineffective witness of Protestants among ethnic Greeks expressed in the interviews, a possible alternative approach for witness to following Jesus will be suggested.

Christianity in Greece

Christianity arrived in Athens in the first century with the preaching of Paul according to Acts 17:15-18:1. Followers of Jesus were a minority during the first few hundred years and experienced moments of persecution. Greek Orthodox tradition celebrates Saint Quadratus, bishop of Athens, as the first apologist, asserting that he wrote an Apologia to the Emperor Hadrian in 126 A.D. defending the validity of Christianity. His preaching to pagans resulted in imprisonment where he died of starvation.

In the early fourth century, Constantine brought political favor to the Christian religion across the empire. This led to greater imperial support for Christianity in the coming years. In the

late fourth century, Theodosius actively persecuted pagan worship and those considered heretics. In the fifth century, Theodosius II “converted pagan temples into Christian churches.” And in the sixth century, “Justinian I forbade pagans to teach” even though by then “most rhetoricians would have been Christian, it presumably closed pagan philosophical schools.”³

Moments of compulsion and centuries of Christendom where political power joined forces with ecclesiastical power in Athens has historically shaped the cultural practice of Christianity throughout Europe, bringing into question the true conversion of the heart. This was part of the story and challenge of Greek Christianity.

Even though the Enlightenment ultimately championed the separation of church and state, this did not take hold in Greece. Unlike most of Western Europe, Greece maintains a Constantinian alliance between church and state. Consequently, in Greece, political affiliation reinforces a cultural identification with Orthodox Christianity.

While Greece is an Orthodox-majority nation and most Greeks identify as Orthodox, the people of Greece need spiritual renewal. There are three ways that people can connect to religion: believing (affirming primary beliefs of the religion), belonging (identifying with a religious group or a local congregation), and behaving (doing religious practices such as active prayer and worship attendance). Grace Davie coined the bi-fold terms of believing and belonging in 1994 and Allan Billings expanded the concept to the triangular formulation of believing, belonging, and behaving in 2001 as he sought to explain religious phenomena in the European context.⁴ Greeks reflect a pattern seen among many Central and Eastern Europeans. They are generally high in believing and belonging but low in the behaving aspects of religion.⁵ We might clarify that for Greeks belonging speaks to cultural identification with a religious group, not necessarily with a local congregation.

It appears that the majority of Greek Christians could be classified as *nominal Christians*. Nominal can mean “that a person is registered as a Protestant, Orthodox or Roman Catholic but does not practice this religion...Nominal Christians do not sever all links with the institutional church. Although their daily life is largely secularized, and although they may have a secular worldview, they wish to maintain at least an administrative link with organized religion.”⁶ This is often achieved through engaging in minimal requirements, such as going to mass just a few times a year, to ensure one remains “on good terms with the church in order to be acceptable to God.”⁷

Views on nominal Christians differ according to church tradition. Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions may consider a person to be a Christian so long as they have experienced infant baptism and possibly confirmation. On the other hand, according to a Lausanne statement, evangelical Protestants would view a nominal Christian as “a person who has not responded in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord. He is a Christian in name only. He may be very religious...But...he is still destined for eternal judgment...because he has not committed his life to Jesus Christ.”⁸ Consequently, evangelicals tend to view nominal Christians as Christians in name but not in reality.

Orthodox and Protestant streams of Christianity also hold different understandings of witness. Professor Dr. Dimitra Koukoura, who teaches homiletics in Greece, wrote a chapter on “Liturgy and Evangelism in Orthodox Theology.”⁹ She describes the central role of the liturgy for evangelism in the Orthodox perspective. In liturgy, the story of the gospel is celebrated and experienced. Baptism brings one into the church and into redemption. Through communion one can “succeed in the faith with sanctified grace.”¹⁰ “During the Divine Liturgy the faithful are transformed according to the model of Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ This is followed by performing “the liturgy after the Liturgy” through being faithful to Christ in daily living.

