

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN TURKEY

- Its Current State
- The Impact of Recent Events

Source: Church worker in Ankara

It has been two years since my last reflections on the state of the church in Turkey. There have been a number of profound developments and changes in the ministry situation in Turkey since that time. And some other characteristics that have been true for a long time have stood out to me a new way recently.

1) Refugees

The ongoing civil war in Syria and the spread of ISIS in Iraq and Syria have contributed to an unprecedented influx of refugees since 2014. There are now an estimated 3 million refugees in Turkey from Syria and Iraq, although precise numbers are very hard to calculate. Nearly every organization serving in Turkey has had to adapt in some way to accommodate this very sudden demographic shift, which now represents a permanent change in the population of Turkey. The high profile of the refugee crisis has also brought the ministry context of Turkey onto the conscious of the church in the world in a new way, and new resources have become available as people are being motivated to give and to serve.

A number of churches have developed food distribution ministries along with clothing distribution and medical work (see our ministry here in Ankara at www.ankara-refugees.com), which continue to mature as churches and organizations gain experience. In some cities the ministry opportunities created by the refugee crisis have brought churches and organizations together in deeper cooperation and partnership. And now, two years into the refugee crisis, there is a new focus on sustainable areas of ministry to refugees. For many of the people fleeing Iraq and Syria the urgent need for food aid remains, but there is also a need for support in settling into a new life in Turkey. The church is helping people to make that transition with language courses, skills training, employment opportunities, and educational assistance for children. Of course, the need continues to outpace the resources.

Ministries focusing on the spiritual needs of refugees are also growing, although this is an underdeveloped area that demands a new level of attention. In some cities Christian background refugees have gathered in large numbers and there are still no long term workers to serve them. Discipleship material and Bibles in Arabic have sometimes been hard to access, especially material written in language that most of the Muslim background refugees can easily understand. And when material is available in Arabic, there is still a paralyzing lack of Arabic speaking long term ministers in Turkey to work toward the formation of new congregations and the discipleship of believers.

Within the Turkish church, the presence of refugees has brought new theological and spiritual challenges to the fore. A nationalistic reaction to millions of Arab and Kurdish immigrants is sweeping across many dimensions of Turkish political and social life, and this has also been felt in the church. In recent months there has been an increased sense of "insider - outsider" distinction between Turkish Christians and foreigners in the church. This has been directed toward refugee communities and also toward foreign workers, especially where ministry efforts and resources are being focused on serving refugees.

2) Terrorism, Regional Instability, and Security Issues

Kurdish nationalist and terrorist groups such as the PKK and its offshoots or cross-border counterparts have perpetrated violent attacks against police, military, and even civilian targets throughout Turkey. While most of the violent conflicts happen in Turkey's southeast, there have

been a number of prominent bombings in major cities over the past year. At the same time, ISIS and groups or individuals claiming to be affiliated with ISIS have also focused new attention on committing violent attacks in Istanbul and Ankara especially. It has become unfortunately common to hear of new attacks, and while so many people insist that they will never become jaded toward this kind of tragedy, it is hard to continue to be surprised when a new attack makes the headlines.

Churches have had to think about security in different ways, and believers in Turkey are increasingly aware of the potential for danger that comes with associating with Christ. When there are publicized threats or rumors of new attacks, churches have had to wrestle with how to respond. The issue of whether it is appropriate to cancel worship services has become controversial. Many churches have insisted on staying open, even in the face of threats. Some churches have decided to cancel meetings on occasion. And some now have metal detectors at the entrance or even locked gates that are opened for church members or approved guests.

Organizations have also had to reassess security protocols and contingency plans. Risks that didn't seem present just a year ago are now being taken seriously by teams around the country. It has sometimes felt as if the community of foreign believers was on the edge of panic that could lead to rash and unnecessary decisions. While the presence of new risks is real, the situation has not reached a point that should cause organizations to abandon work in Turkey. Common sense precautions and clear systems of communication among team members can go a long way toward working in the safest ways possible without compromising the priorities of ministry.

3) National Polarization and the July 15th Coup Attempt

President Erdoğan's AK Party has continued to enjoy unparalleled success and the brand of moderate Islamism that he has developed has garnered the endorsement of more than half of the country's voters. While the other half of the country is opposed to significant portions of Erdoğan's vision for the future of Turkey, this "anti-Islamist" contingent is divided among a handful of equally opposing platforms and political visions. There has not been a unified opposition movement with enough momentum to pose a political threat to the AK Party. The seeming inevitability of Erdoğan's success contributes to an air of political tension in Turkey, which is also felt in the church.

Within the Islamist constituency, there has also been significant division. During the first several years of the president's national political career, he sought the support of Fethullah Gülen, an influential Turkish religious leader with a powerful media and education network who lives in self-imposed exile in the the United States. In 2014 Erdoğan and Gülen had a very public falling out and each of them worked to expose the other in incriminating ways.

On July 15th a faction of the Turkish military attempted to overthrow the government in a powerfully armed and coordinated coup. President Erdoğan responded by calling his supporters to the streets to oppose the coup attempt. Thousands of civilians, along with most of the police force, took on lines of Turkish soldiers, retaking tanks and reacquiring occupied buildings. Explosions throughout the night shook Ankara and Istanbul. Media outlets were forcibly invaded, and government buildings were shot to ruins with attack helicopters. But by the morning the violence was over and Erdoğan's supporters had successfully held off the coup attempt.

