



BY RANDY HURST

Europe's lost generations

Photography by Jess Heugel and Randy Hurst

Post-Christian culture and massive immigration are
transforming the cradle of Western Christianity



Is it fair for young people to live and die in the shadow of cathedrals, wearing crosses around their necks — symbols whose significance they don't even faintly understand? Young Europeans are surrounded by Christian imagery, but they are far from a saving knowledge of Jesus. Some of their ancestors several generations ago genuinely worshipped and served the Savior, but that is not enough. Every new generation is potentially an unreached people group.

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Spiritual emptiness

Nowhere in the world is there more beautiful and abundant Christian architecture and symbolism than in Europe. Majestic cathedrals and landmarks named after saints are clear but mute testimonies to a vital Christian past. Yet most of Europe is spiritually destitute.

The somber majesty of Prague, Czech Republic, is a vivid representation of most of Europe. A central feature of the city is a statue of John Hus, who was burned at the stake for his bold preaching. The statue's face appears to be looking over the city. Its expression is grave, even sorrowful. The mood is appropriate. Prague is considered one of the most atheistic cities in the world. Overall, Czech Republic is about 60 percent atheist.

Lining the Charles Bridge, which spans the Vltava River, are beautiful statues of Christ and saints, now covered with the black soot of many decades. Among the people strolling on the bridge, only a few smile and no one laughs. The atmosphere is grand, but dim and joyless as inexpressive faces convey a spiritual emptiness.

In Belgium, William Tyndale was strangled and then burned at the stake for translating the Bible to put it in the hands of the common people. Now Christian imagery abounds in Belgium, but only 3 people in 1,000 claim Christ as their Savior. The nation is economically wealthy but spiritually destitute.

In Greece, marble columns on the Acropolis reflect a past civilization where a love of beauty and philosophy reigned. On Mars Hill the apostle Paul once proclaimed the gospel to people who worshipped the beauty of God's creation but not the Creator himself. We find no epistle to the church at Athens in the New Testament. This proud civilization, vain in their imagination, considered the gospel foolishness. Its legacy is crumbling ruins.

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Lost generations

Imagine the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with only 5,000 born-again Christians. That statistic describes Lyon, France's second-largest city.

Think of the entire state of South Dakota with only 130 believers attending just three evangelical churches. That is equivalent to the country of Montenegro.

Europe is a tragic paradox — an empty appearance of Christian symbolism that masks a reality of spiritual darkness.

More than 200,000 villages, towns and cities in Europe do not have a gospel witness. In 22 of Europe's 36 countries, less than 1 percent are born-again Christians. In many countries, more than 98 percent of those who walk the streets are headed for eternal damnation.

In the first century, the Church spread from Antioch to the Gentile world. Today, ancient Antioch is Antakya, Turkey. Hardly a vestige of Christian culture or evidence of spiritual life remains. The land of the seven churches Jesus addressed in Revelation doesn't exhibit church steeples. Instead, sunlight glitters on minarets of Islam. Europe is quickly following the same historical pattern.

Both Europe and the Middle East provoke the question: Does a Christian past absolve the church of its responsibility to proclaim the gospel to lost generations?



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Adequate witness

Two realities prefigure a totally changing Europe: a drastically low birthrate among indigenous Europeans and a swelling flood of immigrants.

Of the 20 nations with the lowest birthrates in the world, 18 are in Europe. In some city streets, more people can be seen walking dogs than holding children's hands.

About 27 million immigrants reside in the European Union. Switzerland has the highest immigrant population in Europe, with 23 percent of its 7.5 million residents foreign born. If Germany ceased to accept immigrants today, by 2050 its working population would fall from 41 million to 26 million. In Frankfurt, immigrants comprise about 30 percent of the population. The city also has 27 mosques.

Europe now numbers some 18 million Muslims. Some 20 percent of residents in Vienna, Austria, are Muslim. According to current estimates, Europe will have a Muslim majority by 2100 if present trends continue.

Europe's spiritual condition demands a fresh examination of what we believe. What constitutes an "adequate witness" of Christ?

Missionary strategists grapple with defining when a particular people group or nation is "reached," "unreached" or the "least reached." In the past, a common way of expressing the plight of the unreached was to state how many people in a particular part of the world had not yet heard the name of Jesus. But hearing the name of Jesus is not an adequate witness. Neither is mere proximity to the Christian message without a relevant connection. A drowning man in a fog can be within a few yards of the shore and die within its reach. Close but lost is still unreached. Europeans have been exposed to just enough Christianity to virtually immunize them from an effective gospel witness.

The pervasive spiritual darkness in Europe is gradually being penetrated by increasing points of light. As candles are more visible in a totally dark room, true believers in Europe stand out noticeably. The fact that the gospel is proclaimed relatively sparingly in Europe makes it no less powerful to save and transform lives.

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Veronica preaching on the street in Madrid



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Searching for truth

Within Europe's spiritual darkness, God's Spirit is moving on hearts and using faithful believers in miraculous ways to rescue the lost.

When Veronica was a young girl, her parents occasionally took her to a Catholic church. She believed in Jesus and even prayed to Him at night, but eventually her parents stopped attending church. As a teenager, Veronica had a relationship with a young man for several years. When they broke up, a great emptiness overwhelmed her. She read books on Buddhism but found no peace. She remembered that the only time she felt peace inside was when she talked to Jesus as a young girl.