Koukoura affirms that “modern multi-cultural society” in Europe is in need of re-evangelization. “Christian churches in traditional Christian countries, such as those of Europe,” she writes, “have a double imperative debt for the evangelization and the re-evangelization of society so that the light of Christ shines...Thus, those who seek the truth in the midst of the moral crisis can face it embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.”¹² From this, it can be seen that Eastern Orthodoxy centers evangelism in the liturgy and religious education within the society. Although evangelism and nominalism are viewed differently in the Orthodox understanding than in the Protestant, the Orthodox tradition shares a desire for the Christian faith to be transformational for its people.

Regardless of whether one views nominal Christians as inside or outside the body of Christ, both Protestant and Orthodox traditions affirm the need for the church to provide a witness for Jesus Christ that will fan into flame a faith that includes all three components of believing, belonging, and behaving. This witness is needed in Greece. However, the interviews conducted for this article were limited in scope to witness in and through the Protestant community in

Athens. Further study should be done with the Orthodox community in Athens to explore questions regarding witness among and through the Orthodox Church in Athens. Assuming the importance of believing, belonging, and behaving for healthy faith, we begin with a look at Christian belief among Athenians.

Believing

At first glance, religious belief appears to stand like a column holding up faith in Greece. The fundamental belief in God is strong nationally. The Pew Research Study of 2015-2016 reported that 96% of Greeks believe in God. 62% declared they believe in God with absolute certainty. However, over one third (34%) indicated they believe in God with less certainty. The nationwide studies conducted by the diaNEOsis Research & Policy Institute over that last three years confirms that the majority of Greeks believe in God, but their numbers are 10% to 15% lower than the Pew figures.¹³ In an April 2015 diaNEOsis study, only 83.5% of the 2,500 respondents said they believe in God. This dropped in a December 2016 study to 79%, but it rose again to 84.7% in a January/February 2018 study. This fluctuation may be due in part to variations between each diaNEOsis study in the number of respondents from more liberal urban areas or from more conservative rural areas. Since the Pew study and the diaNEOsis studies are nationwide, none of them may be a true representation of the city of Athens, though they likely give a general picture.

Regardless of the fluctuation of percentages between each diaNEOsis study, one consistent factor is that age has a substantial influence on how people responded in all three of the diaNEOsis studies. Those 65 years old or older exhibited the highest level of belief in God, averaging 86.6% (85.7% in 2015, 86% in 2016 and 88.2% in 2018). At the other end, the youngest age category of 17 to 24-year-olds had the lowest level of belief in God, averaging 73.2% (79.4% in 2016, 63% in 2016, and 77.3% in 2018). Alexandros Sakellariou suggests this may be the result of significant erosion in belief in the last ten years. Whereas the Pew study found only 4% of Greeks say they are religiously unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular),¹⁴ Sakellariou indicates that Atheism has risen from less than 2% ten years ago to almost 15% in 2015, while those identifying as Orthodox has dropped from 96.9% in 2006 to 81.4% in 2015.¹⁵ His statistics reflect more closely the diaNEOsis studies that reported an average of 16% who say they do not personally believe in God.¹⁶

Two of the fifteen interviewees in the present study in Athens indicated there is a growing number of Atheists in Athens. One highlighted this reality in a particular neighborhood near the center of Athens where he planted a church. The other does ministry with college students and she mentioned a growing number among incoming college students identifying as atheist. Consequently, cracks may be appearing in the pillar of belief in God in Greek society.

It also seems the Church's ability to influence moral values and beliefs is eroding. For example, only 10% of Orthodox Christians in Greece say that sex before marriage is wrong.¹⁷ This is the lowest percentage of Orthodox Christians who believe sex outside of marriage is wrong among Orthodox Christians in fourteen Eastern European nations.¹⁸

Another example is reflected in the Greek views on homosexuality. Typically, high percentages of Orthodox Christians in Central and Eastern Europe believe homosexuality is morally wrong, reflecting the view of the Orthodox Church. Among the ten Orthodox-majority nations in Central and Eastern Europe, the median is 84% for people who believe homosexuality is wrong.¹⁹ Greece, however, ranks the lowest of all ten Orthodox-majority nations. Only 51% of Greeks are in alignment with the Orthodox Church.²⁰ Furthermore, there is a very pronounced generational gap regarding the issue of allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally. Of those aged 18-34, 45% favor or strongly favor gay marriage. This contrasts to only 19% of those who are age 35 and above.²¹ This 26% gap is the largest generational belief gap on this issue found in all 18 Central and Eastern European nations. The pronounced secularized views of homosexuality and the overwhelming acceptance of sex before marriage is problematic for the future of Christian faith among Greeks. Although Greeks typically maintain their identity as Christian, their beliefs and behaviors are becoming more secular and post-Christian. The Orthodox Church's influence on social values and religious beliefs are showing signs of weakness.

