

Gaziantep Reflections

Hannah:

Jake and I spent 3 and a half weeks with Ata and Maria in Gaziantep. Sandy explained to us that Ata and Maria were looking to run an English Speaking Club and they needed some English speakers to help run it.

So alongside Ata and Maria, we ran an English Speaking club on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at a local cafe each week. The aim of the English club was: to be a form of outreach from the church as a free club to get to know people in the community. It was a blessing for us to be part of it because the people who came were keen to learn, and we were able to see everyone improve in their English. It was also a lovely way for us (as foreigners) to get to know the locals a bit better and develop friendships with them. Most of the time there were 4-8 people attending - a mixture of people from the Church, friends that they had brought along and people who were in the cafe and were curious to see more of what we were doing. Since the club, several people have been introduced to Ata and Maria's church.

We were really looked after by Ata and Maria; they welcomed us into their home. It was lovely because almost every day there were other guests and members of their community who were invited in for food, games and fellowship too. One evening we spontaneously had a neighbour's family come over to play Uno and eat snacks. We also regularly had the members of the church come over after the service for a meal and to play board games! On one occasion we played Risk which was very fun, though Maria didn't appreciate losing to Jake!

Eastern Türkiye has a reputation for being the rough, dangerous part of Türkiye, and we weren't sure what to expect in terms of our personal safety in the city. There are laws against foreigners talking to Turks about Jesus and the Gospel, and churches are often attacked. Not to mention that Gaziantep is situated less than an hour's drive from the Syrian border, so as young Christians coming to support a church, and at a time of so much unrest in Syria, this seemed like a frightening place to visit...

We were pleasantly surprised to find that Gaziantep is in fact a lovely city! Near the centre, where we were staying, we felt safe throughout our stay. It was completely fine to walk around on our own, and walk around at night time. However, like most cities, there were definitely nicer, safer parts that we could enjoy as well as the less nice, less safe parts. But we were able to relax and enjoy the city for all it had to offer! There were lots of parks in the city: from beautiful green spaces with trees or flowers planted, to really fun and extravagant children's play parks. We also spent many hours in the old town, in the bazaars and the historical buildings and museums. It was very cool to see all of the city, and certainly in the bazaar there were lots of craftsmen/women who were making and selling all sorts of things!

The church was lovely, small - usually 6-7 people each week, and on the 5th floor of the building. The people who attended church were from a mix of backgrounds: some had Christian backgrounds - there are many Armenian people living in Türkiye who have

Christian heritage; some were from Muslim families who had come to know Jesus later in life.

There are few laws actually forbidding the practices of Christians in Türkiye, however the attitude towards Christians has a real effect on the lives of believers, not to mention societal opposition. Ata and Maria recently bought the premises for their church, and I began to realise that this was such a huge blessing for them. The common thing that happens to many churches in Türkiye is once the owner of the building (usually not of the Christian Faith) finds that their rented apartment is being used as a space for church, they increase the rent until it becomes unaffordable to sustainably pay the rent. Many of the people we spent time with had had very difficult experiences with family and friends who were Muslim.

A few highlights of our trip were spending our first Thanksgiving with some friends from the church who were from America, and a lovely afternoon we spent with the church decorating the church Christmas tree. Another highlight was after church on our final day, we all went to the restaurant that was managed by someone in the church, and we sat for hours just chatting and drinking hot chocolates!

Jakes:

Türkiye. What a place! It was amazing to have the opportunity to visit Türkiye and to stay with Ata and Maria for the time we were there. Both Hannah and I felt very touched by our hosts as they were so welcoming and accommodating to us. The first time we walked into their house Maria had spent the day preparing a meal for us with lots of different traditional Turkish foods and it was lovely. That first meal was only an introduction to their generosity and servant heartedness, and through the weeks, we saw them continuously drop everything so they could reach out to, and care for their whole community. Hannah has already mentioned some of the examples of how they opened up their home for people, so I won't mention it much more, but it truly was amazing to see the extent to which they laid down their lives to lift others up.

To give one story (of many)... One day Hannah and I went with Ata and Maria to meet someone in Nizip - the next town along from Gaziantep - who had reached out to them enquiring about getting a Bible. Unfortunately, just as we arrived in Nizip, Ata received a text from the man saying he was no longer able to meet. For both Ata and Maria this was quite discouraging, especially as this was often the case with these sorts of enquiries. This however didn't stop them from making the most of their day, and they made a new plan to take us to the original place where they first made Katmer - a Gaziantep savoury pistachio pastry which we sat and ate with them in the cafe, we even could watch them make it in the next building along! We then went for a wander around the town and we went into a shop to get some Turkish delight. We started having a conversation with the shop assistant (whose name was Gorkhan) about the Turkish delight in Narnia, which led to Ata and Maria telling Gorkhan that we were Christians and inviting him to their Church. Ata also found that he was from the same part of Türkiye, so they were able to bond over that, and it led to Gorkhan inviting them to come and stay with his family over part of the Christmas period - which they did! So although their plan didn't go as they expected, God still used their gifts to reach other people and now Gorkhan has a relationship with them and he has a connection to a local church. How cool is that!

So although there were many more stories I'd love to tell, this one I feel captures the hearts of Ata and Maria in their ministry, and it was admirable to see how much effort they put into the relationships they built with people. They were so keen to get to know and love as many people as they could, because that is what Jesus commands us to do in the Bible. He says "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind". This is the greatest commandment, and the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39) Seeing Ata and Maria constantly building and maintaining the relationships they had with people was a beautiful reflection of this verse being put into action, and it was an absolute privilege to have the opportunity to live alongside them and see all the good they were doing in Türkiye.



At a cafe with members of the church



At the cafe before the English Speaking club with Ata and Maria