More Than a Cathedral

From Zaccheus, Noah, and Jonah, to pizza, kickball, and marshmallows, the Vacation Club for Kids at New Life Church in Varna, Bulgaria, was filled with Bible stories and fun. With support from a CMP group, the Trifonovs held a five-day VBS-style outreach, concluding with a picnic. Many of the children who attended were not from gospel-believing families; but by the end of the week, the kids learned the Lord’s Prayer in Bulgarian and English, as well as Bible verses and stories.

The Vacation Club for Kids was held the first week of July, so on July 4, the CMP group shared about the American Independence Day holiday. For CMP team leader Jackie Lancaster, the opportunity to share about American freedoms, including the freedom to visit Bulgaria and share the love of Jesus, gave her a new appreciation for the culture of faith many Americans experience. Danielle Turner, a student on the trip, agreed: “I have taken the availability of the gospel for granted,” said Danielle. “I am blessed to live in a country that’s all they need to call themselves a Christian. That’s all they need to call themselves a Christian.”

On this particular trip to Bulgaria, Mark and Jackie led a group of students from multiple colleges. “The team Mark and I worked with was amazing,” said Jackie. “These students served so well. We were blessed to have them on our team. They never waited to be told what to do—they just jumped in and helped wherever it was needed. They definitely showed the love of Jesus to the Bulgarian people!”

Danielle Turner immersed herself in the Bulgarian experience, despite the language barrier. She talked about Eva and Ivo, a pair of twin camp attendees: “They were both very engaged throughout the camp and even helped me learn a little Bulgarian! At the end of the camp, we invited the children to come to church Sunday. When it was time to say our goodbyes, they gave us handmade thank you cards. Cue waterworks!”

Although the focus of this CMP was helping with the kids’ camp, the students also enjoyed other experiences in Bulgaria, including a tour of Sofia, a tour of a cathedral in Varna, and a trip to the Macedonian Culture Center.

“It was fascinating to learn about the history of Bulgaria and how it affects the Protestant Church today,” Danielle shared. “I learned some Bulgarians identify as Christians simply because they were born in Bulgaria. Baptized in the Orthodox Church as infants, that’s all they need to call themselves a Christian. That was simply astonishing to me.”

As the CMP team witnessed Bulgarians bow, kiss, and make the sign of the cross to icons throughout the cathedral in Varna, they gained valuable insight into the unique context in which missionaries in Bulgaria work. “I want to show the Bulgarian people that Christianity is more than majestic cathedrals and traditions, it’s having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” said Mark.

“It was saddening to realize the Orthodox Church is leading people astray from what the Bible actually teaches,” said Danielle. “But New Life Church has grown tremendously in the last five years! They are in need of more space to hold church services and community outreaches like this Vacation Club for Kids. Pastor Trif and Vanya are doing an amazing job investing into the people.”

For another perspective on Protestantism in Bulgaria and the Trifonovs’ ministry, check out Keren Delgado’s Through My Lens.