Behaving

Of greater concern than religious faith in Greece are the statistics regarding regular religious practices. Among those Greeks who identify as Orthodox, only 17% attend church on a weekly basis.²² Furthermore, only 29% say they pray daily. For comparison, 55% of adults in the United States claim they pray every day. It is a given that all Greek Orthodox are baptized and 95% say they have icons in their homes.²³ Because of the universal veneration of icons for Orthodox

believers, “most Orthodox Christians around the world say they keep icons or other holy figures in their homes.”²⁴ These vestiges of religion in Greek culture, unfortunately, do not correlate with daily prayer or weekly worship attendance practices. This lack of intentional behaving aspects of religion in Greece are a matter of great concern.

Belonging

The majority perspective in Greece is that a person is not truly Greek if she/he is not Orthodox. According to the Pew study, 76% of Greeks “say being Orthodox is very or somewhat important to truly be a national of their country.”²⁵ To be Greek is to be Orthodox. Most of the fifteen Protestant leaders interviewed affirmed this cultural reality. When asked, “What are the challenges of people coming to new or active faith in Athens?” most pointed to the ingrained cultural identity with Orthodox Christianity. Responses included, “Evangelicals are stigmatized as heretics, so the biggest obstacle is family.” Another summarized, “Their ethnicity is tied to their religion. To be Greek is to be Orthodox...so coming to faith in Christ is seen as a denial of your history or culture or identity.” A third leader spoke of the consequences for those perceived to abandon their cultural identity: “Sometimes we have women who have been threatened and some of them have even been beaten up because they come to the [Protestant] church. The second challenge is the social isolation they get. When lives change, the neighborhood pushes them away like they are lepers.” These examples illustrate the importance of this cultural identity.

Other aspects of Greek national culture contribute to the power of identity for the Greek. Because of the collectivist nature of Greece, cultural identity is a deep bond that is socially enforced. According to culture scholar Dr. Geert Hofstede, the collectivist value in Greece “means that in this country people from birth onwards are integrated into the strong, cohesive in-group (especially represented by the extended family; including uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins) which continues protecting its members in exchange for loyalty.”²⁶ Historically, the Orthodox Church actively resisted the 500 years of Ottoman Muslim rule and preserved Greek culture during this time period. Furthermore, in the last century, the Orthodox Church served as a rallying point under German occupation. Consequently, history welded together the Orthodox Church and Greek identity.

Hofstede's work on cultural dimensions also reveals that Greeks have a very high degree of uncertainty avoidance. In fact, they are the highest of all countries measured by Hofstede. Uncertainty avoidance is "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these."²⁷ No wonder family reacts strongly when someone explores religious expressions that diverge from the Orthodox tradition. "In Greece, as in all high Uncertainty Avoidance societies, bureaucracy, laws and rules are very important to make the world a safer place to live in."²⁸

The sacrament of the Eucharist in the Greek Orthodox Church seems to function for the Greek as a set ritual that helps one avoid uncertainty. One observer suggests that "the Eucharist has ended up as a 'religious duty' and when it is carried out life is 'fixed' for a moment...and thus nothing else needs to be done."²⁹ Consequently, other practices are not necessary. If collectivism enforces Orthodox identity and history forged it, uncertainty avoidance and the corresponding occasional practice of the Eucharist cements it.

Belief in the supremacy of Greek culture is portrayed in the finding that 89% of Greeks "completely/mostly agree with the statement 'Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others.'"³⁰ They scored the highest among the 10 Orthodox-majority nations of Central and Eastern Europe that had a median score of 68% regarding this statement. Clearly a strong social identity is connected to Orthodox Christianity, and yet social identity in Greece does not seem to correlate with regular religious practices. It is in this religious, historical and cultural context that Protestant churches and ministries are witnessing to the people of Athens. The data gathered through the fifteen interviews sought to discover what God is doing in this particular setting in the city of Athens through the witness of Protestants.

