

Is Bulgaria a beautiful country?

Yes! Absolutely! Bulgaria is blessed with a great deal of natural beauty and all within a relatively small area. We have mountains, lakes, sea, plains filled with lavender, sunflowers, roses and so on. One of the things we love most is the very distinct seasons, which is so different to Australia.

What is Discipling for Development (D4D)?

Discipling for Development is:

*A ministry of helping people in **community** to become **all that God intends for them to be**. It is a **relational process**, empowered by God, in which experienced **disciplers** assist the **people of a community** to grow in their ability to **solve their own problems**, to take control of their lives, and to **reproduce this process** in others. Through this process the thinking and behavior of the people/community become **transformed** in ways that result in the growth of the **whole person** (physical, psychological, spiritual) and improvement of the various aspects of their community (health, agriculture, water, relationships, etc.) for the **glory of God**.*

*Keeping things simple, it is apprenticing people and communities [**Discipling**] to become all that God intends for them to be [**for Development**].*

What does Andrew do?

“Mobile Alongsider” is a good description of Andrew. He is the team leader for D4D in Bulgaria, which involves setting direction, and helping Radi and Ani work out how best to walk with communities in whole-life discipleship. He is training and encouraging the team in ministry partnership development, and co-ordinating prayer for all aspects of the ministry. In order to be effective in leading a whole-life discipleship ministry, he needs to learn how to do it, so there is a training commitment. He is also part of the leadership team of our church, International Baptist Church of Sofia. This has been a busy season, as the pastor transition process has required a more hands on approach. Particularly with the pastor search, leading services, developing policies to help with the transition, looking after finances, building relationships, and encouraging more engagement from church members. He is also doing an MA in Contemporary Missiology (European Mission), which has been a significant time commitment, but has been a huge blessing in growing his understanding of holistic mission, international church ministry, and the role of prayer in mission.

What does Kate do?

Kate is on the Discipling For Development team here (which Andrew leads) but mostly in an advisory capacity – she asks the questions which need to be asked but which no one else thinks of! She spends the majority of her ministry time with ECM International working with the Human Resources Director. Her involvement there is quite broad, being involved in training, conferences, staff issues etc but her primary responsibility is in the development of leaders within ECM. She is currently involved in 5 different book clubs (leading 4 of them), to help our ECM leaders grapple with how to both embrace and thrive in their roles as a leaders. We are expecting 2-3 more book clubs to start up in Autumn 2021.

How do you use your book club to train leaders in ECM?

At the moment we are studying the book Lead, Develop, Care by Terry Cook. Those involved read the relevant chapter/s in preparation and then we gather to discuss what they have learnt. I prepare questions in advance to prompt our discussion. It is also a forum for peer support, so I am starting to encourage them to bring an issue they are struggling with to present to the group. The group then asks questions to clarify and then makes suggestions for possible ways forward.

How are the Roma faring with the pandemic?

Not well! As we have said before, there is much prejudice against the Roma in Bulgaria and this has only been made worse with the pandemic. In addition, because many of the Roma do not have health care, they are often refused treatment if they go to the hospital at all. The hospitals are overloaded and so they have to prioritise treatment.

How are your support levels?

We would appreciate more prayer and financial support. Bulgaria is a spiritually dark country and we know that *"...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."*(Ephesians 6:12). We therefore always crave your prayers. Our financial support is also low. When we returned last time we knew we had a buffer in our ECM account from your very generous giving over the previous 3 years. However, we have now depleted that and so our financial support is currently about \$15000/year short. We are looking for another church to partner with us in what God is doing in Bulgaria. If you have any suggestions, please reply to this email or to partner with us/increase your support go to www.ecmaustralia.org/blackwells

The coronavirus had made D4D ministry difficult. Do you still believe it can work?

Yes...in God's strength and timing. One of the things that it is easy to forget is that in places like Africa and Asia, missionaries have been working for over two hundred years, ploughing the ground so to speak. In Bulgaria, it is only since the fall of communism (about 30years) that evangelical churches have been able to operate freely and share the Gospel. The spiritual battle is very real as Satan has claimed this country for so long and we now seek to oust him. This is why your prayers are so vitally important for the Spirit to go ahead of us to prepare people's hearts to be responsive. This is God's work which he allows all of us to be part of in different ways and it must happen in His timing. We have also seen a breakthrough in one community which is mentioned in the encouragement question below.

Why are the dates of Western and Orthodox Easter different?

The formula for Easter? "The first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox" is identical for both Western and Orthodox Easters, but the churches base the dates on different calendars: Western churches use the Gregorian calendar, the standard calendar for much of the world, and Orthodox churches use the older, Julian calendar. The Orthodox have kept the Julian to comply with a First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea AD325) canon, which demands Christians to celebrate Resurrection day after the Jewish Passover. On the contrary, Western Christians use the Gregorian calendar, which makes them celebrate

Resurrection day before, after or even on the day of Passover. This year, we will celebrate Easter on 2nd May and this is true of both Orthodox and Protestant churches in Bulgaria.

What has encouraged you recently (May 2021)?

Our biggest encouragement was a recent visit by our co-workers, Radi & Ani, to a community in north-eastern Bulgaria. Radi wrote “ I told the story for The Samaritan women and Jesus. The church answered, they participated. In the end 4-5 new people repented and accepted Jesus. People liked what they experienced”. Following this, one of the people who heard the story and the challenge to share the story with someone she knew, shared it with a work colleague who also came to faith in Jesus. Thirdly, another member of the team who is being mentored, told the story of the Prodigal Son and 4 others came to faith! Please keep praying for this community as we work through how to continue the discipling relationship with them. In addition, our church voted to issue an invitation to a new pastor and he has accepted, hoping to arrive in Bulgaria in early September and we were granted our permanent residency in Bulgaria which now has a 10 year validity.