

Chapter 3

Albania



Albania was proclaimed independent in November 1912, after almost five centuries of Ottoman rule. After World War II, Albania became a communist state and remained isolationist, during which time it was considered the poorest and most repressive country in all of Europe. Religion was banned, travel was forbidden for its citizens, and ownership of private property was prohibited. Then, with its transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the doors for ministry opened wide, and our OAC staff began walking through!

In 1991, Ian and Caralee Loring were ministering in Greece, taking trips across the border into Albania to minister in the open air. They had previously worked with some Albanians who had escaped from communism into Greece, and found these folks eager to learn and quickly trusted Christ. These folks also had family connections that opened the door to Albania. A short-term bus tour was quickly organized, and the Lorings brought with them the few Bible books that had been translated into Albanian. Open-air meetings were held with huge crowds gathering. It was a joy to use the base of Stalin's statue, which had been pulled down, as a pulpit to preach the gospel in Tirana's capital, with hundreds listening. At a meeting held at the stadium in the city of Korca, 2,000

attended. With the help of some friends, the Jesus Film was shown to a packed house in the town movie theater! People were eager to hear what had been forbidden for so long. Reactions of the crowds ranged from welcoming and eager to hostile and threatening, including spitting and rock-throwing. In Erseka, the crowd was particularly hostile as the message about Peter's call was being preached. Two muscular teens, who spoke a little English, intervened and kept the crowd back, allowing the message to finish. Since our staff could speak some English, these boys were thanked, and the gospel was presented to them. Both trusted Christ as their Savior. But there was a problem. Due to many years of religious repression, there were no local churches with which to work or refer people for follow-up and discipleship. Our early OAC workers in this country found themselves in a situation where, even though our primary purpose is evangelism, planting churches was necessary for the work to grow and spiritually flourish biblically. A church has since been planted in Erseka.



In 1999, California resident Bert Youde learned about OAC through his missions pastor at Shadow Mountain Community Church, who promoted building a team to help repair homes in Kosovo amid the country's civil conflict. Bert was asked to assemble a construction team, and by God's grace, ten men spent several weeks rebuilding widows' homes. It was during that trip that he formed a close working relationship with our OAC staff and subsequently took seven evangelism teams to Albania over the following years to work with our staff and the Korce Evangelical Church. It was in 2008 that Bert was asked to consider helping officially establish a branch of Open Air Campaigners in Albania by establishing a US-based non-profit mission agency to facilitate recruitment of workers and resource acquisition. Since that time, God has used OAC staff in other parts of the world for training and outreach. Mike and Dawn Getley from OAC Great Britain, along with others, have been a great blessing and help through the years. The Lord has also led OAC Albania to establish a girls' safe house and a boys' home to meet the needs of those in this part of the world.

Albano and Fabiola Kadi have three children and, over the last 23 years, have served God in a variety of ways in the Korca area. In the beginning, Albano was conducting youth ministry and evangelism, including working in the church plants of the Korca church. He eventually switched to being the finance person for the church. Eventually, he became a pastor and most currently, he is the senior pastor of the Korca church. He also leads the church-planting movement in SE Albania, which presently comprises nine churches.



PAUL & ALBANA ALKAZRANJI SERVING AT THE CHURCH PLANT IN VLOÇISHT



TRAINING BELIEVERS HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE THE SKETCHBOARD

Ministry teams have been engaged in the OAC ministry for many years in various capacities, including Scott and Vickie Anderson, Dr. Fred Beveridge, Plator and Nicole Collaku, Holger & Zhenka Dashi, Petrika Dhimo, Mike Durante, Natalie Mayo, and Ken Yoder. In recent years, Albert Azisllari, along with Loren and Aidi Nuri, have joined us. Here are some staff testimonies illustrating how the Lord has worked over the years in some of the newest staff members. What a great blessing it is to note that many of the following individuals are products of this OAC ministry and are now ministers!

Paul Alkazraji began his association with OAC in 1997. He was living in the UK and working as a press officer. Paul traveled to Albania in 1998 to write a newspaper report about the work of OAC, which led to a book entitled "Christ and the Kalashnikov" in 2000. Paul met and married his Albanian wife, Albana, and returned to live in the country that same year. They joined the staff of OAC Albania in 2003. He developed and ran a magazine for churches in the southeast of Albania called Ujëvarë' until 2010. In 2012, he began a new role as team leader of a church plant in the village of Vloçisht, where Albana had a ministry among children. Albana now leads the women's ministry there, and Paul is the pastor of Vloçisht church, also supporting a church plant in the nearby village of Bulgarec. Paul is incredibly creative in coming up with new ways to bring people to Christ and leads a team that is reaching out to the surrounding villages. He has written two Christian novels based on his experiences of living in Albania: 'The Silencer' (2012) and 'The Migrant' (2019). They have one son, Hanniel.



