

# Chapter 5

# Austria

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Today, most Austrians, like most Europeans, are deeply influenced by secularism and materialism. Traditional churches have been losing large portions of their membership during the last four decades. Roughly 50 percent of the population are still registered Roman Catholics, but regular church attendance has dropped below 10 percent. Islam is the second-largest religion, soon reaching 10 percent of the total population. Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Austria has one of the highest suicide rates among young people. There is a great spiritual need for the message of true hope and new life in Christ.

OAC in Austria got its real start in the early 1990s, when Korky Davey (OAC UK) took some summer teams trained in Hungary to Vienna. In May 1996, Al Nucciarone, who pastored an international church, invited Korky to teach local believers how to do open-air meetings. This was the beginning of what became known as "Reach the City." Among those trained that year was Stefan Hoefler, who later in 1997 began as a voluntary evangelist with much support from his local church. That same



STEFAN HOEFLER USING THE RAT TRAP ILLUSTRATION



STEFAN HOEFLER USING SKETCHBOARD AND OBJECT LESSON

year, Korky was back with a team of UK evangelists. The first week involved training and outreach in Vienna, and the second week involved outreach in Bratislava, Slovakia. In subsequent summers, teams conducted outreach in other cities in Austria, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania. By the time the program

ended in 2006, the profile of open-air evangelism was raised significantly in Central Europe. In ten years, several hundred Christians from ten countries received training in preaching and personal evangelism.

Stefan Hoefler became the OAC field representative for Austria in 1998 and spent a year of training in Bristol from 1999 to 2000, together with his wife-to-be, Judith. He began as a full-time evangelist in 2000 and later became the ministry's national director. Martin Podobri, who was on staff from 2001 to 2005, was instrumental in establishing OAC Austria as a registered charitable organization. OAC Germany took responsibility for nurturing the work in Austria during the international conference held in the UK in 2002. Austria became an official OAC branch in 2004 at the OAC international

conference held in Pennsylvania.



The ministry continues in weekly outreaches in Linz, Wels, and Vienna, with good results. A great team of volunteers joins them from a variety of different churches. Usually, five to ten locals are handing out tracts and involved in counseling. Some of these volunteers have been trained to preach. Training, including puppet ministry, also continues in churches in several cities during the summer.



A TERRIFIC OPEN-AIR MEETING LOCATION

When OACI President Rob George and his wife, Gayle, were visiting Austria in 2017, they got into a conversation with some locals at a gas station coffee shop. They noted Rob's Australian accent and asked them what they did. Rob described the OAC ministry, and one of the locals said that he had seen that very type of outreach in Linz. Rob and Gayle recognized immediately that it was Stefan, the local was talking about!

The Austrian team also reaches out to tourists and the Muslim immigrant community in "Little Istanbul." The openness of individual Muslims in this setting to spiritual truth and willingness to talk is a pleasant surprise.

Here are some encouraging testimonies from those who have been blessed by our OAC Austria staff and their commitment to open-air evangelism through the years.

### **A Life Changed**

"Reach The City has changed my life!" said Richard about his participation in this time of ministry. He led the worship team and prayer ministry with his wife, Melanie. They were also involved in planning the big summer program and motivated a number of young Austrians to join. Both were involved in an evangelical church in Vienna and come out to do open-air ministry during the year. At the end of the summer, at the age of 30, Richard died without warning during a soccer practice.

### **Discipleship**

The annual training and outreach theme for our Reach The City event in 2005 was "Being disciples – making disciples!" Fifty-eight participants from five countries had a great time learning to share the gospel in creative ways. More than two-thirds of the participants that year were Austrians. The team did a super job, and many were encouraged to continue in their discipleship journey with Christ, especially in soul-winning. Here is just one of many stories from that time of training.

Tom is a youth leader in his church, a gifted preacher, and has excellent leadership potential. He wanted to come to Reach The City outreach the year before, but couldn't because of his involvement in summer youth camps. During the street meetings, he met four young people who had stopped attending church. They were newly motivated to follow Jesus and asked if they could join a discipleship group.

### **God's umbrella**

The sky was getting very dark just before we started with the children's program in a park. A few minutes later, the rain became pretty heavy, and we had to take cover underneath a plastic tarp which was used earlier to sit on. What could we do other than pray, "Lord, please blow away the clouds and make the sun come through." Stefan was not too convinced about it. The sky was dark, but within less than 10 minutes, the rain stopped and the sun came out. What a powerful "object lesson" for the gospel message we could share with the kids.

### **Never too old**

Erich, a retired church elder in his 70s, often told Stefan that he was too old to get involved in evangelism. He was active in outreaches in his youth, but informed us that he was now too old for it. In early 2019, he joined one of our training days to encourage other congregation members to get involved. During the outreach session, Stefan and Erich had a long and friendly conversation with a student who lived next door to the church. Erich was convicted and so excited that he became a regular team member for 4 years, until the Lord called him home. "Sharing Jesus on the street has become the greatest joy in my late years," was his passionate reply.

### **First program attendee, now new treasurer**

Several years ago, Stefan and Judith occasionally helped a family in Eferding, about an hour away, with their evangelistic children's Bible club. One of the regular attendees was Rebekka, who was about 8 years old. She grew up and eventually joined our weekly outreach team, sharing sketchboard stories, offering personal counseling, and providing practical help. Since our faithful treasurer wanted to change his vocation, we began praying and later approached Rebekka about taking on this task. At our annual general meeting in late April, the OAC team entrusted Rebekka with the responsibility of the national treasurer. We are amazed at how God wove Rebekka's and our story together over the years.

God continues to work in Austria. Our workers have shown long-term commitment to the Lord in reaching out to the lost in this part of the world. We are thankful for their example.



OAC AUSTRIA "TEAM DAY"

