

## God's Bulgarian Tapestry



by Howard Culbertson

Picture courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

Dedicated to members of the first three teams of volunteers into Bulgaria:

Chris Branstetter

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Mark, Cari, Angela and Tessa Ogden

Shari Overstreet

Rudy Reyes

Donna Reynolds

Scot Riggins

Matt and Shela Robertson

Philip Rodebush

Ted Snoddy

Jason Worthington

Jim Zink

Miles Zinn

It's too bad we cannot have a book dedicated to the adventures of each one!

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## Weaving the Tapestry

To Olympics' fans, Bulgaria evokes images of dark haired wrestlers and swarthy weight lifters. Health food fanatics may know that one story about yogurt's origin concerns Bulgaria. History channel junkies may remember that in 1981 Bulgarian authorities were accused of hiring a hit-man to kill the Pope. Lovers of the intrigue know Bulgaria as a stop for the famed Orient Express train. Most people, however, know practically nothing about Bulgaria. About all they know is that it was formerly behind the Iron Curtain.

After World War II, this Tennessee-sized country fell under communist domination. Attempting to eliminate Christianity, Bulgaria's new Soviet puppet leaders unleashed four decades of heavy-handed oppression. The gospel was maligned. Churches were closed. Christian leaders were harassed. The communists thought they could erase Christianity from the fabric of Bulgarian society. They miscalculated.

Let's imagine the unfolding of Bulgarian cultural history as the weaving of a tapestry. For a long time, it looked like a red communist star would dominate its design. That's no longer true. With time, the emerging design has taken on a new look. In fact, the Church of the Nazarene has shown up in the Bulgarian tapestry. To weave Nazarenes it, the Lord is using threads from an assortment of people. Those various strands arrived at the loom through a variety of divinely ordered circumstances.

Actually, tapestry weaving is ideal to talk about anything Bulgarian. Bulgaria is renowned for its rugs, tapestries and needle work. Two museums in the capital city of Sofia feature displays of Bulgarian weaving and needlework. Admittedly, the first thing tourists buy are little wooden dolls containing rose oil containers. However, let those tourists wander through the outdoor markets and into gift shops. What they wind up lingering over the longest are the brilliantly-colored embroidery and needle-work pieces.

In this book we'll look at a Bulgarian tapestry. It's a tapestry in which many threads involve the Church of the Nazarene. Some of those threads go a long way back. So, we'll need to jump around a bit in time. Several threads say "Made in the USA." However, some come from Germany and Mexico. There's even a knotted thread that once was broken. So, come. Let's walk over to the loom. Let's see how the weaving is going.

## A Presidential Thread

The first American Nazarenes arrived in Bulgaria in the summer of 1994. From the very beginning, they've used sports as an icebreaker. It began with "pickup" soccer games on a school playground. Young adults from the U.S. would meet to play with neighborhood young people after school. Eventually, exhaustion would take over. As they sat resting, they would begin talking about more than just soccer. Conversations would often turn to deep spiritual issues. When cold weather arrived, a dilapidated old gym was found. The playground soccer games turned into basketball games.

The sports evangelism strands in this tapestry do not start there on that asphalt playground. They go back to 1962. That summer, a Venture for Victory basketball team recruited an All-American player from Pasadena College. The team had a sports evangelism tour scheduled in the Philippines. They had games planned against various Filipino teams. At halftime of those games, the American players did not go to the locker room. Instead, they stayed on the court to share their Christian testimony with the spectators.

That All-American basketball player from Pasadena was Loren Gresham. The trip to the Philippines was his first time outside the United States. It was a transforming experience. So, the next four years found him doing sports evangelism every summer. He began to wonder: "Shouldn't every Nazarene college student be involved in some significant cross-cultural missions experience?"

By 1967, Loren Gresham had about finished his master's degree. He landed a teaching at the Nazarene college in Bethany, Oklahoma. While teaching, he went on to complete his Ph.D. in international studies. Besides teaching history and political science, he also wound up as the school's basketball coach. Finally, after twenty years at SNU, Loren became the school's provost. Four years later, in 1989, he moved up to become the president.

That same year momentous things happened on the international scene. Just months after Loren Gresham became SNU's president, the Iron Curtain shattered. The communist empire fell apart. The once-feared Soviet Union dissolved.

The summer following his first year as university president, Loren Gresham went to Berlin. There, he met with several Nazarene leaders to brainstorm evangelistic strategies for eastern Europe. It was a productive meeting. They talked about ways to use Nazarene college students in the former Warsaw Pact nations. That Berlin "summit" produced some very concrete results. One was that students from several Nazarene colleges spent the summer of 1991 in Russia.

Loren continued to dream about longer term missions involvement for Nazarene college students. Most young Mormons spend two or three years as volunteer missionaries. That intrigued Loren Gresham. Finally, in the summer of 1993 his ideas had crystallized enough. He began talking sending young Nazarenes to mission fields for

a year. It was a vision of new college graduates copying the “Mormon model” of volunteer service.

As the SNU president, Loren Gresham goes to district assemblies. There, he exhorts churches to send students and to give their educational budget commitments. In 1993, as he spoke to district assemblies on SNU's region, he outlined a dream: that of mobilizing young people for a year of volunteer missionary work. The young volunteers would serve primarily as helpers for career missionaries.

Two trips to eastern Europe were fresh in Loren’s mind. American tourists were pouring into Russia. Some of those were Nazarenes. Loren Gresham saw missionaries Chuck and Carla Sunberg spending time caring for these tourists. That wasn’t the focus of their missionary call, of course. They had gone to Moscow to evangelize the Russians, not care for Americans. So Loren began imagining how pairs of fresh college graduates could lighten those missionaries’ load.

Loren envisioned pairs of young volunteers going to the airport to pick up visiting Nazarenes. They would then be the tour guides for U.S. visitors. The volunteers could even handle some office chores, such as bookkeeping and correspondence in English. They could help educate missionary children. And they would do all this at no cost to the church or the missionaries.

That same summer, Robert Scott, Nazarene World Mission Division director, attended the Dallas district assembly. Loren Gresham was there representing SNU. When Loren talked about his “Mormon model” idea, he got Dr. Scott’s attention right away.

At that point, the church faced more open doors than it knew how to enter. Robert Scott had found one of those open doors on the Balkan peninsula. While in Bulgaria on a fact-finding visit, he had fallen in love with it. He liked the flower stalls lining cobblestone streets and the open-air cafes. They gave Bulgaria a homey, lived-in feeling. Robert Scott's interest in Bulgaria went beyond its attraction to him as a tourist. As he walked through Bulgaria's cities, he sensed God's call to Nazarenes to come. Unfortunately, General Budget resources were stretched way too thin. Following his trip to Bulgaria, Robert Scott was in the Dallas district assembly. There, he listened to Loren Gresham explain his "Mormon model" idea. He saw how, with minor alteration, Loren’s idea could be used to enter Bulgaria.

At General Assembly that same summer, Loren was elected the General Board’s lay college representative. Loren Gresham wound up on the General Board committee overseeing the World Mission Division. A few months later, Southern Nazarene University sent the General Board a written proposal. It outlined a way for the university to join forces with the General Board to start work in Bulgaria. SNU would provide the young volunteers; the World Mission Division would formulate the strategy and oversee them. In February of 1994, that proposal came before the General Board. The partnership proposal was exactly what Dr. Scott had requested. Since Loren Gresham was on the General Board, he was also there to talk about it. So, it was swiftly approved.

By late May, the first volunteers started arriving in Sofia. Two months later Loren Gresham went to Bulgaria for a visit. Greeting him were eleven adult Nazarene volunteers, the first fruits of his vision.

As Dr. Gresham's dream of youthful volunteer missionaries has unfolded, not everything has gone smoothly. Bulgaria's political bureaucracy presented the volunteers with formidable challenges. Most of the first group of Nazarene volunteers were in Bulgaria on 30-day visas. About once a month they had to exit Bulgaria. They would usually cross the border into a neighboring country for a day of sightseeing. When they reentered Bulgaria, they got a fresh entry stamp in their passports. That gave them thirty more days in Bulgaria. This did allow (or force) them to visit other countries. It also made for some uncertainty in their ministry.

The government did not have to keep giving those visa renewals. In fact, one day team members left government offices with glum faces. Officials had just said that new visa renewals would not be forthcoming. It was nearly Christmas. It was supposed to be a season of joy. For those volunteers in Sofia, however, there was considerably more apprehension than joy. It looked like they might have to return home or transfer to another country.

It was an uncertain time. At one point, Linda Gresham said to her husband, *"Maybe we got in over our heads."*

She was right. From a human point of view, the university was in over its head. This was a pioneer faith adventure into uncharted territory. Christian colleges struggle to recruit students and stay solvent financially. Partnering with a mission board for work overseas seems far different from that. That's why there's a university president thread in the tapestry. It's hard to imagine weaving it without Loren Gresham.

## Thread from Empty Spools

Not many years ago, evangelicals watched in horror at the menacing rise of communism. In the decades after World War II, communism was on the march. Taking over country after country, this atheistic political system looked invincible. When the communists moved in, doors slammed shut against Gospel preaching. One heard stories of Christians martyred for their faith in communist lands. The only possible missionary activity in the communist world was Bible smuggling and radio broadcasting. Other than that, missionary efforts had to center on the “free world.”

A 1985 General Assembly brochure listed twenty target countries. They were countries Nazarenes wanted to enter in the following ten years. None of those countries listed was “behind” or east of the Iron Curtain. The reason was simple. No one had anticipated that, within five years, communism would collapse. When that happened, doors bolted shut for years unexpectedly burst open.

The 1993 General Assembly and Conventions were in Indianapolis’ Hoosier Dome. In that stadium setting, Nazarene joyfully celebrated the excitement of entering lots of new doors. As the NWMS convention began, two streams of people flowed in from behind the platform. They represented all the countries where there was Nazarene work. Marching in, they carried flags of those countries (including all 50 U.S. state flags). Some of the marchers wore traditional costumes from their home countries. It was a colorful ceremony!

A practice session was held the night before that opening ceremony. With lots of people and props, the practice was somewhat chaotic. Adding to the confusion were the name tags attached to the flag stands. The stands stood in a long line down in front of the platform. Each one had a country or state label on it. So, each bearer had to find the right place for his or her flag.

Amid the confusion and disorder of that practice, the narrator was practicing his script. It was a roll call of the nations represented by the flags. Suddenly, the flag bearers heard him say: *“Now, these are the flags of twenty new countries that were not here four years ago when we last met for General NWMS Convention.”*

Twenty new countries in four years. What a huge expansion in Nazarene missionary outreach! It was even more amazing since it occurred with no increase in career missionaries and only modest gains in missions giving. One of those years, General Budget giving had even decreased a tiny percentage point.