Observable Trends

Examination of the sample of Protestant ministries studied and the insights shared by the leaders of these churches and para-church ministries suggest three observable trends regarding witness in Athens for Protestants. The first trend is a shift in the kind of outreach activities currently at the forefront of Protestant engagement in Athens. The second trend concerns where Protestant church growth is centered. The third trend suggests there is hope the midst of the secularization process in Athens. While individual churches and ministries may feel the challenge and difficulty of ministry in Athens, these three trends should encourage believers in

Athens that God is giving new forms to witness that is bearing fresh fruit. The economic and refugee crises in Athens have been difficult, but they have facilitated productive change in the witness of Protestants.

Focus on Ministries of Compassion

In response to the socio-economic crises in Athens, Protestants made a fundamental shift in the kind of outreach ministries they were doing. In the past, much energy and resources were invested in passing out tracts, distributing Bibles and street witnessing. However, most of the ministries interviewed now focus on serving people in need in their community and city. Thirteen of the fifteen local churches and ministries interviewed do regular ministry for refugees, immigrants, or the Greek poor. Nine out of the fifteen churches and ministries host a regular feeding program at least weekly. Some feed refugees, some feed immigrants, and some feed the Greek poor. Eight out of fifteen have some type of ministry to the homeless. These outreaches are serving the needs of the least and the last of society. Because these community service activities are ongoing, they foster the development of relationships and trust, creating a natural space for authentic sharing and witness. One interviewee shared how in 2004 (the year Athens hosted the Olympics), he co-led a campaign of evangelicals focused on “lots of witnessing, and the distribution of numerous tracts and thousands of New Testaments.” There was “a tremendous output and the response was minimal, and we realized this is not how to do it,” he reflected.

Most churches and ministries were sacrificially engaged in ministry to the least, the last, and the lost of Athens. God is using their service to the poor to bring in new followers of Jesus. Unfortunately, there were two large churches interviewed that had very few new followers of Jesus in the last two years compared to their congregation size (1% or less per year). The larger of the two was the only church in the study that reported it does not do any outreach ministry. The pastor said his people serve in other ministries, but their church does not organize any ministry to the community. It seems that the biblical adage is born out, “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6).

Four of the fifteen churches and ministries had the vast majority of the new followers of Jesus in the past two years (86% of the total). Not surprisingly, these four were the three churches and one ministry most engaged in outreach ministry. Two of the four each have a community center that facilitates a variety of services for refugees throughout the week. One

church has a warehouse for receiving and distributing food and supplies to refugees, continually hosts international teams who come to serve refugees and gypsies, sends volunteers daily to provide childcare in a refugee registration center, and often feeds large groups of people in the community. The senior pastors of these churches all seemed to have apostolic callings illustrated by the huge percentage of their time and church resources being invested in the surrounding community.

Athenian Greek churches and ministries have all felt the harsh impact of the Greek economic crisis, yet despite their own suffering they have displayed great generosity to people in their city. They reflect the generosity of their Greek forefathers who the Apostle Paul bragged about declaring, “we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality” (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). The demonstration of Christ’s love by Athenian followers of Jesus today is opening the hearts of people toward Christ. Several relayed stories of immigrant church plants naturally growing out of these places where compassion ministry was taking place.

Church Growth Among Immigrants

The second trend apparent in Athens is that migration over the past decade has fueled church growth among Protestants. Most new believers come from this demographic, and there has been a dramatic rise in the number of immigrant churches in Athens. One researcher counted 160 Protestant churches currently in and around Athens of which 104 of them are immigrant congregations started in the past decade or so.³¹ Another leader provided a similar number suggesting there are about 100 immigrant Protestant churches in Athens that have started in the past ten years. He further observed that most of the growth in the evangelical community has been due to Pentecostal churches (even though he is not personally a part of that subset of evangelicalism). An interdenominational leader interviewed asserted that despite stagnant growth among Greeks, the number of evangelicals in Greece and the number of evangelical churches in Athens has doubled due to new immigrant churches. He specifically mentioned new Chinese, Filipino, Russian, and African churches. Among the Filipino population there may be as many as 30 churches consisting primarily of women who work in Greek homes. Another interviewee indicated that a Chinese church is one of the largest Protestant churches in Athens. The largest

Protestant church in Athens may be a multi-ethnic Pentecostal church of 700 people . The senior pastor was interviewed for this research. In addition to the multi-ethnic main service that includes 42 ethnicities, this church also has four mono-ethnic congregations using its facilities (two Spanish as well as a Polish and a Russian congregation).

