

## Murat Cakir: One in 78 Million

Dove Street in Istanbul is silent besides the lingering notes of a 5 a.m. fajr prayer and the muffled whir of Murat Cakir's computer as it's awakened from hours of sleep.

The emails are no kinder today than they were a few days ago, but Cakir clicks the trash icon for each one just the same. Sometimes the prosecution comes through texts, sometimes it comes through Facebook messenger, and on rare occasions Cakir's ears are greeted with the voices of former members threatening him and his family; but it all reaches the Istanbul Branch President one way or another.

While Cakir's flock consists of the 90-or-so Latter-Day Saints who congregate in a two-story corner building on Guvercin Sokak every Sunday, the former members-turned-anti-mormon that now haunt the branch and its members keep Cakir on his toes- literally.

"Some of our best friends from the Church fell away and became our persecutors. From time to time, we read our names in the newspapers, and we're even named as spies," Cakir said. "These things in a way motivated me to get into shape and I started walking, jogging and then running--even running a marathon. Now I walk or jog five miles per day."

While proselyting Mormonism in Turkey was legalized on October 29, 2011, it has taken a little more than a government-issued "OK" for the citizens of this 99.8 percent Muslim country to give Mormonism their stamp of approval.

"Before the Church was legalized... our landlord knew that we were holding religious services in his apartment and asked us to move out many times because he was afraid of the police," Cakir said. "We tried to find another place to meet but nobody wanted to rent to us because we, as a church, had no legal status in Turkey. Those were tough times being thrown out, but nobody wanted to take us in."

Ali Aydogdu, an Istanbul native and convert to the Church from Islam blames the religious infiltration into the government system Turkey is currently facing for the persecution against Mormons, and Christians in general.

"Islamic extremists have a problem with Western culture in general, so it's too liberal for the president," Aydogdu said as he shakes his head over President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidential win of 2015. "People who are westernized don't fit into the system he is trying to create, so by default he has a problem against that."

Former branch president of the Ankara, Turkey branch Buddy Fackrell was concerned for his own branch's safety for a period of time as well.

“We've had some problems here,” Fackrell said. “The missionaries here aren't allowed to be in any pictures, and they can't wear name tags with their suits.”

While the Church seems to be progressing only inches at a time in a nearly entirely Islamic country, these inches are bounds for the members who once met in the tiny apartment squeezed in between the countless other buildings that line Babylon Street.

Cakir wipes sweat from his brow as he recounts the introduction of the church to modern-day Turkey to thirty eight BYU-Idaho students in the basement of the Beyaz Saray “Otel” in Istanbul.

The temperature in the room is steadily rising as the makeshift conference room seems to shrink in the heat, each chair pushed up against another, each student touching elbows as the lack of air conditioning puts everyone into a slumber-like state.

After 8 hours of touring Istanbul by foot, devoting their attention to an hour-and-a-half long fireside is the last thing on each student's agenda, but the story of the first modern-day Turkish member of the church is just too compelling.

“It all began on Babylon street...” President Cakir began.

The 90-member congregation would often emerge from the small apartment near Gezi Park and Taskim smelling of smoke.

The waft of cigarettes from the seven floors of residents below was hard to ignore during the makeshift meetings for fourteen primary children in an office that was meant for three adults and doubled as a library, as there is hardly a citizen of Istanbul who isn't an avid chain-smoker.

The lungs of the members weren't Cakir's only concern, however, as the eight-floor apartment building was in the center of the city, where the narrow roads swelled into a two-way avenue that double-decker busses and cable cars frequented at top speed.

“It was a loud, noisy and overcrowded area with frequent demonstration and our safety was of concern,” Cakir said. “The elevator in the building was not safe; one of our primary children had almost lost an arm there. Luckily, his mother reacted quickly and was able to stop the elevator. Only two or three people could fit inside the kitchen where the young women met. I always felt sorry for the primary president who had to contain so many children. During the meetings, people would come to get books, print things from the computer, use the bathroom or kitchen while all the primary children were having lessons.”

The congregation had the last of their haphazard sacraments days before Christmas in 2011, after the Church was officially recognized, where the elder's quorum sang “Oh Babylon, We Bid thee Farewell”.

The members of the first Turkish LDS branch still sing hymns each Sunday, but now they do it on Guvercin Sokak, or “Dove Street”.

The building is still old, but you’d be hard-pressed to find anything amongst the residential buildings that trickle down the hillsides of the Besiktas district that wasn’t built before the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The walls are unpainted, but a picture of Jesus is the first thing you see as you enter the meeting house that’s equipped with folding chairs and Books of Mormon that have been translated to the language of nearly 79 million people with the help of Cakir himself.

With a population of over 14 million people, Istanbul is home to one of four branches in Turkey and only 90 members of the Church.

“The Church is growing. I look forward to the day when the blessing of my mission president will be fulfilled--that there will be many wards and stakes in Turkey,” Cakir said. “As members of the Church in Turkey, we have a desire and a goal--we would like to see a temple built in Turkey. Our Ukrainian brothers and sisters reached this goal in 20 years. We hope to do the same. Our population is almost twice that of Ukraine so if they can do it, we can do it.”