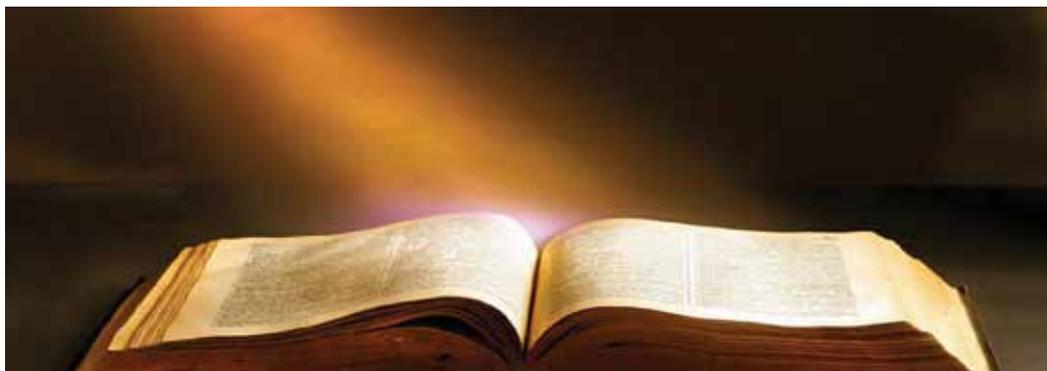


Protestantism on Macedonian Soil



When it comes to talking about small religious communities in Macedonia, protestants tend to be seen as a smaller community than they actually are. According to the last census, at least 3% of the population belong to this Christian denomination. The great number of different protestant churches and communities to which individual believers belong contributes to the impression of a small and marginal community. But if we take into consideration all the communities, we shall see that we have to speak of a history of 166 years and a significant mark on the country's life and history.

The first Evangelical movements date back to the Ottoman times. After the opening of Rofert's College in Istanbul missionaries of this Protestant institution spread all over the Empire. Their activities were centered on giving poor people hope and improving their chances of getting out of poverty. Interestingly, one of their activities was visiting prisons and negotiating prisoner release with Ottoman authorities. And, of course, they preached and distributed the Bible and other Christian literature. The establishment of hospitals and high schools in Thessaloniki and Bitola increased the

visibility of protestants and the spread of their religion. The missions in Strumica and Radovis were particularly successful, as well as the missions in the Pirin region, in the present-day Bulgaria, where the first Evangelical church communities were established. The first Congress of the Methodist Church was held in May 1895.

Adventism took root in Skopje in 1880 with the arrival of Andreas Zefrid from America. In Strumica, Adventist practice was associated with an Armenian Doctor Garabeth Yeram, who, besides being a preacher, was an excellent doctor and a charismatic figure. He encouraged charity work among the local population. One of the first adepts of Adventism was the young teacher Atina Dimova who went to study medicine in Battle Creek, USA, and in 1907 returned to Skopje to practice her profession and continue her religious work. The baptism of seven inhabitants of Prilep in 1923 by the Slovenian preacher Albin Mosnik is considered as the real start of the organized church life according to Adventist rules.

The activity of the legendary Helen Stone and her kidnapping organized by Vojvod Jane Sandanski gave much attention to both her missionary work and revolutionary struggle



of Macedonians. Protestantism boomed in Skopje, Bitola and especially in Strumica-Radovis region. But the wars of the early 20th century and then the political consequences of these wars brought in a dark period for religious pluralism in the region.

After Macedonia's territory was partitioned and the present-day republic became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, missionary work was strongly discouraged by the state which opted for the Orthodox Church to which the majority of the population belonged. This led to the unification of the Macedonian Protestants with the Northern Yugoslav protestants and the establishment of the United Evangelist-Methodist Church at the annual conference in Vrbas, Vojvodina.

Today the Evangelical-Methodist Church has its churches in several Macedonian towns (Skopje, Bitola, Kocani, Prilep, Radovis, Strumica) as well as the villages like Raklis (near Radovis) and Monospitovo, and Veljusa, Murtino and Kolesino in the Strumica region, which preserved their faith in difficult times. The Baptist church also has a few churches with several respected and highly educated families who have belonged to the community for almost a century and

who continue to preach.

Even the Christian Community of Jehovah's Witnesses had an early start in Macedonia. The first gathering took place in the village of Veljusa in 1930, then after World War II a gathering was organized in 1959 in Kolesino, while the first group in Skopje started in 1969 and the first gathering in 1976.

While in the 19th and early 20th century preachers from the USA and Western Europe came to Macedonia, at the end of the 20th century and even more so in the past decade, many Macedonians, including protestants, emigrated to the USA, Canada and Australia forming new Macedonian speaking parishes in those countries.

Today all the protestant churches in Macedonia are involved in significant publishing and charitable activities. They helped refugees and internally displaced people during the conflict in 2001; they donate funds for the renovation of schools. Together with other Christian churches they are members of the Biblical Association of Macedonia that publishes joint magazine and in general is an example of good inter-denominational relationship.