Although the number of immigrant churches remains high, the situation is quite fluid. Many immigrant congregations experienced significant numerical decline and sometimes even closure in the last two years as members moved to other countries, taking advantage of the opportunity to register and or travel afforded by the influx of refugees. One of the ten church leader interviews was conducted with the pastor and founder of an African immigrant church. His church began in 1999 and experienced steady growth, reaching 150 people with enough resources to purchase a sizable meeting location in 2006. However, the economic crisis that hit shortly thereafter drove a number of congregants to return to their home countries, and recently the refugee crisis enabled many remaining congregants to migrate to northern Europe. Today, just 25 of his congregants remain in Athens. Other stories were shared of whole immigrant congregations in Athens (such as Iranian churches) moving to northern Europe during the refugee crisis as well as immigrant congregations from places like Bulgaria, Romania and Albania closing due to members returning home given the strain of the Greek economic crisis. Because of the economic and the refugee crises, the demographic makeup of immigrants in Athens is shifting from Southeastern European immigrants to Middle Eastern immigrants.

Apart from a few exceptions, it is the immigrant populations in Athens, not the Greek people, who are open to the witness of the Protestant community. Some immigrants arrive as Christians (especially from sub-Saharan Africa or other locations in Europe) necessitating new ethnic congregations to serve them. Other immigrants arrive in Athens from non-Christian backgrounds and become followers of Jesus in this new land. Interviewees specifically mentioned Iranians, Syrians, Afghans, and Pakistanis becoming followers of Jesus.

An interesting ethnic correlation was found among the ten churches interviewed. The ethnicity of the pastor (and pastor's wife) was reflected in the ethnic makeup of the congregation. All church pastors interviewed who were Greek nationals served congregations that were 80% or more Greek. The one exception was a Greek pastor who was married to a non-Greek. In contrast, all the churches pastored by non-Greek nationals (either European or American) all had multi-ethnic congregations. Furthermore, generally speaking the Greek majority churches were better

at engaging Greeks in the community and the multi-ethnic churches were better at engaging non-Greeks. Interestingly, the church that reported the most new followers of Jesus in the last two years was the church pastored by a multi-racial couple (a Greek married to a non-Greek). Their church is numerically the most effective among the immigrant (non-refugee) population. Perhaps this leadership modeling creates an environment where foreigners feel welcomed and displays to the congregation how to live in unity with people of ethnic diversity. Another interesting example was observed. The church most engaged in ministry with refugees and bearing the most fruit with this segment of the population is pastored by someone who himself lived as a refugee as a child, having been driven from his home by war. No wonder this pastor has such great compassion for and connection with those experiencing the trauma of displacement. God is leveraging the ethnicity and the unique life experiences of Christian leaders for fruitful ministry.

A pattern also emerged among the fifteen interviewees regarding evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic theological orientations. Each interviewee was asked to select their theological orientation on *The Ministry Leader Questionnaire* form. A list of five choices included: Greek Orthodox; Protestant; Catholic; Evangelical; Spirit-empowered; and Pentecostal/Charismatic. They were asked to check all that apply. Certainly, Pentecostal/charismatic can be seen today as a sub-set within evangelical Protestantism. However, in the first half of the 20th century, evangelical and Pentecostal labels represented clearly distinct groups of people. The Charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s began to blur those sharp distinctions. The mainstreaming of expressive worship in the recent decades along with the declining significance of denominationalism have further diminished a hard separation between these labels, allowing Pentecostal/charismatics to be embraced as a sub-set of evangelical Protestant Christianity. However, theological and often stylistic distinctions are still present.

