

Avanti Italia!

Onward Italy!

Let's Stay Connected!

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I find a lot of satisfaction in keeping busy. So when I got sick at the end of the month and had to stay in bed for a few days, my spirits started to fall. The simplest things can discourage our hearts, yet the Lord is faithful to open our eyes to see that which brings us encouragement. Writing this monthly newsletter has become a necessary practice to remind me of the victories happening here, especially in the middle of struggle. Reflecting on the events here stirs a deep thankfulness within me. He is not absent from us. When we do our part to obey the Lord by doing things that bring glory to Him, He is undoubtedly present.

Student Growth

There are never-ending opportunities for our team to spend time with people. As usual, the Bible School has been filled with many groups of people this month. We continue to have people stop by or call the school asking about English classes. This month alone, I gained two new readers who were referred by friends that already meet with me. Though we have more students and people interested than we have teachers with whom they can meet with, we are blessed to have this "problem". We are hopeful that this year will include the addition of new teachers coming from the states so that the Bible School can expand in ministry.



Eric talking to a group of students
about Avanti Italia

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School Events

Our time with people has taken many forms this month. Earlier this month we had the opportunity to have lunch with the study abroad students from Harding University (AK) and Faulkner University (TN). Both groups frequently worship with us at the Florentine church on Sundays. Their presence almost quadruples our church membership.

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Karaoke Night at the school



Our dear friend, Felice, enjoying himself

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It is always encouraging to have our church fellowship packed with believers. Their presence is uplifting and their added voices in worship are a reminder of the power of Christ's bond to unite across cultures. Their time in Italy is short—about three months. We were thankful to find an opportunity to spend some quality time with them by sharing a small part of our lives.

We are always looking for ways to connect people and give them a network to become a part of. Sometimes this includes connecting local Christians with our students, American students with local Christians, or even the believers from different cities. Much of the work that we do with students is one-on-one or in small group settings. Organizing events at the school creates a social bridge between our work and the church in Florence. This month we organized a Karaoke Night and a Mexican Dinner. Both were on two separate weekends, and each evening was a packed house of many nationalities and social groups. At the end of the month, our team worked with the church in Prato, a city 30 minutes from Florence, by helping and attending a lectureship organized by the Christians in Prato. Several of our team members and other believers from around Tuscany traveled together to attend this lectureship.

New Things

There are always new things taking place at the Bible School and within our team. Sometimes they include problem-solving to make something better, combating a new challenge, or taking on a new opportunity. I mentioned in a previous newsletter that many of the church members at the Florence church had expressed an interest in their children learning English.

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As a result, we have given the Children's Bible Class more of an English focus. I am thankful to be working with Julie Giordano, a former A.I. worker who has made Florence her home, and gaining experience in how to better work with children in a language learning capacity. Another change we are making affects how our team can best meet the needs of the Bible School, our students, and the churches in Italy. We have decided to restructure how we plan future events for each month. For each month, there will be a weekend to:

- Worship and/or serve at a different congregation aside from the church in Florence. In February, that would have included our involvement with the church in Prato. We are hopeful that in the future the Bible School will have more teachers to send out as workers to the neighboring congregations. Until then, we still want to have some level of outreach with these churches.
- Plan and host an event at the Bible School to give our students a place to meet one another. For February, this included the Karaoke Night and Mexican Dinner. In the future, we will keep our large group events to one weekend instead of two.
- Update and maintain the Bible School Facilities. Our building is an old, large space. As a result, it needs continual maintenance. In February, our physical weekend included everything outdoors- pulling up the garden, trimming down and sprucing up plants, etc.
- Be free! We are always involved in some activity, so having a free weekend is an appealing break.

This plan is similar to how we organized our months before, only with a few changes. It is our hope that this plan will benefit our ministry more.



Our gigantic and beautiful new van!

Encouragements

In between all of these bigger events are the small “in-betweeners”. These little things—birthday celebrations, spending an evening with a small group of friends, having visitors, or getting new things for the school—encourage me and help pull me through the week.

- This month we celebrated the birthdays of Jodi and Meredith. These are some joyful girls who make living here fun and easy. They are worth celebrating for the women they are.
- In the spirit of Valentine's Day two friends from church and I went to one of the happiest places on earth—IKEA. If you haven't been, find one and visit. It's wonderful.
- Mark Woodward, a dear friend to me and my family, visited Florence for business, and I was able to catch an hour visiting with him. He is traveling around to different churches around the world promoting Let's Start Talking, a mission campaign, and he made a stop at our school. Familiar faces are the best.
- We got a van! This is very big news, because we have been without a reliable vehicle since September. Due to legal and residential issues, we were unable to make a purchase until now. We are very thankful for the reliability and ease it brings in commuting to various places.

We have a Father who is active and present. We also have an enemy actively fighting against us, and Ephesians reminds us that the battle is real (6:12). No matter what it is, every discouragement is an attack that comes from Satan. May we remember that we have been equipped by the Lord that provides us with strength. Read Ephesians 6:10-20 and be encouraged.

Our Team Prayers

- * That Rosa, a woman who has been working at the Bible school for more than 20 years cooking and acting as a surrogate mother, may come to know the Lord.
- * That plans for outreach in Scandicci may blossom as we consider offering Italian worship services in the city we live in.
- * That our team may be united in all ways.
- * That the Lord would raise up leaders in the churches in Italy.
- * That Allesandro, a reader who has been studying at the Bible school for many years, would be relieved of doubt and come to know the Lord.

About Avanti Italia

The missions program I am a part of is called Avanti Italia (A.I.). This mission program has three primary goals: 1. to use our individual talents in sharing the Good News of Jesus the Christ with those who are seeking to have a more perfect relationship with Him, 2. to learn to share Christ with others more effectively, and 3. to participate in mutual encouragement and edification with the Italian churches of Christ. Their method for achieving these goals is mainly through outreach in teaching private Bible lessons in English. As a part of A.I., I would be expected to teach an average of 10-15 Bible lessons a week. Much of the work A.I. encourages would be described as friendship evangelism, making relationships with people and sharing God's saving message with them. Each team member is not only expected to fulfill their obligations, but also to find ways of using his or her individual talents to make more contacts with people. Most of the work is centered at the Florence Bible School in Scandicci, a suburb on the southwest side of Florence. A.I. has had an extensive outreach since its beginning in 1986. Every year, A.I. forms teams of 3-7 members to send to work at the school for a two-year commitment. Team members are required to fundraise, acquire a student visa, and go through intensive training before leaving the United States. Once arriving in Florence, team members live together at the Florence Bible School and immediately begin Italian language studies while teaching English using the Bible. Teachers generally work in one-to-one or small group sessions.