That brings us to the anguish created by all those new opportunities. You see, we needed to keep doing even more, ever reaching into new areas. But, with resources already stretched thin, how could we? How could we do anything more? Had the resources stretched as far as they possibly go while still having some effectiveness? Certainly, God was the Master Weaver working on those the world outreach tapestries.

Still, how could we keep entering new countries when General Budget could not support more missionaries?

Remember the list of twenty countries that Nazarene regional leaders had targeted in 1985? We did enter twenty countries in the next eight years. However, we still had not begun work all of those originally targeted. In addition, Nazarene leaders were scrambling to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities in eastern Europe. One new open door was Bulgaria — a Balkan nation dotted with ancient tombs, ruins of Roman spas, Byzantine monasteries and Turkish mosques.

At that point, the “missions resources” spool looked exhausted. In spite of that empty spool, however, God worked Nazarene threads into His Bulgarian tapestry. What He led the church to do has affirmed Kittie Suffield’s song: “Little is much when God is in it!” When the missionary spool at Nazarene headquarters ran out of thread, God called forth volunteers. These people came up with their own threads of support.

In the first year of the Bulgarian experiment, Nazarenes spent only \$3,000 of General Budget funds there. That’s not much for a country where we had thirteen American adults and four children. One fear was that people would cut General Budget giving to help these volunteers. That hasn’t happened. The volunteers' support money has been “new” money. It hasn't been a case of "robbing Peter to pay Paul." Same churches even increased General Budget giving after they got involved with the Bulgaria project.

Hermann Gschwandtner added up Nazarene investment for the first two years in Bulgaria. That included each volunteer’s expenses, donated medical supplies, and gifts from individuals and churches for various ministries (including the orphanage project). The grand total came to nearly one million dollars. Just \$3,000 of that was General Budget! “Little” had indeed become “much.”

This Bulgaria project is the test of a new idea. Besides utilizing Loren Gresham's young volunteers, the church has tested a low-risk way of pioneering new work. That experiment seems to have been a success. Bulgarian government officials speak very highly of what they have seen of Nazarenes. With their encouragement, the process of officially registering the Church of the Nazarene has begun.

The success in Bulgaria has prompted the church to try the same strategy in Hungary. Matt Robertson was a key part of the first two years in Bulgaria. After the first year, he married. Now, he and Shela have moved to neighboring Hungary. There, they are copying the Bulgaria strategy, using volunteers from Mount Vernon Nazarene College.

They say you cannot get blood out of a turnip. Probably not. In 1994 the church faced an impossible blood-out-of-the-turnip situation with Bulgaria. However, God wanted Nazarene threads in His Bulgarian tapestry. It didn’t stop Him when the spools of thread had been used up elsewhere. He found another way to get Nazarene threads into the Bulgarian design.

## Directors' Threads

Suppose a Nazarene college — all by itself — had hatched the idea of opening new countries using only youthful volunteers. Mind you, such trail blazing without career missionaries hadn't been what Dr. Gresham originally envisioned. Still, let's suppose his original vision had been to open a new country with youthful volunteers. Would General Church leaders have felt comfortable embracing such an idea coming from an outsider? Probably not. The idea would have seemed too much of a departure from traditional — and successful — Nazarene strategy.

Fortunately, shaping this bold experiment were two men with “director” in their titles. They were the ones who really got the ball rolling to use an all-volunteer force supplying its own financial resources. One of those men was Dr. Bob Scott, World Mission Division director. It was under his leadership that Nazarenes — with no additional career missionaries — opened twenty new countries in one quadrennium.

During that period, however, the General Church faced escalating demands on its financial resources. Each year, more resources were needed just to maintain prior commitments. Among the soaring costs, for example, was health care for missionaries and for Headquarters employees. There is a limit to how far the stretchiest rubber band will go.

So, Dr. Scott asked himself: *How can we keep advancing into new areas around the globe? Have we reached the limits of what we can do?*

As we've noted, Robert Scott was in the midst of such agonizing when he heard Loren Gresham explain his “Mormon model” idea. Dr. Scott thought about the volunteer programs already in use. Wasn't President Gresham's thinking just a natural development of programs like NIVS and ADVANCE? What about going beyond Loren's idea of providing helpers for career missionaries to something more adventuresome? Could these volunteers spearhead the church's advance into a brand new country?

A missions' student at SNU, Melanie Elder, was a distant relative of Robert Scott. When Russia's door cracked open in 1991, Melanie was there with other Nazarene college students. Two years later, when she became senior class chaplain, she invited Dr. Scott to speak in one of her class chapels.

During that 1993 visit, Robert Scott met with Loren Gresham and some other campus leaders. *“I like your young volunteer idea,”* Dr. Scott said. *“Here's a proposal for you. I'd like to challenge you to adopt a country. Let's not spread these young volunteers all over the globe at first. Let's send them all to one country. With their help, we could enter an open door. They could carry the ball until we can get career missionaries in there. The country we'd like you to adopt is Bulgaria.”*

The idea was not nearly as foreign to what we were already doing as it had seemed at first glance. A structure to deploy young volunteers in year-long assignments

was already in place. Naturally, some things would need fleshing out. However, even a training program for such volunteers was already being used with NIVS personnel.

Another director in this thread is Franklin Cook, Eurasia regional director. When it comes to projects involving young people, Franklin Cook is never one to say: "We've never done it that way." Throughout his ministry, Franklin has been instrumental in using young people in global outreach efforts. In the 1960's, for example, he started Student Missions Corps (now called Youth in Mission).

Franklin eventually moved to Europe to direct Nazarene work across Eurasia. God probably had many reasons for putting Franklin there. Undoubtedly, however, one very small reason was the youthful Bulgarian experiment which He was planning. Franklin certainly was among the Nazarene leaders most willing to experiment with young volunteers on mission fields.

Not long after the first volunteers arrived in Bulgaria, Franklin Cook went to see them. One evening, five of the young men took him sightseeing. They wound up on top of the National Palace of Culture. This is a huge concert hall/conference center built by Bulgaria's communists. They envisioned their National Palace of Culture as a triumphal showpiece. To make an impressive setting for it, several older buildings came down, creating a park around the "palace." Sadly, the building cost so much that one Bulgarian called it "a big hole in the pocket of an already tattered pair of pants."

The National Palace of Culture building did not become a sparkling jewel. On the contrary, it's a prime example of the deteriorating grandiose projects littering Bulgaria. Many never got completely finished. Most have had no upkeep work in years. Look around Bulgaria today. Anywhere you look, you'll see aging factories, run-down apartments, crumbling train stations, and poorly maintained roads. Construction projects sit unfinished for years because of a lack of funds or shortage of building materials or both.

One nice thing about the National Palace of Culture is its roof-top open-air coffee shop. That's why Franklin Cook and those five young pioneers took the elevator to the top. At the coffee shop, they ordered cups of strong Turkish-style coffee. As they sat sipping the coffee, most did not drink everything in their cups. Fortunately for them, they remembered the layer of coffee grounds covering the bottom their cups. Drinking the last drops of a cup of Turkish coffee can be a bitter experience!

After they finished their coffee, Franklin walked with them over to the side of the building. At the city's edge, there was Mt. Vitosha looming like a 6,000 foot backdrop. Looking around, they could see Sofia's blocks and blocks of gray high rise apartment buildings. They felt humbled by the audaciousness of what they wanted to see happen: have every Bulgarian clearly understand the gospel message. With their regional director, those young men walked around to each side of the building where they bowed and prayed for Sofia.

This director's thread, with its divisional and regional strands, is important to the tapestry. Two directors initiated and pushed the idea of entering Bulgaria with an all-volunteer force. As a result, Nazarenes are in Bulgaria today. Without those directors,

the tapestry would have remained incomplete (like many Bulgarian construction projects!).

## A German Thread

Lanzingen, a picturesque rural German village, is home to only 500 people. However, that little village is the site of the command post for Nazarene efforts to evangelize the former European communist empire.

When Hermann Gschwandtner became a Nazarene missionary in early 1990, he looked for living quarters in Frankfurt. Everything there was far too expensive. He went a few miles to the north. There, in the little village of Lanzingen, he found something affordable. It was actually bigger than what his family needed. So, one upstairs room with a large balcony could be his office. There were extra rooms for anticipated overnight guests connected with Hermann's work. Best of all, the rental price fit his budget from World Mission!

The story of this German thread goes back several decades. Converted at age thirteen, Hermann Gschwandtner felt a call to missionary service. After finishing his schooling, he went to work for World Literature Crusade. He was with that organization for fifteen years. This stocky curly haired German's administrative gifts led him to become WLC's executive director for Germany and Eastern Europe.

Rev. Gschwandtner and his family began attending Frankfurt First Church of the Nazarene. In 1984, the pastor left. During that interim period, the church board asked Hermann to fill the pulpit. The church warmed to Hermann's vibrant preaching and energetic leadership.

So, instead of searching elsewhere for a pastor, they asked him to become their pastor. He eventually prayed through on saying "yes" to their request. He did not feel he was abandoning cross-cultural evangelism. Rather, he felt he was being led into a ministry as a missions mobilizer. In his first year as Frankfurt First pastor, Hermann asked the congregation to double its missions giving. They did!

More than four years went by. Then, in early 1989, cracks appeared in the imposing Iron Curtain dividing Europe. Although communism looked quite firmly entrenched in eastern Europe, some winds of change were blowing. In the first months of 1989, Communist governments began easing travel restrictions. By the fall, Nazarene leaders felt they should be working more visibly in eastern Europe. Because of Hermann's previous ministry in eastern Europe, he had already caught Robert Scott's eye. So, Dr. Scott and General Superintendent Jerry Johnson asked Hermann Gschwandtner to become the church's first Eastern European Coordinator.

On November 9, 1989 Hermann said "yes" to becoming Nazarene Eastern European Coordinator. He faxed his response to the Nazarene International Center. In that response, Hermann listed some goals he felt were reachable at that time. Twelve hours after that fax reached Kansas City, the East Germans abandoned their police-state mentality. They threw open the gates to their hated Wall. Around the world, television screens showed the delirious crowds surging through the Berlin Wall. Those were heady days as cranes rumbled up to dismantle the concrete barriers.

In their wildest dreams no one had imagined how rapidly the communist world would collapse. Only hours before the Wall opened, Hermann said "yes" to a new job. The Nazarene leaders who had recruited Hermann thought the position would mainly involve the patient cultivation of isolated believers. Suddenly, he found himself looking at wide-open opportunities where communism had collapsed.

What was he to do? He knew that almost all the General Church resources were already committed elsewhere. He went to prayer, knowing that was the about the only resource on which he could count. He knew he would have to take some risks. He knew he would have to experiment with some new strategies.