When the ten pastors were asked their theological orientation on *The Ministry Leader Questionnaire*, correlations appeared between theological orientation and congregational ethnicity or type of ministry. Regarding the ten churches, with only one exception, the Greek-majority churches were all led by pastors who identified as evangelical, while all of the multi-ethnic church leaders identified as Pentecostal/charismatic. Perhaps the evangelical emphases on the mind and Scripture has a greater appeal to the rational/philosophical orientation of the Greek

culture whereas the Pentecostal/charismatic emphases on emotion and Spirit appeal to those from cultures less shaped by the Western Enlightenment and secularization.

Regarding the five para-church ministry leaders, all five identified as evangelical and none as Pentecostal/charismatic. Two of them identified as “spirit-empowered” in addition to marking “evangelical.” Because para-church ministries are inter-denominational and work with a variety of churches, it is no surprise that they all identified with the broader evangelical term.

Only three of the fifteen respondents checked “spirit-empowered.” This term is being propagated by Empowered21 (E21), a recent network of ministries from Pentecostal/charismatic perspectives. “Spirit-empowered” is a new term being used to embrace the role of the Holy Spirit but avoid the historical baggage of terms like Pentecostal, charismatic, or spirit-filled. The only pastor who checked the term “Spirit-empowered” phrase is a leader in E21 and therefore is very familiar with the term. The two para-church leaders who checked this phrase were the youngest of the fifteen leaders interviewed, and they both work with college students. Likely, both of these leaders come from Pentecostal/Charismatic backgrounds but want to avoid those terms given their interdenominational work and their sensitivity to the terms Pentecostal and charismatic among millennials.

These observations about ethnicity and theological orientation of the church pastor or ministry leader should not, however, be seen as determining whether or not a particular church or ministry can be an effective witness to immigrants. Both ethnic Greeks and non-Greeks, as well as evangelicals and Pentecostal/charismatics in the study demonstrated productive witness to immigrants. Although multi-ethnic congregations may attract some immigrants into their existing congregation, it is the multiplication and/or expansion of immigrant congregations that represents the significant growth of Protestantism in Athens. Consequently, finding ways to launch new immigrant churches and funnel immigrants into existing immigrant churches should be a strategic consideration for both Greek and multi-ethnic churches as well as para-church ministries.

Secularization and New Hope

While much has been said about engaging non-Greeks in Athens, one particular ray of light appeared in engaging Athenian Greeks. Earlier it was discussed how Greeks are being less and less shaped by their Orthodox heritage. This is deeply concerning; however, there is a bright spot

in this darkening scenario. There are some signs that secularization among Greeks in this Orthodox nation is opening hearts to new birth experiences in Christ.

Protestants working in the more secular segments of Athens are seeing an increase of new followers of Jesus among Greeks. The only church among the ten interviewed that reported a significant number of Greeks who have become followers of Jesus in the last two years is in the most secular neighborhood in Athens. Whereas most Greeks identify as Orthodox, the opposite would be true of the Greeks in this part of Athens. The “belonging” aspect of religion so strong in most of the Greek population is no longer present among this segment of the population. The pastor believes that secularization is spiritually empty and consequently is opening people to considering Jesus. Another ministry working with college students has also seen an upswing in interest in following Jesus in conjunction with the rise in overt atheism. In the past, when they met new students, they would typically hear the students say, “Oh I’m Greek Orthodox, I believe in God.” In the last few years though, they are meeting many new students who say, “I’m Greek Orthodox and I’m an Atheist.” In this case, belonging is still intact but believing has completely eroded, providing Protestants an opportunity to introduce belief in Christ afresh.

It should be noted that the pastor who is effectively engaging the secular community around him has been very missional in his approach. He has looked for ways to relate to people in his community and is encouraging his congregation to follow his lead. For example, he joined a popular weekly reading club in the neighborhood that reads and discusses books on political theory. Also, because people in the neighborhood have dogs, he too became a dog-owner seeking to relate as much as possible to the lives of people around him. Finding ways to relate to and join into the lives of people in the neighborhood seems to be working. Greeks are discovering new life in Christ in this neighborhood. A missional approach in this secular enclave in Athens is bearing fruit.

