

2026 Mission Report

On July 23rd, Debbie and I returned from Tirana, Albania, where we spent 4 weeks on our 16th and 18th trips there, respectively. On each of these trips, we have had our eyes opened ever wider to God's mighty power and work!

How did we get started in Albania? In the spring of 2008, **Bill Brosey** posted a Connection notice that teachers were needed for a summer campaign in Albania. I responded, and that was the beginning of a life-changing mission for Debbie and me. We were far from being trailblazers in this mission. During our early trips to Albania, we met future HVCOCers **Jim Fox** and **Woody** and **Gwen Byars**. God's purposes brought us together, along with numerous other people from across the U.S. and Europe. Debbie and I became part of the "family" in Tirana, and as our family grew, we began to spend 4 weeks teaching in the campaign, as well as encouraging former students.

Where is Albania? When I signed up to go to Albania, my knowledge of the country was minimal—mainly what I had seen in movies! I soon learned that Albania is strategically located—bordered by Greece, Macedonia, and Montenegro, sharing the Adriatic Sea with Italy. More significantly, I learned that Paul traveled to Illyricum (part of current Albania) to preach the gospel (Romans 15:19).

How does the mission work? Albanians have a great desire to improve their English, so they are attracted to the free lessons that include opportunities to speak English with Americans. Each teacher guides 4 or 5 students—one-on-one for 1 hour each day—through the Bible and the grammar lessons that use biblical examples. These studies (published by the **World English Institute**, printed by **Eastern European Missions**, and based on the **Easy-To-Read Bible**) begin with the creation story in Genesis and the simplest grammar lesson—the noun. In this setting, many of the students develop relationships that create and increase their desire to know God.

Who are the students? The students, whose English skills are evaluated when they register, are a variety of ages. Some are as young as 11 or 12, while others are older adults. Most students have Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, or atheist backgrounds. Some have little or no knowledge of God because the Communist regime forbade their parents and/or grandparents from engaging in any kind of religious activity.

Do the teachers need to be experts in English and the Bible? Not at all! However, teachers thrive because of their relationship with God. The Holy Spirit—not the teacher's ability—changes students' hearts! That powerful lesson was emphasized when a student who was an atheist told me that she was beginning to believe in God. The stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses—not *my* words—had revealed to her the love and the power of God!

How does this mission change our lives and the lives of the people with whom we interact? We have learned how God uses difficulties to help us focus even more on doing His will. Preparing to teach a blind student in 2019 challenged me to overcome my "addiction" to the printed page, to figure out a way to present God with only my voice, and to let the Spirit do His work! In 2024 and 2025, canes for the blind were provided by the Hardin Valley and Maryville churches, respectively.

This year, on our first Sunday in Tirana, one of the worshipers was Edward, a 21-year-old man whom we had met in 2023, when his parents and 9 siblings visited one of the daily devotionals. This family was planning to begin mission work in Shkoder, a city in northern Albania. In 2025, the

parents and siblings moved back to the states, leaving Edward to continue spreading the gospel in Shkoder. “That will never work”, I thought to myself.

I invited Edward to have lunch with us and others because I wanted to share with him the name and phone number of a couple we had met in Colorado in 2024. The husband (Luli) is Albanian and has relatives in Shkoder. He had met his American wife when she was on a mission trip in Italy. I also sent Edward’s contact information to Luli and his wife. That afternoon, Edward messaged me that they had contacted him and were very encouraging.

But here’s another part of this God story: If our son had not passed away in August 2024, we most likely would not have traveled to Colorado in the fall to attend our grandson’s Senior Night football game, and we would most likely not have worshiped with the Cincinnati friends who introduced us to the couple with Albanian ties! I can no longer think that Edward’s work is in vain. “God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think”!

God’s story is also very evident with former students Nastjana and her brother, Nicholas. Nastjana last studied with Debbie in 2014. Nicholas studied with me most recently in 2023. Nicholas graduated from high school this year and had planned to study with me again; but his parents wanted him to concentrate on preparing for an exam for admission to a college where he would study medicine. So I met him for coffee one Saturday morning, and one of his first comments was about his “nostalgic memories of the stories of Jesus”!

Later, Debbie and I had coffee with Nastjana and Nicholas. Nastjana works at the British Embassy and directs a scholarship program for Albanian citizens who want to pursue a Master’s degree in Great Britain. We also met Anastasia’s husband and saw pictures of their daughter and soon-to-be-born baby. Nastjana’s husband was a Muslim who is finding his way to Jesus! Glory to God for these seekers!