Russia was the first former Soviet bloc area to be entered. Hermann's work made possible Loren Gresham's visit to Russia in 1991. Loren's vision for sending young volunteers to mission fields was really crystallizing. At the same time, Hermann was trying figure out how to Eastern Europe's open doors. It was providential that Hermann and Loren wound up with time together on that Russian trip. Maybe the Master Weaver had something to do with it!

After the start in Russia, Hermann turned to Romania and Albania. He used SNU and Point Loma students giving a summer to open those two countries. He helped ENC set up a semester-long resident study program in Romania. Hermann knew the deep skepticism of people emerging from communist domination. Though hammered by decades of propaganda, few eastern Europeans believed communism's promises. Even so, they sacrificed living standards and political freedom in the name of that promised Utopia. As a result, many eastern Europeans were left with a nihilistic outlook.

Hermann knew such people would be impressed far more by what they saw done in Jesus' name than they would by sermons about the Savior. The strategy he devised for these former communist countries centers on nonprofit foundations. In each country, an "Institute for Total Encouragement" would be legally incorporated. Hermann believed that compassionate ministry activities would create interest in the gospel. From this, he envisioned the sprouting of house churches led by bivocational pastors.

By late 1993 Hermann decided it was time to enter Bulgaria. He had already made several trips to that beautiful mountainous country. He was captivated by the Bulgarians' plight. Eroded landscapes scar their country. Industrial waste taints large areas. Their economy is a shambles. And, of course, Bulgaria's disastrous experiment with communism caused as much spiritual damage as it did economic and environmental. Hermann felt the Master Weaver saying that He wanted Nazarene threads in His Bulgarian tapestry. But how?

On paper, the idea of opening a new country with an all-volunteer force looked chancy. Only with Hermann's close supervision would the strategy succeed. As we've noted, things began to unfold rapidly in positive ways. The group had the foundation legally registered by late summer. Then, in the autumn, tragedy struck. Near Frankfurt, Germany, Hermann had a terrible automobile accident. Those who saw Hermann's crumpled car said there was no way he should have survived.

*"Satan did this,"* Hermann wrote to friends from his hospital bed.

If demonic forces had engineered Hermann Gschwandtner's accident to shred the Bulgarian tapestry, they failed miserably. Though badly injured, Hermann survived. Even wearing plaster casts, Hermann managed to get back to work via telephone and fax.

The convalescent process took time. After he recovered, Hermann went to Sofia to meet with Bulgaria's Minister of Religious Affairs. The man was delighted to discover that Hermann was from Germany. Since he also spoke German, he and Hermann carried on much of the meeting in German. The government official saw that the Church of the Nazarene was an international church. He was impressed. He had expected to see Americans ordering everyone around. Instead, here was a German directing a group of American young people.

With a German as their leader, Nazarenes got a better reception than they would if only Americans had gone to Bulgarian government offices!

## A Kazakhstan Colored Thread

One photo taken by the first Bulgarian volunteers shows Miles Zinn and a sleeping bear. That picture isn't a zoo photo where a moat and fence separate Miles from the bear. It wasn't taken in a circus tent. It was taken on a street in Sofia and Miles is right next to the bear. The big animal belonged to a gypsy couple. They used it to raise money (from people like Miles who paid for the privilege of taking the photo).

A favorite story of the first year's team also concerns a gypsy and his bear. It happened one day during a street car ride. Being on a street car was a common thing for them. Much of Sofia travels on those trolleys and the feeder bus system. A web of trolley tracks and their accompanying overhead wires crisscross Sofia. Looking at them, one could think that Sofia was caught in a giant spider web.

That day, several of the Nazarene volunteers were riding across Sofia. At one stop, they watched open-mouthed as a gypsy clambered on board pulling his bear with him! Apparently, bears aren't allowed on Sofia's mass transit system. The trolley driver came charging out of the forward compartment she had decorated with lace curtains and family photos. Storming to the back door, she ordered the gypsy and his bear off her tram.

Miles Zinn — the young fellow in the photo with the bear — Philip Rodebush, Todd Brant and Scot Riggins were close friends at SNU. The spring of their junior year, all four of them won elections to student government positions. That same year they made a promise to one another. None were ministerial students. However, they decided that, when they graduated, they would go together to some unevangelized people. There, they were spend at least a year sharing Christ. While Dr. Gresham was already formulating his volunteer idea, he had not yet mentioned it to students. This was something they felt led to commit to by the Holy Spirit.

Miles and Philip already had short-term overseas experience. Both had been to Russia for a summer. One Christmas break, Philip went on SNU's annual Work and Witness trip to Mexico. During his senior year Miles took a missions course: "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement."

Around the time they covenanted with each other to give a year to evangelizing unreached peoples, the group of four made friends with Nick Konoenko. An ethnic Russian from Kazakhstan, Nick was a new foreign student at SNU. A former Soviet "republic," his country became an independent nation when the USSR broke apart. The name itself, Kazakhstan, had an exciting sound to the four SNU students. So, the Kazak people became the missions target for Miles, Philip, Scot and Todd. Oil-rich Kazakhstan was an ideal target country in several ways. Kazakhstan is nominally Muslim, but fear of spirits is often stronger. Less than 1% of the Kazaks are evangelical Christians.

When SNU took up Dr. Scott's challenge to adopt Bulgaria, it wanted to send its very best young people. There wasn't much time. It was already the middle of the

school year and Hermann Gschwandtner wanted the volunteers in Bulgaria right after graduation. If young people like those four student leaders would go, the audacious experiment might succeed. It just might succeed.

Those four young men were approached about being among the first NIVS volunteers into Bulgaria. They said: *“Well, that’s great. We’re excited for the church and the university, but we’re headed to Kazakhstan.”*

President Loren Gresham entered the picture. He had been a coach. In 1981 he had led SNU men’s basketball team to a national championship. He had to be able to give motivational speeches. That's what coaches do, isn't it? It should have easy for Loren to get those four young men to sign up for Bulgaria. One could imagine them listening to him, getting fired up and bursting out of his office. They would dash to the airport, buy tickets, and be in Sofia the next evening.

So, what did the former basketball coach do? He simply asked them to pray about it. There wasn’t any painting of a vision on the canvas of their imagination. He didn’t give anything resembling a rousing halftime speech. Days went by with no answer from the four. Anxiety levels mounted. Suppose those young men said “no” to Bulgaria. Would the project have to be postponed?

Finally, those four felt God saying: *“Your friendship with Nick helped give you a tangible symbol of the unreached. Now it’s time to move beyond a symbol. I want you to accept this challenge in Bulgaria!”*

With Loren Gresham's help, God shifted those young men’s gaze from that Kazakhstan’s derricks and pipelines to a place producing a far different oil. East of Sofia, Bulgaria, rose blossoms cover the valleys. There, another kind of oil is produced: rose oil. Kazakhstan’s oil comes out of the ground; Bulgaria's oil is made from rose petals. Kazakhstan’s oil is measured in barrels; Bulgaria’s rose oil — the base for the world’s most expensive perfumes — is measured in grams.

When they had clearly prayed through about going to Bulgaria, they never looked back. That sure sense of a divine call steadied them through the problems encountered in pioneering in Bulgaria.

Recently, one of those four, Philip Rodebush, said: *“It doesn’t seem like we did much that first year.”*

In one sense, he was right. One thread may not seem like much to a huge tapestry. It’s when all of the threads are put together that the marvelous and wonderful design emerges.

## Broken Threads

Broken threads should be discarded, shouldn't they? Knots don't look all that great in fine tapestries. So, weavers don't generally use broken threads. The Bulgarian tapestry is different in that respect. It has some broken threads in it.

Called to missions at age eight, Don Moore prepared to be an agricultural missionary. In the 1970's he and his wife applied for missionary appointment. Charles Morrow, whose story is told in *Saint in Overalls*, was then an agricultural missionary in Haiti. Because of what Charles Morrow was accomplishing, denominational leaders wanted to appoint other agricultural missionaries.

Of course, no matter their actual job description, every Nazarene missionary's top objective is developing strong national churches. A major priority for Nazarene missionary work is producing leaders for churches and districts. While Don knew agriculture well, he had no college training in religion. So, World Missions leaders suggested he move to Colorado Springs and attend Nazarene Bible College. With that ministerial education, they said, Don and his wife would be prime missionary candidates.

Don quit his job with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture. He and his wife packed up and moved to Colorado Springs. Don enrolled in Nazarene Bible College while his wife went to work at a newspaper. After a year and a half there, Don's world fell apart. His wife left him to move in with her boss. In the aftermath of the divorce, she left Don to raise their three boys.

With the failure of his marriage, Don Moore's dream of becoming a missionary died. He dropped out of Bible college and moved to California with his sons. There, he got a job with his uncle's construction business.

At the Nazarene church Don began attending, there was a lovely young lady named Cynthia. She and Don fell in love. They got married and she helped him finish raising his three sons. Then, they started a "second" family by having two baby boys of their own.

One day, Don felt God talking to him again about becoming a missionary. Cynthia also began sensing a similar divine call. Don remembered the World Mission Division's request that he get additional training in religion. So he and Cynthia moved back to central Oklahoma. Don got a job not far from his parents' home. In the fall of 1991, Don arranged his work schedule so he could go back to college. Taking a couple of courses a semester at SNU, he finished his second bachelor's degree in two and half years. This one was in religion and sociology.

When Don started driving the 60 miles from Stillwater to Bethany, he was not bashful about his missionary call. Not long after Don started back to college, a World Mission representative visited SNU. Don and Cynthia went in for an interview. Unfortunately, it was a disappointing meeting.

*"You are too old for a missionary appointment,"* the Moores were told.

Don was already forty-five years old. That was ten years beyond the normal age limit for career missionary appointment. Some find that 35-year age limit prejudicial and discriminatory. There are, however, good reasons for it. One reason is the dropout rate of those going to the field after age thirty-five. The over-35 dropout percentage is much higher than the dropout rate of those arriving on the field before turning thirty-five. From that one perspective, it's much riskier to send a 45-year old to the mission field than it is to send a 30-year old.

However, the infectiously optimistic Don Moore is not easily discouraged. He would not accept a closed door simply because he had celebrated too many birthdays. He pled with the World Mission office representative. Finally, he and Cynthia said: *"We will go to the mission field even if we have to pay our own way."*

As plans moved forward for getting the first volunteers to Bulgaria, a serious look was taken at team makeup. The youthful volunteers already recruited were full of enthusiasm and idealism. For balance, perhaps the team needed at least one mature couple with some life experience. From that perspective, Don and Cynthia were perfect. Don Moore had just earned a religion/sociology degree at SNU's January commencement. Thus, he met that condition for missionary service set down earlier by the World Mission office.