XHONI WITH THE TEAM AND IN THE OFFICE



Xhoni Bacellari is located in Korca. He is married to Rudina, and they have two boys, Joeli and Daeni. He works in the church, which was established by OAC in 2009. His ministry duties in the office entail handling a wide range of roles and responsibilities. Overseeing the finances for church plants is his

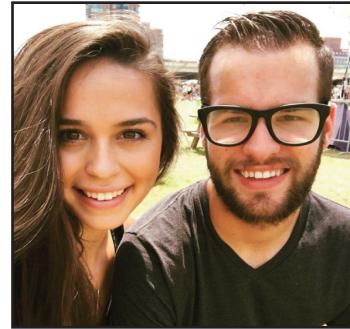
primary responsibility at this time. Still, he also handles legal affairs and works with the government to obtain any permits or licenses OAC needs. He helps our missionaries with housing and living permit details.

Meet Sokol Bori. He is from Durres and moved with his mother to the village of Sheqeras when he was young. He has been a believer since he was a teen and was baptized at eighteen to show his true commitment to serving God. He has worked for the church since 2016 and, in 2018, came on full-time as a pastor-in-training in Sheqeras after graduating from Bible school. Two of his favorite things are having fun and sharing the gospel. He is married to Sara Kaimaku, and they have served full-time in the church and village since 2021.



SOKOL BORI

Thomas Bourke is the son of American missionary parents working with The Navigators. He spent his early adult life in the U.S. Air Force and chose to transition to full-time ministry in Korca after his wife's trip in 2019. Arianna grew up in the U.S., the daughter of an Albanian and an American. Her first trip to Albania occurred in July of 2019 with OAC. The Lord quickly captured her heart for the country, and upon her return, Arianna shared the vision with her husband. With her background in social work/child welfare, and his mechanical and musical experience, it was easy to see how God could use them in Albania. They served faithfully with OAC until June of 2022.



ARIANNA & THOMAS BOURKE



ERION & MELODIE DIELLI

Erion Dielli is from Korca and has been with the church for many years. His wife, Melodie, is from the San Diego area, and she first came to Albania in 2004 with a group from her college. To answer God's call, she moved to Albania in 2005 and began working with OAC. Her first big project was creating the middle school program that we now call Shqiponja. Erion and Melodie were married in 2008 and now have three children. In 2013, they moved to Pogradec to help revive the church plant there. Erion and Melody now reside in the USA.

Suzana Dumka is from Korca and has been involved in the church for 17 years. In 2006, she began volunteering in the village church plants and has been on staff for the past two years. She works in the village of Kamenice with her husband, Altin, who also works in the kids' day center. He is from Korca and has worked with the church for many years. Together, they have built strong ministries in Kamenice that serve all ages.



ALTIN & SUZANA DUMKA



HEKTOR & ERFIOLA

Hektor (Tori) is from Korca. His grandfather is one of the pastors at The Evangelical Church of Korca, which was planted in 2017. Tori has been working with the church since he was a teenager. When he became an official staff member with OAC, he began helping with programs in Vloqisht and later in Bulgarec. He also plays guitar in the worship band in Korca on Sundays. Erfiola is from the village of Libonik. When Erfiola first began with OAC, she was working in the Girls' Home, and now she is spearheading the integration of music therapy into our special education care plan.

Eris Duro is also from Korca and has grown up in the church; his grandfather is one of the pastors at The Evangelical Church of Korca. In 2013, he was baptized and began volunteering with the church. He works with the pre-teen group in Korca called Shqiponja, and he works with the youth. He has created many games for the kids to play, and he often leads the devotional time. He completed his Master's degree in Agronomics at the university here in Korca. During the fall of 2019, he coached a group of boys from Shqiponja in our organization-wide football league.