God’s glory also shines in the Roma seekers (the “outcasts”). For most of the summer, one Harding student interned with the adults who work with Roma kids, and four other Harding students assisted as well. On Thursdays in Tirana, Roma children and young teens meet for an afternoon of Bible lessons, refreshments, and games. A similar gathering is held on Saturdays in Fushë Krujë, a city about an hour’s drive north of Tirana. Also, on Sunday evenings in Fushë Krujë, some of the Tirana young adults and Roma parents and children meet for worship and Bible lessons. These kids (and their parents) are “thirsting” for Jesus, and we were blessed to assist some of the kids in attending the Albania church camp in August.

The September 2025 issue of *The Christian Chronicle* (thechristianchronicle.org) includes some good articles about the mission work in Albania. In “Finding peace ‘when there is no peace’”, Albania and other Balkan countries are mentioned. “Among outcasts, a church moves in” and “Despised people live ‘at the heart of shalom’” describe what the church is doing in Fushë Krujë.

History of Summer Sessions. The WEI secretary in Tirana is Sadete Hoxha, who has visited Hardin Valley a couple of times when she has come to Tennessee. With her permission, I have included below a portion of her report on the 2026 Summer Sessions.

For me, this is more than the report of another summer. It is part of a story that I have been blessed to witness for many years—a story of faithful servants, open doors, lasting friendships, answered prayers, and lives touched through the Word of God.

The WEI summer work in Tirana began in 1992. In those early years, it was called the Summer Campaign. Later, the name became Summer Session, but the purpose remained the same: to bring teachers and students together through the English language and the Bible.

*That first summer, Brothers Dick Ady, Bill McDonough, and **Ben Jones [Mark Jones' father]** led a team of 26 teachers to Tirana. They came at a special time in Albania's history, when our country had only recently opened after many difficult years of isolation. People were eager to learn English, but through those lessons many also discovered something much more valuable—the message of Jesus Christ....*

*I also thank God for **Brother Jim Fox**, whose humble service has touched many lives in Albania. Brother Jim served in Albania for about twenty-five years and taught students in Tirana almost every summer for two decades. Students remember his kindness, his prayers, his humility, and the patience with which he listened to them. He understood that important spiritual decisions are not always made quickly. Some students needed several teachers, several summers, and many conversations before they were ready to obey the Gospel. Brother Jim was willing to teach, pray, wait, and trust God. His life reminds us that strength in ministry is not always loud. Sometimes it is seen in a quiet prayer, a patient answer, and the willingness to return for one more summer....*

When I remember these brothers, I do not think only of names or positions. I remember open Bibles, shared prayers, full teaching schedules, difficult questions, joyful baptisms, tired faces at the end of the day, shared meals, laughter, and goodbye hugs.... They showed us that ministry is often built through small acts repeated with love—one lesson, one prayer, one student, and one more willing answer to God's call.... Today, I am deeply encouraged to see this legacy continuing through Albanian Christians who have carried responsibility for the work through many years.

Brother Artan Xhaferaj, the new President of the WEI Institute in Albania, is not new to this ministry. He previously served for many years as the national coordinator of WEI follow-up in Albania. He has taught students, encouraged those who wanted to continue studying, served the church, and helped the work reach other parts of the country. Today, Artan also serves as an elder with the Maryville Church of Christ. During the Summer Session in Tirana, he works closely with the visiting teachers and the local team so that the six weeks of teaching are carefully and evenly planned.

I am also thankful for Brother Erik Qirjaqi, who has served as Director of WEI in Albania since 2002 and continues teaching and preaching with the Tirana Church of Christ.... Artan and Erik first came to know one another in Bucharest in 1992, where they were baptized into Christ. At that time, neither of them could have known how the Lord would use their lives and friendship in the years ahead. God gave them different responsibilities and later placed them in different locations, but both have continued serving the same mission: teaching, preaching, encouraging others, and helping the work of the Gospel move forward....