Of course, another way they were qualified for the Bulgarian team concerned financial support. The Moores wanted to become career missionaries. Still, they had said they would go overseas even if they had to provide their own support. So, in early February of 1994, SNU approached Don and Cynthia about joining the youthful volunteers. They were ecstatic. They began soliciting prayer and financial support from friends and family. To buy airline tickets to Sofia, they sold their car. On June 1, with Don decked out in cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat, the Moore family boarded a plane in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Final destination? Sofia, Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, the Moores have not escaped the problems encountered by those becoming missionaries after age thirty-five. Among other things, Don has struggled with the Bulgaria language and its strange-looking alphabet. Still, by the end of his first year in Bulgaria, he had led five people to the Lord.

Don's long experience with government bureaucracies may be another reason the Lord put him in Bulgaria. Not long after the Moores arrived in Bulgaria, Hermann Gschwandtner asked Don to get the foundation legally registered. As they began the registration process, a deadline of July 30 was set for filing the legal paperwork. Even if he met that deadline, people told Don not to expect a quick answer. It would take months, they said. For one thing, Bulgarian government offices are virtually closed during August and much of September.

By a series of miracles they turned the paperwork in on July 20. Long-time observers told them to sit back and wait. A key person in that approval process was Bulgaria's chief justice. On July 25 that man died of a heart attack. But, as they later

discovered, a miraculous thing had happened. Prior to his death, the chief justice had signed the paperwork submitted by Don Moore.

Another person that needed to approve the application was a cabinet minister. On July 27 the prime minister and his entire cabinet resigned. Everything except routine stuff was put on hold. New elections were scheduled for the fall. Amazingly, just hours before relinquishing his office, the cabinet minister had signed the Nazarenes' application. Thus, a process that normally took months was completed in five days!

Had the approval not come so quickly, it would have taken months. With the government in crisis, only the most routine decisions were being made. Everything else waited until the new parliament took office and a new prime minister was installed. Appointing a new chief justice waited until all that was completed.

At one point Hermann Gschwandtner said: *"If we get the Church of the Nazarene established in Bulgaria, it will be because of Don Moore."*

The Bulgarian tapestry wonderfully shows what God can do with broken threads!

## A Youthful Thread

On a flight into Bulgaria, an SNU professor sat beside a U.S. Commerce Department official. The professor was on his way to Sofia to visit the volunteers. As the two fell into conversation, the Commerce official found out what the university was doing in Bulgaria.

*"This country's only hope is its young people,"* he said as the plane crossed into Bulgarian airspace.

Was his analysis correct? If so, maybe that's why God has made youth an important part of His Bulgarian tapestry.

The American volunteers in Sofia have become used to lots of different things. They no longer stare at the stocky women in blue coats scouring city streets with high pressure water hoses. They are used to seeing an occasional horse-drawn wagon coming down the street. They have learned to endure long lines at bakeries and periods without hot water. They learned to survive intermittent water supplies and elevators that break down twice a week.

These young people grew up in single family dwellings in small towns. They played in lush grassy back yards. In Sofia, they live in bland, badly-maintained apartment buildings with very little grass in sight. Most of the volunteers owned a car in the U.S. In Bulgaria they had to walk everywhere. The first group even joked about have "lost" a member of their team. How did that happen? Well, walking almost everywhere during their first two months in Bulgaria slimmed them down. In fact, they took off a combined 125 pounds. That's equivalent to losing one person!

The NIVS volunteers in Bulgaria get a month or so of language study. That's not nearly enough to really learn a language. Career missionaries often get a year or more of full-time language study. But these NIVS volunteers will be there for just one year. They want to accomplish something for the Lord other than learning a language. Actually, the limited language study time is not completely a negative. Many young Bulgarians are eager to learn English. So they cluster around these young Americans with whom they can practice their English.

Some strands of the Bulgarian tapestry's youthful thread stretch back to the 1960's. In 1962 Bob Bolton was the youth minister at Oklahoma City Trinity church. That year, he took his high school group on a missions trip. It was the first of many youth-oriented mission trips he has led. For these annual trips, Bolton started using the name "Ambassadors." At that point, he did not know he was beginning something that would affect a Bulgarian tapestry. He was just trying to expose his youth group to missions.

However, a year or two into his mission trip experiences General Church leaders approached Bolton. They had some plans for a youth cross-cultural project and wanted to borrow his "Ambassador" title. Thus, in 1964, a group of musically talented Nazarene

college students called “Nazarene Evangelistic Ambassadors” made a singing tour of several mission fields. Two years later, two such singing groups spent the summer doing concerts on mission fields.

One negative thing about the Ambassador concept was that it involved only a few young people. It did help the denomination see how effective young people could be in cross-cultural evangelism. But, with the General Church was picking up some of the expenses, there was no way to expand it. The performance group concept did make a great impact on those mission fields involved. However, with the program's costs, it could only involve a handful of people at a time. Franklin and others wanted a way to put lots of young people overseas each summer. So, the program's focus was shifted from performance to service.

The program's name also changed. The name Nazarene Evangelistic Ambassadors was dropped. In what may have been a take-off on the U.S. government's “Peace Corps,” it became Student Missions Corps. Today, we call that same program Youth in Mission.

After the first year of SMC, Franklin Cook wrote a book called *Discovery — Student Missions Corps*. In that 1969 volume, Franklin quoted a missionary: “*Young people can do things we veteran missionaries could not accomplish. They can imagine things that to us are unimaginable. They have energy we don't have, vision that we call foolishness, and smiles that are completely disarming.*”

In the Student Missions Corps early days, an SNU religion major named Roger Hahn applied. He was accepted and spent the summer of 1970 in Nicaragua. Gifted in language learning, Roger came back from Central America speaking Spanish. He also came home with a heart for world evangelism. In Guatemala, Roger worked with two missionary families: the Galloways and the Birchards. As those missionaries worked with that young college student, they had no idea they were forming strands for a Bulgarian tapestry.

Roger went on to earn a Ph.D. in New Testament studies. A gifted scholar, he returned to Bethany to teach. There, his Student Missions Corps summer saved him from being the stereotypical “ivory tower” scholar with very restricted vision and interests. Roger Hahn became good friends with Loren Gresham. Based on their cross-cultural experiences, they had long talks about what Nazarene young people ought to become. They talked about the experiences which a Nazarene university should provide for its students.

Loren and Roger dreamed about organizing huge Work and Witness trips to Mexico each year. Loren Gresham became SNU's president in the summer of 1989. One of his first acts was to appoint Roger Hahn — who was by then religion department head — as director of the school's first New Year's holiday trip to Mexico.

In the summer of 1993 Loren Gresham asked Roger to assume chaplaincy responsibilities. For Roger, that meant more than scheduling speakers for the three-times-a-week chapels. Combining his missions' passion with his new responsibilities for

students' spiritual development, Roger became a key player in launching the Bulgaria experiment.

It was Roger who actually wrote SNU's partnership proposal to the General Board. Roger Hahn's summer on the mission field turned him into a life-long missions mobilizer. He became the facilitator for sending other college students overseas. The youth thread thus keeps reproducing itself. That is, of course, what everyone had hoped for all along.

## Of Shuttles or Spinning Wheels

There's more to weaving a tapestry than just accumulating threads. There are looms, shuttles, and spinning wheels and the hand of a master weaver. Some things about this Bulgarian experiment seem more like spinning wheels or shuttles than they do tapestry threads.

One of those revolves around some mobile prayer meetings in 1992-93. That year, an SNU missions organization organized "Joshua Walks" on campus. These are prayer meetings which take their name from the way Joshua captured Jericho.

In this modern version, a group walked around the campus, stopping to pray at various locations. They paused in front of each building and prayed aloud. At the dormitories, they prayed that a passion for world evangelism will consume students housed there. At classroom buildings they prayed for professors and for the Lord's presence in classes. The last stop was the administration building, Bresee Hall. That campus focal point is right on "Main Street USA" — Route 66, the historic Chicago-to-Los Angeles highway. There, facing SNU's oldest building, a group prayed earnestly for President Gresham. They prayed that he would discern God's vision and that he would be divinely empowered to carry out that vision.

Those Joshua Walk organizers had never been to Bulgaria. As it turned out, none of the Bulgarian volunteers were involved in those Joshua Walks. So there is no direct link. However, those prayer walks do loom as a backdrop to the Bulgaria experiment.

Who can say what influence those prayers had on the global vision Dr. Gresham began articulating so clearly only months later? Did those prayer walks prepare the college campus to rise to the challenge of the Bulgaria experiment? One wonders if those prayers somehow fueled the zeal of those applying for the Bulgaria project. Surely, it was more than just mere coincidence that these events occurred one after another.

Evangelist Chuck Milhuff represents others who have indirectly contributed to Bulgarian tapestry design. Dr. Milhuff has talked for years about Nazarene young people emulating young Mormon volunteerism. He has been the evangelist for several college revivals at SNU. In his visits to the campus, did he ever talk to Dr. Gresham about his idea? Neither remembers talking to the other about the Mormon model of volunteer service. Still, it is interesting that both men thought and talked a lot about it.

There were some pathfinders or trail blazers for the Bulgaria volunteers. For example, after his 1991 graduation, Paul Springer left Oklahoma for Central America. There, he spent a year helping missionaries. In 1993, Cheryl and Jeff Crouch left for a two-year volunteer assignment in Papua New Guinea. There, they were "house parents" at a boarding school for MK's (missionary children).

To go back even earlier, in 1966 SNU sponsored what is probably the denomination's first Work and Witness trip. That spring, students and faculty raised

money for construction materials. Then, a group of them spent their 10-day spring break in northern Mexico building a church.

Clearly, the ethos challenging SNU graduates to give a year to world evangelism has arisen from more than just one person's efforts.

## Faded Red and Gold Threads

Bulgaria has had a national identity since the fifth century. However, it has rarely been truly independent. Following World War II, Bulgaria became a Soviet satellite with a government subservient to Moscow. Bulgaria's communist regime kowtowed so much to the Kremlin that it was labeled "Little Russia."

One of Bulgaria's most highly acclaimed novels is called *Under the Yoke*. It was written in 1894, long before communism came to power. Nonetheless, that title symbolizes well life under communism and how these people continue to struggle with its awful legacy.

In communism's repressive atmosphere, Christians were singled out. Church property was confiscated. The government had to approve the selection of all priests/pastors and church officials. For four decades there were continual assaults on believers. Persecution killed some with others winding up in prison. The Bible was banned. Christian literature became so scarce that believers copied Bibles and other Christian literature by hand. The campaign of misinformation against Protestants continued past communism's fall. Even today, rumors and untruths color the average Bulgarian's image of evangelical Christianity. As a result, there's still plenty of red thread running through the Bulgarian tapestry.