When she moved to Madrid, Spain, at 25, she brought her father's Bible with her and started reading it. After three months, she realized that she was a sinner. On one of her worst days, she prayed and asked God to send someone to teach her because she couldn't find the truth. Later she walked through Madrid's central plaza, Puerta del Sol, which means "Sun Gate." A young woman named Maritza was standing on a box, playing a guitar and singing. Veronica stayed and listened to the message preached by missionary Jacob Bock. When he talked about judgment, Veronica was fearful.

After the message, a girl named Julia approached Veronica and gave her a Gospel of Luke. Julia told her that God loved her and had prepared her heart for Him. Veronica received Christ that day.

Veronica had such a hunger for the Word that within two months she enrolled in a Bible school. Today, while attending Bible school, she preaches with Jacob Bock and others at Puerta del Sol. God is using her to lead people to Christ at the same place where she found Him more than a year ago.

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Jovica



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Women from the Teen Challenge women's center in Novi Sad, Serbia, listen to Greg Mundis preach.



Rescued

Jovica (pronounced “Yoveetsa”) grew up in Serbia in a small house with only one room and a kitchen. He and his parents and sister slept in one bed, and his grandmother lived in the kitchen. Children made fun of him at school because he was so poor. At 13, he started drinking, listening to American heavy metal music, sniffing glue and using drugs. When desperate for alcohol, he would physically beat his parents for money.

After 10 years, he left home and moved in with a friend. His new roommate shared his interest in American heavy metal music and was also dabbling in satanism. Oddly enough, his roommate had a Bible — something Jovica had never seen.

One day, while lying in bed reading a comic book, Jovica felt impressed to read the Bible he had seen in the closet. He remembers Jesus “coming alive in front of his eyes.” He felt so sinful and hopeless. But when he came to Mark 2:17, he read, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (NIV).

Through contact with an old friend, Jovica found a Pentecostal church and soon received Christ as his Savior. God called him to the ministry, and he attended the Bible school in Osijek, Croatia. After graduation, he began helping a fellow graduate who was starting a work in Montenegro. Jovica and his wife have been serving as missionaries to Montenegro for nine years. The work is hard, but the joy of serving Christ is evident in Jovica’s expression when he speaks of all that God is doing. He has great hopes and vision for reaching multitudes in Montenegro.

I sat with Greg Mundis in a Teen Challenge

women’s center in Novi Sad, Serbia, as we talked with 10 young women who have been rescued from heroin addiction. To hear their joyful testimonies of new life in Jesus — after no less than three and as many as 10 years of bondage to drugs — was moving. Each woman told how many years she was addicted to heroin, her happiness and peace of now being free from drugs, and the love and acceptance she has experienced from her new spiritual family.

Sasha, a former drug addict who founded the center, asked Greg to share a few words. Greg told the girls how proud we are of what God has helped them accomplish. Then he exhorted them, “When you’re finished with the program and go back home, you will have some friends and family members who will tell you that you’re the same person who left. Don’t believe them. You are a new person in Christ. You have a totally new life ahead of you, and God has a wonderful plan for you.”

As Greg spoke, I watched several of the girls wiping tears from their cheeks. I contemplated what a great joy it always is to see a life that, as the apostle Paul told the Colossians, has been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

As the women worshipped in the church service that evening, their faces reflected their joy and fervent love for God. No one could imagine the depth of pain and sadness from which they had been delivered.

Light is especially bright when shining after darkness, and joy is nowhere as evident as where sorrow once overwhelmed the soul.



Darkness to light

In contrast to joyful youth in vibrant churches, the streets and plazas of Europe's cities teem with the desperately lost, ranging in appearance from stylish to grungy. Each is searching — in a futile attempt to find intellectual satisfaction, physical sensation, spiritual enlightenment and ever-elusive personal peace.

The light of the gospel once beamed brightly from Europe to the world. Now Europe is shrouded in spiritual darkness. Though covered with a religious facade, its inner soul is decayed and offers no hope. But the Holy Spirit is working, and God's truth is bringing light to Europe's dark soul.

In the context of eternity, Europe's statistics, demographics and trends are not the most critical issues. What really matters to God — and should to us — is the eternal destiny of individual people. Statistics represent real people — individual personalities — each with hopes and dreams, pains and fears, belonging or loneliness. Each person matters to God and is someone Jesus gave His life to redeem.

Since the Europe region was formed 10 years ago, many new missionaries have answered the Spirit's call to establish lights in the darkness. The U.S. AG missionary force has grown from 283 to 478, and those attending churches in our fraternal fellowships have grown from 1.1 million to nearly 2.6 million. But the growing light in Europe is still shadowed by the multiplied millions who remain lost and perishing — waiting for the only true message of peace, hope and life everlasting.

Effectively communicating the gospel in Europe's post-Christian society requires a sovereign work of the Spirit, for which the church must passionately and persistently pray. Only the all-wise Spirit of God who sovereignly calls laborers into the harvest knows who is needed to reach a post-Christian Europe.

In the history of Christian missions, God has always called exceptional people to hard fields of labor — people who allowed the Spirit to light a fire of passion within them for the lost. With determined commitment, they were willing to pay the necessary price to see the lost comprehend both the heavy cost of sin and the love and forgiveness of Christ.

Before creation, God's Spirit hovered over a dark void. Then — the Word was spoken and life began. Europe, the cradle of Western Christianity, is now largely spiritually dark and empty. But God's Spirit is moving, and His Word is being spoken. In the spiritual void of Europe, God is bringing life again. **tpe**



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