***Summer Session 2026** did not begin when the first student opened a lesson book. In many ways, it began several months earlier, around a table where local brothers and sisters gathered to pray, plan, and prepare. Beginning in March, Artan, Bledi, Ellen, Arjan, Erik, and I met several times as a local team. We reviewed the teachers' arrival and departure dates, discussed the students and interns, prepared teaching schedules, and considered the needs of the six weeks ahead. Each meeting began*

and ended with prayer. We knew that planning was important, but we also knew that only God could open hearts. There were many practical matters to consider. Students needed to be matched with teachers. Lesson times had to be arranged. Books needed to be printed and classrooms prepared. Because teachers would arrive and leave at different times, the schedule also had to remain balanced throughout the session.... We also looked for opportunities to invite young people and families already connected with the church through VBS, basketball, and other activities. A simple invitation could become the beginning of a meaningful relationship....

The Summer Session officially began on Sunday after worship, when we met with the first group of teachers for a short orientation. We reviewed their schedules, distributed lesson books, and prepared for classes to begin the next morning, Monday, June 22. By Monday, the lower floor of the church building had become a lively mixture of ages, books, accents, questions, and voices—sometimes quite loud! Yet no one seemed disturbed. Teachers and students found their places, opened their books, and began the six-week journey together....

*A total of **44 students registered**. Among them, **19 were returning students**, **22 attended** for the first time, and **3 studied online**. A few were unable to continue for personal reasons, but 38 students participated regularly in the five-day-a-week program.... One of the moments that touched me most was seeing mothers bring their children and patiently wait until the lessons were finished. Some told me that they wanted their children to learn English, but they also wanted them to learn about the Bible. They were thankful because the program was free and gave their children an opportunity they could not otherwise afford....*

As the weeks passed, the Summer Session became more than a schedule of lessons. It became a place where old friendships were renewed, unfinished conversations continued, and new relationships began to grow. One of the special blessings of WEI is seeing teachers return to students they have taught in earlier summers. Trust has already been formed, memories are shared, and the lesson can continue from a deeper place....

These stories remind us that we are rarely teaching only one person.

Sometimes a student brings a brother or sister.

Sometimes a child encourages a parent.

Sometimes a returning student strengthens the teacher.

And sometimes a lesson that begins at one table reaches an entire family or congregation....

*The service of **Ken and Debbie Martin** gives us another beautiful example of relationships that continue.... They shared that approximately 17 students with whom they and others studied have been baptized. Behind that number are personal stories, years of questions, patient teaching, and faithful prayer.*

*Among those students were the brothers **Eri and Flavio**. Ken studied with Eri in Tirana during 2016 and 2017, together with others [**Jim Fox and Gwen Byars**] who served him over several summers. Later, when Eri moved to the United States for his studies, he lived with Ken and Debbie in Knoxville.*

On February 16, 2020, his twenty-first birthday, Eri was baptized into Christ. His parents watched from Albania through Messenger, while several of the teachers who had taught him stood nearby.

Today, Eri is active in a congregation in the United States, helping with activities for young adults. His brother Flavio also became a Christian, and their parents have developed relationships with brothers

and sisters in the church. This reminds us that the fruit of a Summer Session cannot always be measured when the six weeks are over....

***"New Every Morning".** Each morning [of the Summer Session] began with a short devotional that helped prepare the teachers' hearts for the day ahead. We gathered in a circle, opened our Bibles, prayed together, and listened as the teachers shared Scripture and personal experiences.*

During the six weeks, every teacher had an opportunity to share something from his or her life. Some spoke about how God had led them to WEI. Others remembered students who had touched their hearts or lessons they had learned through years of service. These were not formal speeches. They were sincere moments among brothers and sisters. Some stories brought encouragement. Some brought laughter. Others reminded us that ministry requires patience and faithfulness....

Looking back over these six weeks, I am thankful for the spirit of cooperation that God gave us. Visiting teachers, WEI staff, interns, local brothers and sisters, students, families, and supporters all became part of one work. No one person could have done everything. But when many people offered what they could, God brought the pieces together. The visible work happened in the classrooms, but the ministry was supported by many quiet acts of faithfulness.

Our desire is not only to continue lessons, but to continue relationships.

May God receive the glory for every lesson taught, every relationship formed, every question still being considered, and every life that He will continue to touch.

How can you help? If your heart is moved to travel to Albania, please visit with, email, or text **Ken or Debbie, Woody, or Jim**, or visit with HVCOC's "in-house" Albanian, **Eri Boraj**. **I encourage you to watch the Albania Mission video on the HVCOC website: <https://hvcoc.org/missions/> (A Word from the Martins).** You may want to begin teaching the online WEI courses (worldenglishinstitute.org), and/or you may wish to contribute to this mission and others. Above all, please pray for the mission, for the churches in Albania, and for those of us who travel there to teach.

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