The reality of that came home to the volunteers in Bulgaria one spring afternoon. One day a couple of the volunteers set out for their weekly visits to elderly people. They took a few groceries to each home. They also spent time talking, reading Scripture and praying with these isolated elderly people. Carrying sacks of food, the American volunteers blended in with Bulgarians rushing along toting their own plastic shopping bags. A wiry little Bulgarian lady went with Miles and Todd. They worked their way around Sofia by trolley and on foot. They had met her at the Methodist church. Because she spoke English, they had asked her to help them as a translator.

The lady's hair was grey, but her step was quick and firm. She explained that her father had been a Congregationalist minister when the communists took over. As the young Americans talked with her that afternoon, they chose their words carefully. The lady seemed very conscious of people around them on the trolley and on the sidewalk. It was as though she was afraid of being overheard.

"Did the government make life hard for your father?" they asked her at one point. "Yes," she said, hesitating, "that's why he got sick and died."

Team members recalled their walks through Bulgaria's equivalent of Red Square in Moscow. Standing at one end of that large open space was an imposing several-story building. During the communist era, a huge red star atop a spire marked this as Party Headquarters.

Bulgaria's communist dictator, Todor Zhivkov, fell from power the same week the Berlin Wall opened. A helicopter showed up and lifted off the huge red star, leaving a

broken spire. In that tumultuous autumn of 1989, angry crowds tried to set fire to the building. At the deserted headquarters, masonry walls around the boarded up windows are smoke stained.

Across the square is a large mausoleum. Inside are the refrigerated remains of Georgi Dimitrov, the founder of Bulgaria's communist party. After Dimitrov's death in 1949, this Bulgarian version of Lenin's tomb went up in a matter of days. Graffiti appeared all over it after the 1989 upheaval. Though the graffiti has been cleaned off, Dimitrov's tomb is no longer a focal point for proclaiming communism's glories.

As it turned out, the hard-liner Zhivkov was very corrupt. After his removal, a court convicted the 83-year-old ex-dictator of lavishing \$24 million of public funds on himself, his family and favored aides. Though sentenced to seven years imprisonment, Zhivkov did not go to jail. Instead, he lived under house arrest at his granddaughter's villa.

Gold-colored cobble stones pave the square where Zhivkov presided over triumphal May Day parades. Those cobble stones are not a bright or shiny yellow. The gold is a very dull color. That makes it a good symbol of what happened to communism and its promises of a Utopia just around the corner. The Bulgarians and other eastern Europeans were told that their countries would be transformed into Workers' Paradises. They just needed to make enough sacrifices and it would happen. That Utopia never arrived.

Some parallels can be drawn between communism's promises and the Christian promises about heaven. For one thing, the Apostle John described a street in the New Jerusalem as being paved with gold (Rev. 21:21). There is a big difference in those two visions of the future. Unlike the Christian hope, the promise of a communist Utopia has faded even more than that street's gold cobblestones.

Not long after the first Nazarene volunteers arrived, they made friends with a small band of believers in northern Bulgaria. The believers are from farming families in a town called Montana. The volunteers began visiting that little group regularly, often on Sundays. One of the believers owned an old car. After a service on one of those trips, the American volunteers piled into that little automobile. It was more than full, but it wasn't very far to the train station.

As the car started down the hill, its cassette player came alive with an English song. A repeated phrase caught the Americans' attention. It was: *"If you build with a crooked cornerstone, how are you going to make it stand?"*

That song never made the top gospel hits in the U.S. Its words, however, rang hauntingly true that day. They graphically hint at what happened under a government built on communism's defective political, philosophical and religious foundations.

Let's go back to that city square with Dimitrov's tomb and the communist headquarters building. In the heady, revolutionary fall of 1989, someone got into the top story of Party headquarters. They put yellow paint on the mullions of a corner window. To anyone looking up from the square, it looked like a gold cross. Those mullions have now been repainted white. However, when that gold cross overlooked

that square, it shouted the only answer that could satisfy the Bulgarians' deepest yearnings.

Another unfortunate thing for the Bulgarian tapestry was the arrival of some American “health and wealth” evangelists after the fall of communism. These evangelists initially attracted large crowds. They pressured audiences into giving generous offerings. They counted as “converts” people who really didn’t know to what they were responding. Glowing reports went back to the U.S. as the preachers moved on. All they left in Bulgaria was the truncated hope of pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. Such shallow, though high-powered evangelism only winds up fueling a reaction against American “cults.”

In their brief passage through Bulgaria, the health and wealth preachers did contribute something to the tapestry. However, they probably would be horrified to know that all they gave it were faded gold strands strikingly similar to those of communism's false hopes.

## Discarded Threads

Bulgaria has a long Christian history. As the first Nazarene volunteers prepared to go in 1994, Hermann Gschwandtner sent them a photo. It showed the rugged red brick ruins of St. George's rotunda in central Sofia. That structure, according to archaeologists, was a fourth century church building.

So we know the Gospel thread arrived long ago in Bulgaria. Tragically, in this century, it has come close to being unraveled from the Bulgarian tapestry. All through the last half of the twentieth century, demonic forces tried hard to yank it out and discard it.

*"See those statues. That's Cyril and Methodius,"* Matt Robertson told a visitor from SNU one day as they rode by a library on a trolley. Then he added: *"Sadly, no one even knows they were missionaries."*

Cyril and Methodius were two brothers from Greece. Born about 800 years after Christ, they became businessmen. Sensing God's call, however, they soon abandoned their promising business careers to become missionaries. They went first to southern Russia. Then, they moved down to Bulgaria where they found people speaking an unwritten language.

These two brothers modified their own Greek alphabet to fit the sounds they heard the Bulgarians using. Then, they used this new alphabet to start translating Scripture. Their Cyrillic alphabet is still used today in Slavic-speaking countries like Bulgaria and Russia.

Because Cyril and his brother turned Bulgarian into a written language, their statues stand in front of that Sofia library. Bulgaria even has a national holiday honoring Cyril and Methodius. However, no one ever says they were Christian missionaries. The communists wanted to celebrate the brothers' gift of literacy while ignoring the greater gift the two gave Bulgaria: the written Word of God.

The communist leaders seriously erred in discarding the Christian threads of Bulgaria's past. By doing so, they created a moral vacuum. That vacuum was evident long before communism collapsed. Today, the signs of moral rotteness are everywhere. For instance, thievery of auto parts is very common. Drivers parking their cars on the street routinely remove windshield wipers and lock them in the trunk. That keeps thieves from taking them.

One church building surviving communism's onslaught was the Alexander Nevski Memorial Church in central Sofia. That imposing Orthodox church is topped by twelve domes. Some of those domes are covered with copper that has weathered into a green patina; others sparkle with a bright gold leaf covering. The Orthodox worship services in that building will differ greatly from what evangelicals are used to. Orthodox theology differs in some respects from that of evangelical Christianity. For all Christians, however, that building proudly testifies that Christ's Church can outlast any political system.

Sadly, today, this large structure attracts tourists better than it does worshipers. It did not become a focal point for spiritual revival when communism fell.

Why? Well, many Bulgarians say Orthodox leaders cooperated far too closely with the ruthless dictatorship. Some accuse the Orthodox church of betraying the common person during that time. As a result, Bulgaria turned its back on organized Christianity. Though tourists flock to see the gilt domes, the magnificent chandeliers and the frescoes in Alexander Nevski church, few worshipers show up.

Hindering the re-emergence of historic Christian threads in the Bulgaria tapestry has been some other things. First, when communism fell, American cults and heretical movements invaded eastern Europe. It has been hard for eastern Europeans to understand that evangelicals are not bizarre cultists. Suspicions abound concerning any American religious worker in Bulgaria (particularly the young ones).

One day in early spring Todd Brant and Miles Zinn went to visit an elderly lady. They had been to her apartment the week before and had given her some groceries. She needed them. The month before, her heating bill had been more than her whole month's income. When they arrived this time, she startled them by handing back the sack they had given her. The groceries inside were untouched. With a trembling lip, she said her son told her to give it back. He surmised the Nazarenes were one of those "sects" against which the government-controlled television had warned.

Along with battling this negative image problem, Bulgarian evangelicals also contend with some Orthodox leaders' efforts to keep a monopoly on Christianity in Bulgaria. Bulgaria is supposedly democratic. Even so, many Orthodox leaders insist that there be only one Christian organization: the Orthodox Church. If they could, they would close Bulgaria's borders to believers belonging to any other church group. That stance, of course, reminds one of the old communist regime.

Indeed, that idea of closing Bulgaria to other denominations comes not just from the Orthodox Church. It is fostered by Bulgaria's own communist past. Communist officials — some of whom are back in positions of power — think government should closely regulate religious organizations. Such regulation and control would be easier if there is only one organization — such as the Orthodox church — with which to deal. Thus, the Orthodox longing for a religious monopoly on Bulgaria resonates well with those former communists.

Of course, Protestants are not new in Bulgaria. The first Bulgarian Protestant congregations began appearing in 1893. When World War II broke out, five Protestant denominations were already well established in Bulgaria. Then, in 1940, the Nazi-dominated government arrested all the Protestant leaders. By 1944, all those men were dead. Thus, before the communists took power, the Evil One tried to destroy key strands of Bulgaria's Christian community. In spite of such persecution, the tiny Protestant movement survived communism.

In contrast to the Orthodox Church, those original Protestant denominations have welcomed the Nazarene volunteers. For a short time, the Nazarene group held weekly services in a small Methodist chapel in Sofia. That unnerved government

authorities. They did not understand the spiritual unity all born-again Christians feel regardless of denominational labels. The government saw the Nazarenes as a cult without official consent to conduct public meetings that had somehow managed to get permission to use a totally different cult's building. The Nazarenes and Methodists didn't see it quite that way. Nonetheless, the government called the Methodists on the carpet. So, to keep from causing problems for the Methodist church, other born-again believers quit using their building for activities.

One day, John Knight and a visiting SNU professor were hurrying along the street in Sofia. They passed a coffee shop. The weather was blustery and cold. So they decided to go inside where it was warm and get something hot to drink. To their delight, the waitress spoke quite a bit of English. Since they were her only customers, they struck up a conversation with her.

*"I want to leave Bulgaria," she said. "There is no hope here."*

They talked a while. As they got ready to leave, the Americans asked the waitress if she believed in God.

*"Yes," she said, hesitantly and quietly.*

She seemed afraid someone would overhear her. As they talked a bit more, it became sadly clear that this young lady's professed belief in God gave her no reason for hope.

Over the past half century, communism mangled and tore at the Christian thread in the Bulgarian tapestry. As a result, many Bulgarians seem unaware that vital Christianity can be authentically Bulgarian. Tragically, some believed the demonic lie that Christianity would hurt the fabric of Bulgarian society. Today, this makes Bulgaria — according to many observers — among the globe's most difficult countries to evangelize.

