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Prayer Brings Church Back to Life in Romania

By Andrew McChesney

The new pastor was shocked when he showed up at the Bucharest International Seventh-day Adventist Church — the only English-speaking church in Romania’s capital — and found only three people present.

All three were Romanians.

“They pretty much told me that was it, that was the whole group,” said the pastor, Benjamin Stan.

Three weeks later, Benjamin learned that one of the three people, a 21-year-old woman, no longer planned to attend. The woman’s mother came to the church on Sabbath to break the news that her daughter, after being part of the group for two years, had decided to move on.

“The mother tried to tell me in a delicate way that her daughter was thinking about going to another church because she wanted a church that had more young people in it,” Benjamin said. “You know, young people need young people to grow.”

As the pastor listened to the mother speak, he wondered why God had led him to an apparently dead church. He prayed, “Why am I here? Why did You give me this calling?”

At that moment, a Romanian woman who attended church regularly but wasn’t a member arrived with an elderly couple. She had met the couple — a retired Adventist pastor who was touring Romania with his wife — on the way to church and learned that they were looking for her church.

“It was then that I understood that there was a need for the international church,” Benjamin said. “We have tourists who come to Romania and need a place to worship.”

Benjamin kept praying about the church. A couple weeks later, he turned up at the church to find a man dressed in a suit and tie waiting outside.

“Can I help you?” Benjamin asked.

“Yes, I am looking for the Seventh-day Adventist church,” the stranger replied.

Once the small church group gathered to worship, Benjamin asked the man to introduce himself. The man said he lived with his wife and two children in Poland but worked in Romania. He belonged to a Sunday church but, after studying the Bible, was looking for a church that worshipped on Saturday.

“It was then that I realized that there are foreigners who work in Romania but don’t speak Romanian,” Benjamin said. “This church would be good for them.”

Soon after that, the slow summer months arrived, and the church's two members and the other attendees left Bucharest for vacation. The church closed until the fall.

When it reopened, Benjamin suggested scheduling Sabbath School and the divine worship service on Sabbath mornings. Until then, the church had offered only the divine worship service from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. every Sabbath.

The two members voiced reluctance about the new format. They went to Romanian churches in the morning and didn't want to lose that fellowship. But Benjamin was insistent.

"We need to stop playing church," he told them. "We do not come here to study English. We come here to study the Bible. If we are going to do this, we need to be a church."

Benjamin recruited a 17-year-old treasurer and a 19-year-old Sabbath School superintendent. He found a man of about 30 to serve as elder. He advertised the new morning worship schedule on social media.

That first Sabbath morning, 32 people showed up.

"You should have seen the expression on the faces of the two members when they arrived," Benjamin said. "I could see their big eyes. They were surprised when they saw so many people — especially so many young people — in the church."

The Polish visitor, who had been taking Bible studies with Benjamin, was baptized on a Sabbath morning several weeks later.

Today, Benjamin has no doubt that the church, started by pastor Adrian Bocaneanu in 2010, serves an important role in Bucharest. It now has 26 members, and weekly attendance ranges from 30 to 50 people, including tourists, foreign workers, and international students. A couple times attendance reached 60.

"With the exception of two Sabbaths, we have had at least one new visitor at the church every Sabbath," said Benjamin, 43, who also serves as associate youth director for the Adventist Church in Romania, and oversees the country's Pathfinder and Adventurer clubs.

The church was officially recognized by the Romanian Union Conference as a church in March 2016, 10 months after Benjamin began praying.

What happened to those three people who attended the church when he arrived that first Sabbath?

"The three members still go to the church, and they are very much involved," Benjamin said. "The young woman who left is now one of the elders."

Andrew McChesney, Editor Adventist Mission

TRANS-EUROPEAN DIVISION

Prayer Focus

August 6 – 13, 2017

BRIEF FACTS ABOUT THE TED: The Trans-European Division was first organized in 1928 and now encompasses 22 countries, including: Aland Islands, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Faeroe Islands, Finland, Greece, Greenland, Guernsey, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Svalbard and Jan Mayen Islands, Sweden, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the southern portion of Cyprus.

The area comprising the TED has a population of about 205 million people, with 86,000 Seventh-day Adventist members worshipping in 1,165 churches. With postmodern secularism prominent in this region, ministries focus on evangelism and outreach for the secular mind.

PRAYER REQUEST: Please pray for Raafat A. Kamal, Division president; Audrey E. Andersson, Secretary; and Nenad Jepuranovic, Treasurer. Please pray for the Union and Conference leadership as well as local pastors.

PRAYER REQUEST: Pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on church members of the TED as they seek to witness to those around them.

PRAYER REQUEST: Pray for the youth of the TED to desire a personal relationship with Jesus, and make Him the Lord of their life. Pray for Seventh-day Adventist education in the TED to be a light and witness in the community.

PRAYER REQUEST: Pray for the pastors and church leaders of the TED to have the wisdom to lead the church toward heaven, while meeting the needs facing their countries in the refugee crisis. Pray that we all would be the feet and hands of Jesus to a hurting world.