ERIS DURO



FLORI & ASHLEY

Ashley Henderson first connected with Open Air Campaigners in July 2018 when she came to Albania on a mission trip with her church. She then entered a one-year internship commitment with OAC Albania in June 2019, when she moved there. She felt God leading to extend her stay, living in Korca, and working with the Kenedi Foundation and The Gospel Church of Korca as the media manager. She has served as the administrator for the Instagram and Facebook pages for Open Air Campaigners Albania and maintained

kenedifoundation.org, which has a history of working closely with OAC. Ashley has also been involved with the junior high ministry at the Gospel Church of Korca. She assisted Flori Adili, the coordinator, with logistics and planning; the Lord led them to marry in April of 2020. They transferred their staff status to OAC Great Britain 2024 and continued to have a thriving ministry in Albania until their field assignment ended in 2025.

Sara Kaimaku is from Metro Detroit, Michigan. Both of her parents are from Korca. While visiting her family's land in 2019, God called her to Himself and to missionary life. She arrived, again, in May to work at the Girls' Home and to do ministry in the village of Sheqeras. That ministry includes meeting with girls (teens and younger), pre-teens, children, and the whole church.



PETRINA KALAVESHI



SARA KAIMAKU

Petrina Kalaveshi is from Korca and has been a part of church programs since she was a little girl. She started volunteering at age seventeen and began working for OAC in 2019. She is a part of the Shqiponja staff. She leads worship and works with the girls in the group. She also helps develop programs and lessons for the group. On Sunday mornings, she sings with the worship team at church.

Xhentil Kora is from the village of Plasa. While attending the church plant programs, he became a believer. He immediately began volunteering at the church and eventually became full staff member. He graduated from Bible school in March 2019. Throughout the week, he meets with the children, teen boys, and the men of the village for Bible studies and fellowship. He also preaches once a month for Plasa's big group meeting. In addition to all of this, he plays the keyboard during worship for these meetings. Xhentil is married to Victoria, and they have one child, Michael.



XHENTIL KORA



AMBRA KURTI

Ambra Kurti is from Vloqisht, and she began taking part in programs when she was three! At the age of ten, she became a faithful Christian, and now her brother and parents also attend the church. Throughout her youth, she attended programs, volunteered, and eventually became a member of the church staff. She creates and facilitates children's programs in Korca and girls' meetings in Plasa.

Mikel (Keli) Kycyku is from Plasa and also works there. He accepted Christ as his Savior while attending church programs in Plasa. In 2019, he began serving as staff at the church and plans to attend Bible school in Erseke for six months. His responsibilities in the village include meeting with the teens and running the men's Bible study.



MIKEL KYCYKU



EGLA & TONI LIKA

Toni (from Korca) and Eglia Lika have two children: a daughter, Ester, and a son, Elias. Toni trusted Christ in 2003. He began working for The Evangelical Church of Korca around 2009 and Eglia in 2011, after they got married. In 2016, he and Eglia started working at the Pojan church plant and moved to Pojan full-time. They work with their volunteers to put on programs for all ages, provide care to the people of the village, host summer teams to preach in the open air, and conduct VBS programs.

Ryan McDonald is from the San Diego area of California. His sister, Melodie, came to Albania in 2005, so he visited many summers before moving here. Ryan's wife, Kayla, is from Canada and moved to Northern California when she was five. They married in June 2017 and honeymooned in Albania together. In 2018, they joined OAC and moved to Pogradec in March. They work with the church plant in Pogradec, and the ministry's primary focus is running a coffee shop and a Bed and Breakfast. Due to the city's high unemployment rate, the church felt a strong need to provide job opportunities for its members and the community. Ryan and Kayla, along with a team of others from the church, oversaw the renovation and design of the new coffee shop and Bed and Breakfast, Garden Villa, on the recently purchased church property in the center of town. They transformed the three-story, hundred-year-old Villa and its large yard with multiple gardens and patios into a beautiful, classic, and vibrant location. Since the coffee shop's grand opening in August 2018, they have employed over 21 people, and the influence this has had on the church and the families of those employed has been incredible to see. The main goals of Garden Villa are Christ, Community, and Church. Through employee training and daily discipling in a Christ-centered work environment, the community is reached, with the ultimate goal of growing the church. The Bed and Breakfast portion of Garden Villa opened in the spring of 2020 as an extension of the same mission, offering more job opportunities and opportunities to reach the community while meeting a genuine business need of the city.



JETNOR MEHMETI

Jetnor (Nori) Mehmeti is from Korca. He became a Christian when he was sixteen, and at the time of this writing is twenty-four. He has two major roles within the church. He is part of the Shqiponja staff, and he works in the kids' day center. During the summer, he facilitated a football (soccer) program for the boys at the day center. Their team is called Korca United. Currently, he is obtaining his degree from Bible school.

