

## **Some Flashlights from Bulgaria**

### **Possibilities of cooperation in Europe**

**By Stanislav Alexiev**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

I am grateful for your invitation to address this session of the conference and it is a great privilege for me to share with you some aspects of my work among the Jewish people in Bulgaria.

At present there are several Missions and some individuals who are working amongst the Bulgarian Jews, of whom there are about 3 000 in the whole country. As far as I know we have Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, one Bulgarian NGO, called “Academic Friends of Israel”, Church “Victory” – Sofia, Pentecostal Church from Pazardzik (South Bulgaria), some other churches from different denominations, Christian Witness to Israel and individual Christians who prefer to serve alone.

The work amongst the Jewish people in Bulgaria started in the XVIII century with the first Protestant Churches in the country, and it continued throughout the Communist regime.

As with most of the minorities in Bulgaria, the Jews were neglected by the Party. Some of them were allowed to grow in the Society, but on the condition that they were loyal to State policy. Many Christians risked getting involved with evangelizing the Jews in my country and they knew that it could cost a lot. Some ministers who were involved in active church work during that time (including Jewish Evangelism) were considered “Spies of the West”. They were sent to prison and later deported to the Labour Camps. Nevertheless the Church stood for the Gospel. At the Evangelical Congregational Church, where I serve, there were two ordained ministers from Jewish backgrounds. Unfortunately, in 1949 – 1951 they made an aliya and went to live in Israel.

After the fall of Communism, a lot of opportunities opened for Jewish Evangelism in Bulgaria. Different Missions came to the country but only those I have previously mentioned have remained. Their approach to reach the Jews is varied. Some follow the Jewish religious year and organise concerts and services to which they invite Messianic Jews from Israel and the States together with Jewish people from Bulgaria. That way the Bulgarian Jews not only listen to Jewish music which has Jesus at its centre, but they also meet with fellow Jews who believe in that Name. Others are trying to reach Academic Jews. Last month they organised a commemorative service in remembrance of the time, 67 years ago, when Bulgarian Politicians, Priests, Ministers and others stopped the pro-fascist Government deporting Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi Concentration Camps. One of the Ministers is involved with the EU European Coalition for Israel and he has spoken to the European Parliament where he was applauded for his words.

My approach is a little bit different. I work with individual Jewish people whom I know. I try to establish friendships with them and, in most cases, they then introduce me to their friends and relatives. This is how I develop most of my contacts and my approach involves using the Word of God. I enjoy making friends but my aim is to take my friendships with Jewish people to a higher level. That is why I try every possible way to expose my friends to the Bible. I have also developed a small programme for delivering humanitarian aid and medications to the needy and this way of reaching the community has proved to work well and through it I have made many contacts.

One of the difficulties I face is knowing how to work with the elderly people. Most of my contacts are, on average, 80 years old. It is difficult for them to listen, to remember and to share what they know. I try to educate them with the Bible, but by that stage it is not easy. If anyone here knows how to help me with this, please contact me.

Another difficulty is working with mentally ill Jewish people. Unfortunately there are some of them on my contact list. Aggressiveness is just one of the things that I face almost every week and the way that they completely reject the Word can be scary. Because the Bulgarian Social System is so weak, I cannot rely on these ill people being given the medication they need to calm them. Again, I would be grateful if anyone can advise me as to how I can deal with these situations.

I have an idea regarding the possibilities of working together in Europe. I do not know if you know this, but the second longest river in Europe flows through Bulgaria - The River Danube! Many other countries can say the same. This river has been a means of business, of goods, food and even ideas. The Danube has made huge impact on our cities and architecture, mainly because of the trade, but also because Jewish people were involved in these exchanges. There are about 8 countries through which the Danube flows – Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. About 200 - 220 000 Jewish people are living in those countries!

My suggestion is to establish “J” Danube Network (“J” is staying for Jewish) and to try to encourage the Evangelical Churches in these countries to develop and maintain Jewish Evangelism as their main agenda. I think the work should be done locally, but the Network is essential in order to keep us together with the vision of reaching the Jewish people with the Gospel. We could also pray for each other, share experiences and get together for encouragement and worship, etc.

This is why I would like to ask, if you are from one of these countries and you like the idea, let us meet after this session to discuss the setting up of a Working Committee and to see how we can start to come together for the salvation of Israel.