## Some West Coast Threads

Not all the North American threads in the Bulgarian tapestry came from the U.S. heartland. Some come from the West Coast. At least one was spun in San Diego. That one involves Dr. Nancy Hardison, business department head at Point Loma Nazarene College. A Presbyterian, Dr. Hardison developed an interest in Eastern Europe and in Nazarene work there. In the early 1990's Norm Shoemaker was Point Loma's spiritual development director. He had a special interest in eastern Europe and thus encouraged Nancy's interest there.

In 1993, Hermann Gschwandtner got Nancy to come as the featured speaker for small business seminars in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Those former communist countries were struggling to make enormous economic changes. For decades their economies had been centrally planned. When communism collapsed, they began moving to a free enterprise system that was consumer oriented and market driven.

Few of the Bulgarians that came to Nancy's seminars were born-again believers. They came because they wanted to know how to run small businesses. However, discussions wound up ranging far beyond profit and loss issues. Participants expressed deep concern about the countries' moral and ethical plight. When the Bulgarians heard Hermann Gschwandtner talk about the Church of the Nazarene, they begged him to come plant that kind of church.

Riding around Bulgaria that summer with Nancy Hardison and Hermann Gschwandtner was a young accountant. Mark Ogden was a graduate of Northwest Nazarene College. In Bulgaria, he and Nancy and Hermann were chauffeured around by a doctor who, they say, would have made a great chariot race driver. Mark talks vividly about his white knuckles as he gripped the car's arm rest. Between terrifying automobile rides, he became gripped by a vision of what the gospel could do to Bulgaria.

Feeling a strong pull to Bulgaria, Mark went home to talk with his wife and two young daughters. He and Hermann stayed in touch. Months later, the church began gearing up to send the first volunteers to Bulgaria. Mark and Cari Ogden agreed to join the team (along with their two small daughters). For most of the two years the Ogdens spent in Bulgaria, Mark was team leader. It was he who led the volunteers through their initial pioneering time.

Mark Ogden is not from the West Coast; his roots are in Missouri. However, had it not been for Nancy Hardison's burden for eastern Europe, it's likely Mark and Cari would not have gone there. So, the Ogdens ministry to Bulgaria is the result of a West Coast thread.

After those summer seminars, Dr. Hardison's burden for Eastern Europe continued to grow. She saw information on 1994-95 Fulbright teaching fellowships in Albania. One opening was for a business instructor. Nancy applied with the

understanding that Point Loma would give her a sabbatical to do it. She saw that Albania also had a Fulbright opening in teaching medicine. Nancy's husband was qualified to fill that position. So, he applied for that one.

It was unusual for a husband and wife to apply for Fulbright fellowships in the same country in the same year, but the Hardisons did. And they were both accepted. Thus, they arrived in Albania about the same time the first volunteers landed in Bulgaria.

The group in Bulgaria went through five weeks of intensive language study. Then, they were ready to try to launch into ministry. The question was: where to begin? At that point, Hermann Gschwandtner asked Nancy Hardison if she could come up to Bulgaria. He wanted her to lead a two-day organizational retreat for these first volunteers. The volunteers were raring to get going with their newly-registered Institute for Total Encouragement. Hermann wanted them to get off to the best start possible.

The Hardisons flew up to Sofia from Albania. Hermann Gschwandtner came in from Germany. For the planning retreat, they and the team of volunteers went to Bankia, a little resort town. Up early in the morning, they took trolleys to Sofia's central train station. There, they caught a run-down commuter train out to Bankia. While the trains in Bulgaria run on time, they are all in need of refurbishing. This one was a prime example of that!

For some reason, the little train didn't merit a place alongside a platform in Sofia's central station. To board it, people went to the end of one of the platforms. Then, they had to walk along the tracks on the concrete ties and gravel to where the train was waiting.

In Bankia, the September air was crisp and cool. Everyone had their jackets on. Change was in the air! The leaves on the trees were turning colors. Some were even beginning to drop. The young people kicked up the leaves as they walked from the train station up to the little pensione where they would stay.

Nancy skillfully led the team in brainstorming how to get started. She dividing them into five groups according to their interests. Then, she asked them to visualize various programs that could be effectively launched by the "foundation." By the end of the retreat, the team came away with a plan to initiate programs in five areas:

- Teaching English as a Second Language
- Helping Small Business Entrepreneurs
- Medical Support
- Agriculture
- Humanitarian help

Nancy asked the team to verbalize their dreams about their year of service. Then, she had them assess what they could realistically accomplish given the available resources and personnel. On the last morning, she prodded the group with increasingly pointed questions:

*What, under the Lord's leadership, would you like to do this year?*

*What would you like to get done this first month?*

*What will you do Monday when you get back?*

When the Bulgarian tapestry is finished, some of it will reflect the planning skills of a Point Loma business professor.

There was another PLNC strand woven into the tapestry. Matt Robertson graduated from Point Loma with an English degree. The first year or two out of college he floundered around somewhat aimlessly. Then, Matt began sensing a desire to take the gospel to eastern Europe. After hearing Hermann Gschwandtner in Centralia, Washington, Matt Robertson volunteered to go where Hermann needed him. So, Matt joined the Bulgaria experiment. Unlike most of the other single volunteers, Matt committed himself for two years. Then, as it turned out, he was the first Nazarene volunteer to set foot in Bulgaria. Arriving in early May, he made the first contacts and found apartments for the team.

In his two years in Bulgaria, Matt Robertson organized and led the English teaching program. In the summer between his first and second year, Matt returned to the U.S. to marry Shela Schwanz. She was an MK, a missionary kid who had grown up in Haiti. After Matt's second year in Bulgaria, the two of them moved to Hungary to pioneer Nazarene work there.

Still another western U.S. strand was Jim Zink. In his 40's, Jim was on the pastoral staff of Nazarene church in Enumclaw, Washington. Earlier, when he was teaching school, Jim had accumulated a small retirement fund. To join the thrust into Bulgaria, Jim took a leave of absence from the church and cashed in his retirement fund.

Seeing how God led Jim's life adds richness to this tapestry. A few years ago Jim felt led to take a leave of absence from his work. He went back to college to get a degree in Third World microeconomics. He did not know it then, but that would be exactly the background needed in Bulgaria with the team's economic development thrusts. Jim fell in love with the helping street vendors — the smallest of the small businesses. His concern for lowly street vendors put a very human face on the team's plan to help Bulgarian entrepreneurs.

Jim Zink also turned out to be the computer whiz for the first year's group. He went through all the hassles to get on-line and establish E-mail connections with the U.S. He spent frustrating hours trying to get modern computers to work with Sofia's antiquated phone system. Because he succeeded, he became the group's "mailman" during the first year.

It would be overstating the case to say the Bulgarian tapestry has a West Coast look. Still, there are some West Coast strands that have contributed greatly to it.

## A Very Weak Thread

A teen-age Philip Rodebush came home from the 1989 Nazarene General Assembly in Indianapolis saying: *“I’ve found the girl I’m going to marry.”*

That girl — three years younger than he — was Amy Porter. Amy was an MK, a missionary kid. She was quite small when her parents, Jerry and Toni Porter, went as missionaries to the Dominican Republic. Then, she spent most of her growing-up years in Costa Rica and Guatemala. At General Assembly, Amy was attracted to Philip as much as he was to her.

Four years went by. Then one cool, crisp spring evening they were walking down Sofia's busy Hristo Botev street. Trolleys going both directions rumbled by, but they preferred to walk. They walked along arm in arm, looking in shop windows on the first floors of the apartment buildings lining the street.

A lot had happened since Philip and Amy had met at the General Assembly. Not long after that General Assembly, tragedy struck. Amy hurt her wrist in a volleyball game in Guatemala. At first she thought it was only a sprain, but the pain didn't go away. Finally, she went to a doctor. Everyone thought it might be carpal tunnel syndrome. Then, the worst possible scenario (in human terms) began unfolding. Amy's wrist problem wasn't a carpal tunnel irritation that routine surgery could remedy. The pain came from a cancerous growth in her wrist and arm.

Surgeons amputated 16-year-old Amy Porter's arm just below her elbow. By removing Amy's hand and part of an arm, the doctors knew they were disabling her. Still, they hoped to leave her cancer-free and give her a healthy and long life.

In the midst of that, Amy adopted something she had read as her life's motto: **“God has every right — and my permission — to rearrange my life at any time, in any way, in order to fulfill His plan for its influence, to His glory.”** As her story and choice of motto spread, people were profoundly moved.

Amy enrolled in SNU. Her bright smile and ready Christian witness affected lots of students. And, of course, there was always Philip hovering around! Then, in May of her first year at SNU, Amy began having chest pains. Medical test results came back with disheartening news. Cancer had reappeared in Amy's lungs. She headed back into treatment.

When Amy headed to Baltimore to undergo experimental medical treatment, Philip wondered what he should do about his commitment to Bulgaria. Should he go ahead as planned. If Amy's condition worsened, would he have to come back early to the U.S.? He thought about withdrawing from the team.

As he prayed, Philip also considered delaying his departure for Bulgaria for six months. His three close friends on the team departed in early July without him. Then, Amy's condition improved and so in early August, Philip left for Bulgaria. He arrived in Sofia just two weeks after language school started for the others.

In early 1995, Philip sent an E-mail message back to SNU: *“Amy is planning on coming here during her Spring break. . . . Please keep praying. I guess you know that her tumors have grown.”*

Philip loves children. His interest in them and in cancer victims led him to the children’s leukemia ward of a Sofia hospital. At first, the hospital was leery of these American evangelicals. Finally, however, they allowed them to come and play with the children and tell them a story. They severely warned them, however, not to promote their religion! The group went at Christmas. To the delight of everyone, Don Moore showed up in a Santa Claus suit — but that’s another whole story! In the spring, with Amy coming for Easter, Philip got permission for the group to visit again. That visit would be one of the days Amy was in Sofia.

Before she went to Bulgaria, Amy’s hair had fallen out from her chemotherapy treatments. To keep from being stared at (and to stay warmer), she wore a long wig. At the hospital, most of the children were also bald from their chemotherapy treatments. So, when she arrived in that ward, Amy took off her wig. When the children and nurses saw Amy’s missing arm and her bald head, their standoffishness disappeared. They knew that she was one of them.

Amy had made up a story which she told the children. It was about an Easter bunny who went looking for an egg. Along the way, Amy said, this bunny ran into problem after problem. But, he never gave up. Amy talked about him going over huge rocks and through a river and up a mountain. As she told the story through an interpreter, Todd Brant acted out the bunny’s part. Other NIVS volunteers played like they were rocks, then a river and finally the mountain. The children giggled as they listened to the story and watched the Americans’ antics. With the help of the American volunteers, a few of the more energetic children followed the bunny as he searched for the egg. When Amy finished her story, Philip stood up.

