

UNDER THE BIG TOP:

Convoy of Hope Opens Doors in North Africa

By Kirk Noonan
Photography by Michael Nene

Melilla can be complicated. It's a Spanish-owned enclave in North Africa not more than six square miles in size. It sits on the Mediterranean Sea and is surrounded by Morocco. Nearly 70,000 residents are packed into Melilla. Most are there legally; some, not. Mosques outnumber churches, a resilient Jewish population has been there for centuries, and a Hindu community continues to grow. Visitors can move from one culture to the next in this compact place as fast as they can walk to the next block. Some streets look to have been plucked out of Madrid or Barcelona with their cobblestone pathways, flower baskets hanging from streetlights, and outdoor cafés. A quick “hola” or “buenas tardes” will suffice for a greeting. On other

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Volunteers from around the world prepare bags of groceries for distribution.



streets, shops spill over with ornate carpets and Middle Eastern trinkets. Tarifit-Berber is spoken rather than Spanish. Women go about their daily tasks cloaked in hijabs. Old men topped with kufis sit on stoops eyeing anyone who happens into the neighborhood.

In Melilla's economics, a tremendous gap between rich and poor, the haves and have-nots, means some families spend their days on the beach while others wonder where their next meal is coming from.

There is no arguing that complications and challenges are part of life for many residents of Melilla. But where some see insurmountable odds, a local Assemblies of God pastor, an assortment of AG ministries from around the world, and Convoy of Hope Europe see only opportunities to bridge cultural and ethnic gaps.

They recently demonstrated this by holding a Convoy of Hope outreach.

BIG TOP

With the sun beginning its descent, volunteers drive into the ground the final spikes that will anchor the white and yellow tent.

Team members quickly move metal barriers into place. Some set up chairs under the big top as others form prayer teams and walk the grounds calling on God to touch those who will come to the outreach the following day.

An air of expectancy energizes the organizers and volunteers here. Most of the volunteers have never been part of a Convoy of Hope outreach, but already they can sense the impact free medical screenings, haircuts, entertainment and groceries can have on the community.

"This is going to be a great blessing," says Cesar Gil, pastor of Centro Nueva Vida [New Life Center], which is one of only three Evangelical churches in Melilla and the only Assemblies of God church in the enclave. "We're praying God will open the hearts of the people who come here."

"Many of them cannot read or write. Because of their traditions, it's hard for them to understand the gospel. But they are just like anyone else — they need someone to love them and tell them about Jesus."

The next morning volunteers pull bags of groceries off a flatbed truck and stack them on pallets outside

the big top. Cooks load grills with charcoal. Beauticians organize their workstations. A van pulls up and a worker unloads and inflates two gigantic bouncers for the Kids Zone.

"This is a normal outreach adapted to the local culture," says Michael McNamee, who leads Convoy of Hope Europe (COHEU). "The health screenings, haircuts, games and free food will attract people, and we'll give them a presentation of the gospel."

Last year COHEU held 10 outreaches similar to this one, but larger in scale. This year they'll hold 18. Next year, says Chris Dudley, coordinator for COHEU in southern Europe, at least 20 outreaches will serve communities throughout Europe.

The Melilla outreach is scheduled to begin at 11. But five minutes before the hour, not one person is in line at the entrance to the site. This is unusual. Convoy of Hope outreaches in Europe and the United States typically attract thousands of people. At most sites, crowds wait anxiously to get in. But in Melilla, time in general is not of the essence.

"They'll come," says Gil with a disarming smile and optimistic eyes.

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PARTNERS IN MINISTRY

Numerous ministries and organizations participated in the Melilla outreach.

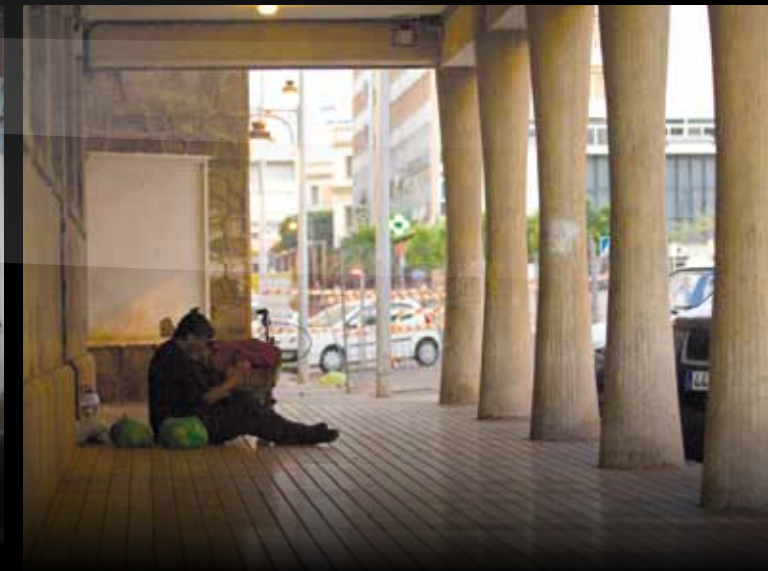
- New Life Center in Melilla
- Convoy of Hope Europe
- Culturally Diverse Communities, an AGWM immigrant ministry
- The Spanish Assemblies of God
- The AGWM Spain Field
- The Mexican Assemblies of God
- Volunteers from Bethany AG in Wycoff, N.J., pastored by Don James
- Tri-County Church, Fairfield, Ohio (Pastor Brad Rosenberg), partially funded the outreach.