Luke and Lydia Valenti have served with Open Air Campaigners Albania church planting in the village of Plasa. Luke was first introduced to the work of OAC and Albania when he went there on a mission trip in college. Touched by the Albanian people's great need to hear the gospel, God captured his heart for missions. Luke later joined OACA in 2009 to pioneer ministries in Albanian villages without churches.



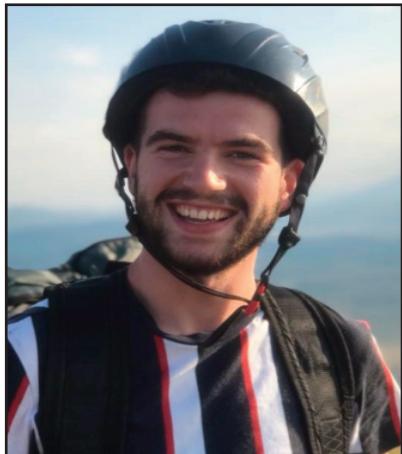
RYAN & KAYLA MCDONALD



LUKE PREACHES AT THE FIRST CHURCH MEETING OF THE PLASA EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN 2016

During a summer outreach, God led Luke to the town of Plasa, where some youth responded positively to the gospel. Leading a team of Albanian workers, Luke began working with the children and youth of Plasa, eventually ministering to their families as well. Three years into the work, Luke reconnected with his friend Lydia, who also had a heart for missions. They married and returned to Plasa to continue planting a church in the village and serving the community's needs. Many Albanians believed, and several were baptized, and the Plasa Evangelical Church began services in 2016. Medical issues forced the Valentis to return to the States, and leadership of the Plasa church was transferred to Xhentil Kora and other young adults in the Plasa church. The young Albanian leadership grew significantly and continues to lead the Plasa church to this day. The Valentis continue to encourage and fundraise on behalf of the Plasa church from their home in Oregon.

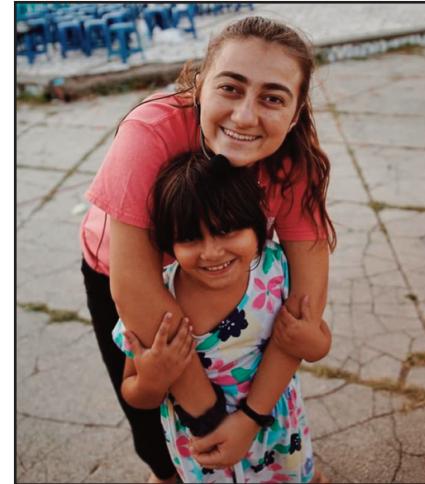
Mesina Vitollari is working in the Tirana area. She came to faith through outreach conducted around 2014 in her hometown and has been an active volunteer helping in the Pogradec area. She has finished university in Tirana.



RIZA MYFTARAGO

Riza (Xake) Myftarago is from Korca and has been attending church programs since he was eleven, when his brother invited him and his friend. After attending for a while, he became a Christian and immediately began volunteering to help with programs and games. In 2018, he became an official member of the church staff. He is one of the three core people who organize and orchestrate children's ministry at the church and the three other zones in Korca. On Sundays and for special programs, he is a part of the drama team, writing and acting.

Mariglen (Geni) Zenga is from Korca, and he has been working with the church since 2017. He is part of the Shqiponja staff and works each week at three or four meetings with the teens and develops programs and lessons when they are not meeting. He often leads worship for those meetings and uses his musical gifts by playing his guitar. On Sunday mornings, he plays piano for the worship group.



MESINA VITOLLARI



MARIGLEN ZENGA

Jonada Ziso is from Pojan, a village just outside Korca. She has been a believer since 2017 and began working for the church in May of that year. She is involved with a handful of things, including the kids' ministries in Korca and in Plasa. She also helps with the girls' ministry in Plasa. She played an essential role in translating and developing the VBS curriculum used by many churches in the summer of 2019. Jonada and Visi have since married. Visi is one of the chefs up at Vila Kenedi.



JONADA & VISI

OAC Albania believes in the OAC motto: "Presenting Christ By All Means Everywhere" and uses every possible means for ministry outreach. God has done great work in the country of Albania over the years through the OAC staff He has provided. There have been challenges and setbacks along the way, but we continue to look to Him who overcomes and has the final victory!