*“You know,”* he said to the mothers holding their little bald-headed children, *“Christians also celebrate Easter for a very special reason.”*

He talked briefly about Christ’s death and resurrection and what that means for all humanity. After story-time was over, the team played with the children a while. They had brought along scissors, crayons, and colored construction paper. As the children drifted back to their rooms, the volunteers began visiting them there. Peeking in a small window in the door of one room, one could see Philip, Amy, and a Bulgarian believer praying with a mother.

What happened that Easter weekend was a miracle in more than one way. There is only one Bulgarian religious group allowed to work in either an orphanage or a hospital. The Nazarene volunteers have permission to work in both. Mark Ogden reported: *“After talking with the Evangelical Alliance I feel we are very lucky to be allowed in there as they are not allowed to work in hospitals. Only the Orthodox Church is allowed in and they don’t go!”*

Amy's visit made an ongoing ministry in that children's ward possible. Would it be happening without her? Probably not. In the spring of 1995, Amy was a very fragile thread. Still, she was used to complete a crucial part of the tapestry's design.

Amy had another momentous event during her Sofia weekend. Philip asked her to marry him. Medically, the prognosis was not good. But, even facing an uncertain future, Amy said "yes" to Philip's proposal. They set December 22 as their wedding date. That would be six months after Philip returned to the U.S.

Three weeks before her wedding date, Amy Porter died. Seven months had gone by since her visit to the Sofia hospital ward. The family asked that relatives and friends contribute to a memorial fund in her honor. That fund aids Nazarene outreach in that children's cancer ward. The contribution of Amy's fragile thread lives on!

## Some Mexican Thread

In 1991 a young Mexican, Rudy Reyes, crossed the U.S./Mexican border headed for Oklahoma. He was going to Southern Nazarene University to study on a soccer scholarship. As the second group of volunteers for Bulgaria began forming, Rudy was in his senior year.

Rudy was a very good soccer player. He was also a very good chemistry student. However, in the fall of 1995 neither chemistry nor soccer dominated his thinking. Instead, he began asking: *"Can I go to Bulgaria?"*

A thousand questions bubbled up: Rudy was not a Nazarene. He was a very active Baptist. So, how effective would a non-Nazarene be in planting Nazarene churches?

Because he wasn't from a Nazarene church on SNU's region, the school's ability to encourage friends to help him seemed limited. Where would Rudy possibly get the funds? Mexico, his home country, was struggling economically. U.S. newspapers told of the peso's downward slide in value against the dollar. That slashed the value of financial support coming from Rudy's family and home church in Tampico, Mexico.

One day, concern about Rudy's financial support was mentioned to the other '95 graduates going to Bulgaria. *"Don't worry about Rudy,"* said team member Ted Snoddy. *"We'll take care of him. We won't let him starve."*

Even if Rudy came up with enough support, what about his legal status? Would the Bulgarian government issue a visa to a young Mexican? Would they refuse, fearing Rudy wanted to escape Mexico's economic problems? Would they think he planned to stay on illegally after his visa expired?

Even in the face of these negatives, this Mexican thread was offered to the Lord. From the Bulgarian project's inception, Dr. Gresham had challenged students to have willing hearts. He asked for students to trust God and put themselves at His disposal. Rudy met those requirements perfectly.

As the group prepared to go, it began to dawn on people that Rudy might become one of the project's most effective volunteers. That's exactly what it happened. Rudy knew how to learn a new language. He knew how to survive and even flourish in a culture not his own. So, very quickly after arriving in Bulgaria, he moved into effective ministry. In addition, his soccer skills opened all kinds of friendship doors. With soccer being king of sports in Bulgaria, people looked up to someone who played soccer as well as Rudy.

There was another thread related to Mexico. That came to light one day during the first year. One day, Rob Burgess was sitting in an outdoor ice-cream parlor in Sofia with a visiting SNU professor. Suddenly Rob looked up and said: *"If it hadn't been for that trip to Mexico, I would not be here today."*

Rob's story goes back to his home state of New York. In 1990, three or four SNU students spent the summer in New York working for a Christian camping organization. There they met Rob Burgess. After only a few classes, Rob had dropped out of college and gone to work. They mentioned a trip they were making to Mexico over the New Year's holiday. Rob got excited about going as well. So, after Christmas of that same year, he joined 200 other people on that Work and Witness trip.

There, in Mexico, Rob got turned on to missions and to getting his college degree. When he went back to New York, he quit his job at the grocery store. He packed up and returned to Oklahoma to major in church music at SNU. In his three and a half years at SNU, Rob's interest in missions was fanned into a flame. As a result, Rob was part of that initial pioneer team to Sofia.

Because of Rudy and Rob, there is a "south of the border" element in the Bulgarian tapestry. The Lord put Mexico into that design!

## Threads of Greenbacks and Tears

*"Where will we get the money?"* students ask as they consider joining this pioneer adventure. They are overwhelmed at the thought of buying transatlantic airline tickets, and then finding the money for a year's worth of rent, food, and insurance coverage. The best thing we can tell them is this: If volunteering a year to world missions is God's will, He will make a way for getting the funding.

The development of support systems for each volunteer is part of the tapestry story. We've discovered that this tapestry has some very long threads in it. Those are the threads of prayer support and financial assistance reaching across thousands of miles.

None of the young people graduating from college had enough money in the bank to get to Bulgaria and live there for a year. After all, they'd just spent four years in a Christian college. A few faced large student loans which need repaying. Ways had to be found to appropriately solicit support from family and friends.

A key question was: Would people help these volunteers without cutting back on their support for General Budget? Would they give beyond what they were already doing for the denominational missions program? If not, all we would be doing would be shifting the same dollars from one area to another. In the long run, it would be damaging if this new volunteer program detracted from General Budget. In talking about doors we could not enter for lack of money, we didn't want to cast aspersions on the General Budget system. That very effective system has made the Church of the Nazarene a top missionary-sending denomination.

When Hermann Gschwandtner talked with new team members, he told them to primarily seek prayer support, not finances. *"It's primarily a spiritual battle,"* he has said repeatedly.

Prayer support did come from back home. One critical issue was that of permission by the Bulgarian government for team members to be there. The first team members arrived with only tourist visas, hoping to get long-term visas after they arrived. That hope was in vain. Christmas of that first year was a critical time. Government officials were cracking down on foreigners coming to in Bulgaria for religious reasons. A couple of religious organizations actually had to withdraw all personnel. Would our group be able to stay? People prayed. Miracles happened.

*"Do they remember us?"* comes the plea every so often from Bulgaria. Students and faculty at SNU always assure them that people do. Over the months, boxes from SNU staff and from home churches gave tangible evidence of that support. SNU has a bulletin board devoted to photos and news from Bulgaria.

*"We flourish on the prayers of those back home"* Philip Rodebush said to someone visiting Bulgaria. What Philip said struck so deeply that it was scribbled it down on a napkin to bring back to the U.S.

What about the money? Could they come up with it? Each volunteer has assembled a prayer and financial support team of friends, family and local churches. The best way to explain how people came up with their funding is to say that they prayed it in. In one instance, a college sophomore gave money from an accident settlement she received. The company had given her a settlement for “pain and suffering.” She invested part of that in the Bulgaria project!

Philip’s home district, led by NWMS President Lou Noel, earlier had raised the money to put him in Russia for a summer. Then they turned around and helped Philip with funds for his year in Bulgaria. They did this without reducing their General Budget support.

An SNU employee is giving \$15 per month to one team member. A faculty member is giving \$50 per month to another one. A couple of Baptist churches jumped in with support for Rudy Reyes, one of the 1995-96 group.

There are the churches that prayed. Rev. Ron McCormick of Little Rock First church called SNU one day to ask: *“How can we help with Bulgaria?”*

None of the volunteers that year was from his church. However, seeking to personalize missions for his congregation, Ron wanted to financially support at least one team member. So that year, Little Rock First Church picked up half of Rob Burgess' support and part of the Ogden family's support. They have also helped the Don Moores financially. By adopting these volunteers, Ron hoped to increase missions visibility in the church (and thereby help out the very-important General Budget).

These long threads of greenbacks and intercessory prayer have been crucial to the tapestry design.

## The Compassionate Ministry Thread

How have the volunteers begun Nazarene work in Bulgaria? Images of Jim Jones and David Koresh exploiting their followers made big news in Bulgaria. Scandals involving American televangelists did not go unnoticed. Those are the things Bulgarians think of when someone mentions Christians who are not Eastern Orthodox. It has not been easy overcoming such erroneous stereotypes.

In Bulgaria we have to show that born-again Christians are people who care deeply. We are fitted to do that. Nazarenes aren't into "excursion evangelism." We don't grandly go somewhere, make a big splash, report "thousands" of converts to supporters back home and move on. That's not our style. Indeed, our long term goals for Bulgaria center on planting loving, caring communities of Bulgarian believers. That will not happen overnight; it will take time.

A key to entering Bulgaria's open door was finding the way to offer that "cup of cold water" that Jesus mentioned. The team even came to see that compassionate ministry needed to be modeled for Bulgarian believers. They saw that they could be mentors in setting a tone for the future church in Bulgaria. So, early on, the team adopted a rule: *If we cannot get young Bulgarians to join us in a particular compassionate ministry avenue, we will abandon that avenue and look for another one.*

When the doors opened for Nazarenes in Bulgaria, Hermann Gschwandtner knew that open evangelism there had already become difficult. There were new freedoms. Still, evangelicals faced formidable problems in holding public worship services. As we've mentioned earlier, Hermann formulated a strategy built around a compassionate ministries foundation. As the denomination went into a country, it would register that foundation before attempting to register as a church. He used the term "Institute for Total Encouragement" as a title for those foundations.

That compassionate ministry thread has lots of different strands in it. Don Moore works with farmers wanting loans from international lending organizations. When communism took over, family farms were seized. The land was put into huge collective enterprises. Many of those families are now getting land back from the government. But they have no equipment with which to farm it. Nor do they know how to get loans to buy equipment. Don has helped several of these farmers successfully apply for loans.

The team ran on to an orphanage that desperately needed help. Their building needed considerable renovation and upgrading to its kitchen. If that work was not done, the government Health Department planned to close the orphanage. With the help of some Nazarene businessmen in the U.S., that kitchen was remodeled and the orphanage stayed open. Now the team has a regular ministry to those orphans.

Many of those orphan children were gypsies. Often despised by other Bulgarians, gypsy children are considered throwaways. Some have never sensed that anyone cared about them (much less, loved them). Such young girls will likely turn to prostitution

with the boys becoming professional thieves. So they are desperately in need of loving, caring guidance. The Nazarene volunteers are determined to make a difference in those orphans' lives.

Nazarene Compassionate Ministries has shipped in a container or more of donated medical supplies. Bulgaria's hospitals are badly strapped financially, so this kind of help is badly needed. As those supplies have come through customs, the volunteers have discovered that some of them have been pilfered before they got them. The good news is that most of the medical supplies have been delivered to hospitals and put to use for needy people.