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Honored guests received a free lunch, haircuts, groceries and services during the outreach.



“And when they do, we’ll stay open until the food runs out.”

Less than two hours later hundreds of people are on site. Families eagerly accept hamburgers hot off the grill. Children jump in the inflatable bouncers, which are a luxury in Melilla only for the rich.

Women get their hair cut and styled in the makeshift beauty salon. Nurses take people’s blood pressure in the clinic tent. Under the big top Juan Carlos Exposito, the coordinator for Spain AG’s evangelism office, focuses on the similarities that exist between his beliefs and the audience’s.

“Most of these people have not heard about or do not recognize their need for Jesus,” he says between sermons. “So today we focus on planting seeds.”

Mark Cannon, a missionary to Spain from the Potomac District of the AG, agrees.

“The greatest thing happening here today,” he says, “is that people who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, or who have never had meaningful contact with Christians, had an opportunity today to hear the gospel explained and experience the love of Christ

through His followers.”

According to James Neely, area director for the AG in Europe who specializes in working with culturally diverse communities, the outreach not only brought several ministries and organizations together but also strengthened their ties.

“Our teamwork demonstrated the power of unity through Christ in diversity and thus demonstrated the power of the love of Christ to the diverse society represented in Melilla,” he says. “It is only Christ and unity through Him that can and will bring healing and unity to Melilla’s diverse communities.”

DIFFERENCE MAKER

Most Convoy of Hope outreaches in Europe are designed so that churches can be planted or strengthened. This one, says McNamee, was conducted to encourage and support New Life Center’s ministry efforts. That support included the donation of the big top and a commitment by Convoy of Hope Europe and Assemblies of God World Missions to pay the rent on a parcel of land where the tent will be placed.

“The Convoy of Hope outreach helps so much in letting our city

know more about God and that He loves Melilla,” says Gil. “It also gives us a great opportunity to expand our ministry. With the tent we now have a bigger place to worship and we don’t need to send people away anymore.”

For years New Life Center’s main location in downtown Melilla has been challenging. Three times each week, hundreds of people cram into the tiny storefront church to worship. With the tent, Gil says, he and his congregation will have another place to worship. It will also help Gil and his congregation reach out to African immigrants who live in camps near the new site where the tent will be placed.

Melilla is one of the main starting points for immigrants attempting to find well-paying jobs and better lives in Europe. Many of the immigrants in Melilla have paid thousands of dollars and traveled thousands of miles just to reach the enclave. Once here they must wait, work and save until they have enough money to get to Europe. For some that can take years.

“I have no family, no money,” says Xavier*, a 25-year-old from Somalia, as he eats a hamburger at

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the outreach. “All of my family is dead. I live in a refugee camp and am waiting to go to Europe.”

Xavier tells of his conversion to Christianity and how for 15 months he trekked toward Melilla. He’s been here for more than a year and can’t find work or even food sometimes. The outreach, he says, provided a nice respite from his life.

“Everything is free,” he says with a broad smile in between bites of the burger. “It’s good, very good.”

In front of the inflatable bouncers a 12-year-old named Juan says he is very happy to be at the outreach and that he heard about Jesus for the first time.

“When I get bigger I want Him in my heart,” he says. “I want my family to know Him too and for the people of Melilla to know Him.”

While Juan is talking an older

boy snickers at him then interrupts. “Jesus isn’t the Son of God; that’s a lie,” he insists.


The older boy’s words are a reminder that Melilla is a mission field — a tough one at that. But going to such places and ministering is absolutely necessary according to Albert Walsweer, European director for COHEU.

“This outreach is a unique opportunity,” he says. “Events like this don’t typically happen in Melilla. We are getting an opportunity to share the gospel with people we otherwise wouldn’t be able to reach. That’s one reason Convoy of Hope outreaches are an incredibly effective way to evangelize in Europe and throughout the world.”

As men, women and children stream out of the outreach site laden with bags of groceries, Gil can only

smile. The outreach, he says, has sparked many ideas. He wants to start a ministry for children and expand his church’s evangelism efforts.

“There are very little jobs here and people are desperate, but look at the smiles on these people’s faces,” he says. “There is so much joy today in Melilla. This touches my heart to know that they know someone cares for them.”

That’s what a free lunch, a haircut, a couple of bags of groceries and a presentation of the gospel can do for a person, a family, a community ... and even a tiny Spanish enclave in North Africa. 

*A pseudonym

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E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.