An Alternative Approach for Witness to Greeks

Unlike the neighborhood mentioned above, the majority of Greeks in Athens still believe in God but have a very nominal faith. The evangelical leaders in this sample of Protestant ministry leaders and pastors consistently spoke of the cultural identity of Greeks with Greek Orthodoxy as one of the greatest challenges to sharing Jesus with Greeks. As discussed earlier, this identity was forged in the history of the Greek experience and is reinforced by the cultural dimensions of

collectivism and high uncertainty avoidance. The typical Greek has a high sense of religious belonging. The religious arenas of believing and behaving are problematic. Unfortunately, evangelicals are viewed as religious outsiders. To become Protestant is to betray family and one's Greek identity in the mind of most Greeks. Perhaps another means for witness to Greeks could be considered for ministry in Athens.

What if evangelicals found a new way to contextualize the gospel so that witness moved from a "bounded set" to a "centered set" where the goal was not to make evangelical Protestant followers of Jesus but to foster Orthodox followers of Jesus? Missiologist Paul Hiebert proposed making this shift to categorize what it meant to be a Christian.³² The traditional "bounded set" focused on boundaries that defined who was inside and who was outside of Christianity. He recommended using a "centered set" to shift focus to what is at the center of being a Christian.³³

This kind of shift in thinking has been used as part of insider movements among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, and they could be informative for witness in Athens as well. Missiologists are observing groups of people in Asia and Africa who follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior, who study the Bible to see how they should live their lives, but they do not leave their cultural identity as Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. Theological debate centers on whether this is syncretism, a transitional state, or something to be affirmed. Since God is working in this mysterious way among adherents of other religions without them abandoning their cultural identity, why could He not also work among nominal Greek Orthodox to transform their believing and behaving, stirring them to be active Orthodox followers of Jesus? Perhaps Athenian evangelicals could begin praying for and seeking to help foster this kind of move of God among nominal Christian Greek Orthodox.

This has a significant implication for church planting. Church planting is the mantra of many mission strategies. Perhaps reframing our understanding of church planting would allow leaders to pursue developing Orthodox followers of Jesus.

Given the prominence of the phrase *church planting* in evangelical circles, it is surprising the phrase is never used in the Bible given our Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*. When Jesus used the planting/sowing metaphor, the object planted was "the word" (Mk 4:14), "the word of the kingdom" (Mt 13:19), "the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 13:31), or "the sons of the kingdom" (Mt 13:24, 37). When Paul declared, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth" (1 Cor 3:6), he was referring to planting the gospel, not planting local

churches.³⁴ Irenaeus, in 180 A.D., coined the phrase *church planting* when he wrote, “the Church is planted like the Garden of Eden in this world.”³⁵ Stefan Paas points out that Irenaeus was speaking of the institution of the universal church, not of local congregations.³⁶ Paas asserts that the classical understanding of church planting throughout church history was a three step process of evangelizing (sharing the gospel), gathering (forming community and discipling), and establishing (creating the institution and structure of the church).³⁷ For much of church history, the church being planted was a national church that sought to Christianize culture. Evangelical Protestants shifted the focus of church planting to planting churches in contrast to the older model of planting the church. Paas laments that in the last century, the three steps of church planting have been compressed into one step.

Today, church planting literature perpetuates a belief that the best method of evangelism is planting local churches. Paas insightfully pushes back suggesting a return to the three stages without rushing to the third stage. Furthermore, he suggests that the third stage is not always needed in communities that already have churches. He challenges church planters to consider working with existing churches. Church planters could focus on evangelism, discipleship, and creating communities of new followers of Jesus that could then become part of already established churches in the community. In the Athens context, with a centered set approach, these established churches in the community could be the Orthodox Church. Adjusting the dominant Protestant model of church planting could free an evangelical leader to engage nominal Orthodox Greeks in ways that support the Orthodox Church and stimulate growth in believing and behaving aspects of the Christian faith. Perhaps this could become a future shift in witness in Athens.