One ministry the team has had has been visiting elderly Bulgarians. To each home they took a sack of food. Each winter, several elderly people die in Sofia from malnutrition. When bad winter weather sets in, they sometimes do not get out and buy food. That first year, our group adopted about thirty of those couples or elderly singles.

One of those was a blind couple. The ministry to that couple began the day Don Moore saw a confused man in the middle of a busy street. Cars were honking at the confused man. Buses and trolleys were rumbling by uncomfortably close. Don ran out to the blind man and discovered that he was also quite deaf. Don got "Grandpa" Ivan safely back on the sidewalk. Then the Nazarene volunteers began visiting he and his wife regularly.

Another elderly lady with whom they made friends had a wood floor in her kitchen/dining area that had buckled upwards. Amazingly, those floor boards were a foot higher in the middle than they were around the walls. Apparently moisture had swelled the flooring so much it no longer fit in the kitchen. The walls were unyielding masonry. So, the only place the swollen floor could go was up in the middle. It was an remarkable sight!

The elderly lady had no money to pay someone to fix her floor. So she had learned to live with the huge bulge. Then, to her surprise, one day several Nazarene volunteers showed up and went to work. They carefully dismantled the floor board by board. Then they pieced it back together flat on the concrete sub-floor (and, yes, there were a few boards left over!).

About one evening a week, the team plays basketball with Bulgarian young people. They had rent an old gym in which most of the lights did not work. That doesn't seem to matter. They race up and down the dimly-lit gym, laughing and shouting till they drop from exhaustion. On other evenings Bulgarian young people will come by the team's apartments. There, conversations often turn to the Bible and spiritual matters.

Will the gospel take root in Bulgaria? Yes. There will be all kinds of obstacles of mistrust. But the team has hit on a wonderful design for the Bulgarian tapestry.

The team came home from the Bankia planning retreat knowing they needed space for English and CPR classes. They began looking for something to rent. Everything they found in their price range needed extensive renovation. Other places were beautiful, but far too expensive. They were on the verge of giving up. Then, they came across a small four-room apartment that could be used as classroom and office space.

That second-floor apartment was totally unfurnished. There was no furniture fund. So, at a team meeting they decided that each volunteer would buy one chair! Thus, they were in business. Classes started right away.

Scripture says: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them" (Matthew 14:14). As the team has moved around Bulgaria, they've cheerfully offered a "cup of cold water." The part of the tapestry into which the Nazarenes are being woven clearly has a compassion motif!

## Some Parental Threads

*“Dr. Culbertson is going to Bulgaria in September. He’ll be glad to take anything you want to send.”* That’s what Loren Gresham said in the late summer of 1994 to relatives and friends of the first Bulgarian volunteers.

Through four years of college, parents sent favorite snack foods, clothing, and other things to their sons and daughters. When the son or daughter moved across the Atlantic, those parents wanted to do the same thing. However, they soon discovered how expensive mailing a box overseas can be. That’s especially true if it goes by air!

When Dr. Gresham said that SNU had someone who could take packages to Bulgaria, parents and friends came to campus to drop off boxes and even a full suitcase or two. A call went out for “big” suitcases in which to try to pack all that stuff. Two really enormous ones showed up. Somehow everything fit inside! They were packed and repacked to get them at the weight limit of 70 pounds per bag.

Those American volunteers in Bulgaria were right in the middle of some culture shock when those suitcases arrived. So there was a real morale boost as the contents of those packed suitcases were distributed. It was like “Christmas in September.”

A first concern of prospective volunteers was about how their parents would react. Many have said: *“What will my parents think? They’re still reeling from my college costs. They think I should find a job right away. How can I convince them I should give my first year out of college to volunteer missionary work?”*

In the spring before the first group left for Bulgaria, Philip Rodebush’s dad partially answered those questions. It happened over lunch at El Pollo Chulo. That’s a Mexican food restaurant about a mile from the SNU campus. Eating there with an SNU professor one day, Harold Rodebush fell silent and began gazing out the window.

He got a faraway look in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he looked back at the professor. Then, he said, *“I don’t know how we’ll do it. But we’ll do all we can to help Philip.”*

Evangelicals have watched young Mormons put career ambitions on hold for a year or two of volunteer evangelism. Usually, their immediate family supports them during that year of volunteer service. Not long after a baby is born, Mormon families begin saving funds for his or her “mission” years.

The parents of the Bulgarian volunteers are not like Mormon parents. At the birth of their sons and daughters they had not begun putting aside money for that volunteer missionary work. Still, Rev. Rodebush’s resoluteness to help Philip respond to God’s call is symbolic of the willingness of most parents. Most have gladly made necessary sacrifices to put a son or daughter in the Bulgarian tapestry.

As young people have committed themselves to go, parents voiced worries about safety in eastern Europe. During the Cold War, those parents spent years in fear of the communist menace. Still, even with all the fearful unknowns, these parents have

strongly supported the pioneer venture that whisked their children away for a year. Parents have found themselves asking the question: *Do I really mean it when I sing "I Surrender All" in church?*

Fortunately, they've been able to respond: *"Yes, I really did mean all — including my children."*

Most of these parents have done far more than contribute their offspring for the team. They have helped mobilize prayer support. To local congregations they've passed along news gleaned from letters and telephone calls. They've duplicated and mailed monthly support letters from team members. Their own letters to the field are sources of encouraging support.

In many important ways the parents of team members are essential threads in the Bulgarian tapestry.

## The Emerging Pattern

Bulgarians are very reserved toward strangers. They do not smile at someone that they do not know. For the NIVS volunteers, it was unsettling to be in a culture where people don't greet passing strangers. Bulgarians simply stare blankly when they pass people on the street.

The Americans wondered why. Then, someone reminded them Bulgaria had spent half a century under a secret police system. In that communist dictatorship lots of people were police informers. You had to be suspicious of almost everyone. So, people trusted only a tiny circle of friends. Bulgarians seem less suspicious of foreigners than they are of their fellow countrymen!

Early on, the first volunteers saw how the Gospel might transform one element of Bulgarian culture. It happened in church. The Nazarenes had not yet begun any type of services. So, on Sundays they worshiped with other evangelical groups in Sofia. That morning several of them went to a church service in rented space in the National Palace of Culture (the old communist show piece).

The Nazarenes arrived fifteen minutes early for the service. Even so, every seat was already filled. Some of them found supporting pillars to lean against. Not long after the singing began, an elderly lady arrived and stood near them. Out of nowhere, an usher appeared with a chair for her.

As they were singing, that elderly lady looked up. She caught the eyes of one of the Nazarenes. Then she smiled. It was the first time that a Bulgarian stranger had smiled at that team member. Besides making him feel good, that smile showed the family-like atmosphere that vibrant churches could create in Bulgaria where formerly no one trusted anyone. In that smile, one could see clearly some of the design of the divine tapestry.

In the middle of Genesis 3, the dust began to settle across the universe after Adam and Eve's cataclysmic choice. In the awfulness of that moment, God stepped forward to promise a Redeemer for His rebellious creatures. The account of how God keeps that promise is the story of the Bible. God's call to Abraham included the promise that through Abraham all peoples of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12). That promise included Bulgaria! So, it's no surprise to see God using Abraham's spiritual descendants in Bulgaria.

God's hand at work in the weaving process has been very evident. *"It's not a coincidence,"* Cynthia Moore insists repeatedly as she talks about events in Bulgaria.

The opening of Nazarene work in Bulgaria has begun. There are lots of stories in the first months of this adventure. We've looked at only a few of them. It is, however, by tracing these individual threads that we've sensed the larger pattern emerging on the loom.

How do you open a country? You offer your thread to the Lord and let Him weave it into His tapestry! Sofia's coat of arms portrays Tyche, the goddess of chance. That may be the wrong symbol for that city. What is happening in Sofia is not due to chance. There is a divine design unfolding.

What do you do when you don't have permission to rent a hall and openly announce church services? You do what the Early Church did: you gather new converts into groups that meet in homes. Thus, the compassionate ministry work first establishes to people hardened by decades of communist propaganda. Then, this cell church strategy allows us to conserve the fruits of evangelism. At the same time, we continue to work toward full official recognition for the church.

Will this pioneer experiment in Bulgaria effect global Nazarene missions strategy? It may. What each Nazarene college is learning in such experiments is being shared with other schools. Maybe a real movement similar to the "Mormon model" will happen. Hopefully, large numbers of young Nazarenes will someday be volunteering a year or more to world evangelism.

As their first Christmas in Bulgaria approached, the Moores bought a little evergreen. It was a live tree complete with its root ball set in a bucket. While it wasn't very big, it did serve to decorate their apartment. The Moores lived in an apartment building that comes right out to the street. They had no lawn on which to plant that tree after Christmas. They gave it to a family of believers in Montana, that farming community they visited about once a month. Weeks went by with the family remembering to occasionally pour water in the little tree's bucket. Still, they never got around to planting it. Parts of the tree slowly turned brown. However, with the occasional watering, the tree survived.

The Moores visited Montana on Easter Sunday of 1995. They arrived in time to celebrate Easter morning service. They joined a dozen believers crowding into a family's kitchen/dining room. Afterwards they watched as food finished cooking over a wood stove. Then, they ate with the family in whose home the church met. After the meal, the Moores happened to spy the little tree. It was in a corner, still in its original bucket. They asked the family where they wanted it planted.

Everyone trooped outside. The family marked a spot about 10 feet away from their hand-dug well. Someone got a shovel. Don went to work, digging a hole. He and Cynthia lovingly put that little tree in the hole and patted dirt around it. From the well, a hand-cranked windlass brought up a bucket of water. They poured the water around the little tree. Given what the Moores were doing in Bulgaria, planting that tree was like a live parable. It was as if they were showing the love and care it would take to plant a church.

How long will it take to really start the Church of the Nazarene in Bulgaria? Well, as we've noted, Bulgaria is the world's primary producer of attar or rose oil, a base for expensive perfumes. It takes 200 pounds of rose petals to produce 1 ounce of rose oil. Since the sun evaporates oil from the petals, the blossoms must be picked at dawn. Is

the effort it takes to produce rose oil indicative of what it will take to successfully plant churches in Bulgaria? It may be.

*“Everything in my country takes a long time,”* a government official said several years ago to a TIME magazine reporter. *“After all, it took us half a millennium to get rid of the Turks.”*

However, the volunteers who had given a year or more to Bulgaria have seen a promise in Revelation 7:9. There, John says, **“I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb”** (Rev. 7:9, NIV). Because they allowed themselves to be woven into a Bulgarian tapestry, the volunteers who've gone to Sofia are certain that there will be some twentieth-century Bulgarians in that crowd!