In the days following, it became clear that Fethullah Gülen's network was at least partially responsible for the coup attempt. Erdoğan began a campaign to purge the country from any remaining vestiges of Gülen's influence. Tens of thousands of people were fired from their jobs or arrested. Thousands of schools, associations, and hospitals were closed for their connection to the Gülen network. And Erdoğan instituted a three month state of emergency called an OHAL in

Turkish, which gave his government and police forces expanded powers and limited some constitutional rights of citizens in a number of areas including search and seizure, arrest and detainment, and international travel. The OHAL will end in September and it is unclear whether the president will ask for an extension. There is also some uncertainty about what kind of permanent changes in current laws will affect the rights of Christians to express and practice their faith in Turkey. For now, church life continues as usual for the most part, although the Association of Protestant Churches has recommended that foreign believers refrain from public evangelism or other activities that could draw negative attention in public.

4) Vibrant Youth Ministries

The Turkish church is moving into a new generation. It has been more than 50 years since the early days of church planting efforts in Turkey in the 1960's, and a generation of Turkish Christian youth are taking responsibility for ministry in deeper ways. Vibrant youth ministries within individual congregations are more and more common, although not entirely new. Often it seems that young people who have been raised in the church are serving as anchors for a ministry that is reaching out to other young people.

Ministries serving across churches that focus on youth have also found increasing success and fruitfulness in recent years. Camp ministries have always been a hallmark of youth ministry in Turkey, and today there are several camp options for Christian youth every summer. Conferences for older youth (18-30) such as Yüzyüze have gained momentum. Church-based, nation-wide youth movements such as "Uyanış Gençliği" have also found increasing fruitfulness.

As is the case in so many parts of the world, the young people in the church in Turkey have begun to carry the ministry agenda of the church forward in new ways. Young people are pioneering in the area of prayer and worship, and there are bright spots that hint toward the future of a grass-roots movement in the Turkish church to engage in cross-cultural mission.

There is a need for discipleship material and media that addresses the concerns of youth and that also takes seriously the depth of spirituality that the vanguard of young people in the Turkish church have. Youth groups in Turkish churches are also struggling with many of the same challenges that the rest of the church faces. Turnover in youth groups seems very high and relational struggles and conflict create tense environments sometimes. It also seems that deeply entrenched issues related to sexuality are able to be addressed in more honest ways in youth ministries than in the regular church context. Honestly confronting pornography, sexual addictions, and sexual abuse is still so rare in the church, but it has increasingly come onto the radar of youth groups and youth ministries, again pointing to a hopeful future.

5) Worship as a Growing Movement

The Turkish church is experiencing a growth spurt in the area of worship. New Turkish worship leaders are emerging. Church members around the country are expressing interest in leading worship or learning skills related to serving on worship teams. There are still congregations around the country that are frustrated with a lack of members with musical ability or gifts related to worship leading, but the church is moving in the right direction on this. New worship music is being written, often faster than congregations can keep up with. New albums are being produced with songs that are being assimilated for use in the churches. While some songs continue to be translated into Turkish, especially from English, a growing percentage are original compositions in Turkish.

Churches without musically-gifted worship leaders can use CDs or playlists to organize sets of worship music. There are now dozens of YouTube channels devoted to worship music in Turkish and some churches and small groups rely on them week after week to lead their members in corporate worship. The Turkish songbook "Tanrı'yı Yüceltelim" continues to be updated

regularly, with new songs being incorporated with every edition. And now, an app called "Worship Leader," developed by a worker in Turkey is nearly ubiquitous in the church. It compiles all of the available songs in Turkish, including music that isn't yet in the print edition of the songbook, and it has chords and helpful tools for worship leaders and congregations. Seminars for aspiring worship leaders and a camp called "Kanat" continue to grow in popularity. This year Kanat had to keep a waiting list because of the unprecedented demand.

The movement toward worship in the Turkish church is not limited to music, however. Prayer events are also multiplying, with regionally coordinated conferences being organized, occasional prayer and worship meetings gathering, and permanent ministries related to prayer and worship establishing a presence in Turkey. This also seems to be an area that exemplifies fruitful cooperation between Turkish and foreign believers and organizations, although that is not likely to come as a surprise to anyone involved.

6) The Ongoing Need for Evangelism, Discipleship, and Church Planting

The church in Turkey is undoubtedly growing. There are approximately 5500 believers meeting in Turkish churches around the country. However, there are still thousands of cities, towns, and villages that have no gospel presence. The number of Christian workers committed to evangelism and church planting in unreached places is still staggeringly small. As I highlighted two years ago, Turkish churches are increasingly prepared and willing to expand into new areas. But, without self-sustaining workers who can take responsibility for serving in an unreached place, that expansion can't happen. There is still an urgent need for people who are willing to move long term into unreached areas.

And almost all of the congregations that I know also struggle with the human resources to disciple new believers in an intensive way. Capable people who are committed to meeting with new believers to help walk them through the depth of the Christian life are rare. That kind of ministry requires a high level of Turkish, which many workers never attain. It requires a depth of knowledge and experience that can be passed on to new believers; and it requires a disciplined focus on that kind of ministry. We desperately need spiritual fathers in Turkey. Some of them should come from the growing Turkish church; and some should come from the church in the nations.

The number of foreign workers in Turkey continues to grow, with new organizations arriving every year. And existing teams are expanding, especially in the major cities. We need good coordinating structures to apply these combined resources in partnership to the persisting need, and to foster an atmosphere of genuine partnership with Turkish believers and churches as these foreign workers make Turkey their home.