Conclusion

The fifteen interviews conducted among Protestant pastors and ministry leaders in Athens, Greece suggest God is doing fresh things and shifting the means of witness in this great city. Evangelicals in Athens Greece are experiencing growth, especially in the Pentecostal/charismatic sector with new congregations and new followers of Jesus among immigrants. This is where the evangelical community sees God moving most today. Evangelical growth, however, is mostly limited to the non-Greek population in Athens. Growth among ethnic Greeks is generally stagnant except where secularism has allowed Protestants to reintroduce Jesus to atheistic

Greeks. Finally, evangelical witness is experiencing a dramatic transformation away from impersonal short-term forms of witness to compassion ministries often exemplified in weekly feeding programs for the poor. This is a fundamental shift from non-relational activities to relational care and compassion. Witness no longer begins with word but first begins with deed.

The trends and patterns identified in this research study among fifteen Protestant church and ministry leaders in Athens, Greece are tentative but could provide relevancy to witness in other parts of Europe that share a historical Christendom reality. European scholars and ministry practitioners are concerned with the rapid decline in church attendance across Europe.

Observations from Athens may provide hope in the face of growing secularization across the continent as well as affirm the power of authentic witness through ongoing service to the poor and engagement with the immigrant. Athens may also speak to evangelism in the American context as well, providing a rich case study for what effective missional communal ministry could look like. Outreach activities usually require significant investments of believers' time and church finances. Churches on both continents may need to evaluate their outreaches and ask God to lead them into ministries that serve real needs of people in the community in regular and relational ways.

¹ Only 17% attend church weekly according to "Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century," *Pew Research Center*, 8 November 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century>.

² Thodoris Georgakopoulos, "Extreme Poverty in Greece," *diaNEOsis Research and Policy Institute*, June 2016, <https://www.dianeosis.org/en/2016/06/extreme-poverty-greece-survey>.

³ Lawrence P. Schrenk, "Athens," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd Ed., vol. 1, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1997), 143.

⁴ Evert Van De Poll, *Europe and the Gospel: Past Influences, Current Developments, Mission Challenges*, (London: Verista, 2013), 290-91.

⁵ "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," *Pew Research Center*, 10 May 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

⁶ Van De Poll, *Europe and the Gospel*, 286-87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁸ "Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics," *Lausanne Occasional Paper 10*, 16-27 June 1980, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-10>.

⁹ The book was a result of two symposiums held by the world council of churches on the subject of evangelism in Europe in light of the rapid decline of church attendance. Authors contributed from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Dimitra Koukoura, "Liturgy and Evangelism in Orthodox Theology," *Sharing Good News: Handbook on Evangelism in Europe*, eds. Gerrit Noort, Kyriaki Avtzi and Stefan Paas, (Geneva: WWC, 2017), 81-91.

¹⁰ Koukoura, "Liturgy and Evangelism in Orthodox Theology," 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88

¹² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³ “What Greeks Believe.” *The diaNEOsis Research & Policy Institute*, 2016, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Posotiki_Apriliou_Spreads.pdf. 2017, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ti_pistevoun_oi_ellines_final_version.pdf. 2018, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Ti_Pistevoun_Oi_Ellines_2018_Upd_040618.pdf.

¹⁴ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

¹⁵ Alexandros Sakellariou, “Atheism in Greek Society: Breaking the chain of religious memory and the emergence of atheist identity,” *NSRN Online*, 16 January 2017. <https://nsrn.net/2017/01/16/research-atheism-in-greek-society-breaking-the-chain-of-religious-memory-and-the-emergence-of-atheist-identity>.

¹⁶ This average is from 15.8% in 2015, 19.3% in 2016 and 13% in 2018. “What Greeks Believe.”

¹⁷ “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”.

²³ “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century.”

²⁴ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Country Comparison: Greece,” *Hofstede Insights*, <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/greece>.

²⁷ “Country Comparison: Greece.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Stavros Ignatiou, *Members of Athens Christian Center Engaged in Local Missional Ministries*, order no. 10599111 (Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2017), 14.

³⁰ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

³¹ Andre’ Rocha (Researcher & developer of www.prayforgreece.net), interviewed by John Thompson, Athens, Greece, May 2017.

³² Paul Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,” *Gospel in Context*, 1978.

<https://danutm.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/hiebert-paul-g-conversion-culture-and-cognitive-categories.pdf>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ In the previous verse Paul wrote, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed” (3:5). So what Paul planted was the gospel that enabled them to believe.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.20.2.

³⁶ Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2016), 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.