



Avanti Italia

NEWSLETTER

Promoting a two-year mission involvement of college graduates

January, 2002

New Team to Begin Serving AI in Summer, 2002



Gary

Born in Wichita, Kansas, Gary grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has a bachelors degree from Oklahoma Christian College and Master of Theology degree from Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis.

Gary has served in ministry roles with several churches and schools and he enjoys creating ways for Christians to minister to others. He currently serves as a chaplain of a juvenile justice center, where he is helping to create a "Faith Network" of churches to help troubled youth upon their release.

"The churches of Italy need the help college graduates can offer," Gary says. "Avanti Italia can be an effective, service-oriented training center for Christian ministry."

Together Gary and Jennifer have taught Bible classes and conducted seminars on adult education and developing spirituality in children. They currently help lead a Sunday morning adult Bible class and serve with the Lake Cities Church of Christ missions committee.

Gary and Jennifer Williams live in Grapevine, Texas (near Fort Worth), and have been married since 1976. They have two sons: Brock (20), a junior at Harding University; and Erik (19), a freshman at Texas Tech University.

Jennifer

As a child of missionaries Howard and Doris Bybee, Jennifer grew up in Italy and has long had an interest in foreign languages. She completed a bachelors degree in French, then a M.A. in Economics while working for Holiday Inn's international division in Memphis. She taught high

school Spanish and ESL for several years, and was Chairman of the Language Department at Colleyville Heritage High School in Texas, where she was declared Teacher of the Year in 1998.

This fall Jennifer became an Assistant Principal at Haltom Middle School in Haltom City,

TX. Jennifer has been a speaker for ladies' classes and events, including the New Mexico Ladies' retreat and the A.C.U. Bible Teachers' Workshop. She has served on the Richland Hills Church of Christ missions committee for the last seven years.

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Williams by phone at
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Sarah Bailey

First I would like to say a great big “Grazie a voi” specifically to all of you who signed up to pray for me during our prayer vigil and to all of you who could not sign up for a specific time, but prayed for me on that day anyway. Of course, I am continually thankful to those of you who pray for me on a regular basis. (By the way, “Grazie a voi” literally means “Thanks to you (pl).”)

Second, I have finished my three months of language school. These last three weeks of language school were very hard. The guys decided to take a couple of months off from language school and then return in January, so I had to go alone. It is hard to get up very early when everyone else can sleep in a little later. It has also been hard because there have been so many things going on here at the Bible School. We had a great big Thanksgiving-type dinner for the church members one Friday, the next Thursday we had an open house for the Harding University students studying here in Florence, and then last Friday we had another student party. I also now have four lessons a week instead of just two. I have a grammar class on Monday nights with five or six students, a private conversation lesson on Tuesday, a private conversation class on Thursday, and a conversation class with ten students on Thursday night. Preparing and teaching those classes keeps me pretty busy as well.

Recently we at the Scuola Biblica went to a Military Air Base in Germany for the AMEN Retreat, which is for missionaries and military personnel in Europe. We enjoyed it very much. We came back to Florence on Thanksgiving Day and had our own turkey dinner a couple of days later.

On a light note. . . when I first arrived in Italy, everyone warned me that I would cease to be able to speak English well. I thought, “Surely not I!” HAH! When I (try to) speak in Italian I think in English and when I (try to) speak English, I think in Italian. Then to add to the confusion, when I encounter someone who speaks French five and a half years of study disappear and all I can say is “Si” which is not French at all. I’m sure I will get it all sorted out one day, but it may be ten years from now.

Please continue to pray for me and the work here. Pray that I will be bold with my purpose here and God’s mission for me here.

Emilie Shepherd (formerly in Rome)

When the tide comes in . . .

At times it feels like we have to beg, bribe, and drag people to the church and to get them to want to have a personal relationship with God. Other times it feels like the tide washes them in the door. In the last two months, we have had a number of people simply walk into the church building and say that they want to study the Bible and attend worship. This is not too unusual; however, the unusual part is that they really have begun studying and attending on a regular basis. One is a single woman from Moldavia (former U.S.S.R.) who works as a domestic in a home near the building. Since the moment Valentina walked in the door she has blessed us with her smiling face and testimony of faith. The other is a family of five who have been searching the Bible for truth. They entered one Sunday morning saying that they felt God wanted them to come to worship with us. They have been in attendance along with their three beautiful girls at almost every church activity or worship service since. Praise God!

New Book

A few years ago a well-respected, well-known, ex-Catholic priest named Fausto Salvoni died. He left behind many religious books and commentaries that he had written and published as well as a basement full of unpublished manuscripts. Paolo Mirabelli, the evangelist at the church here in Rome, is associated with the widow of this scholar and recently made contact with her about having the manuscript for a book that Salvoni wrote about Maria. The Signora Salvoni was happy to send us the ten-chapter manuscript and I have been working daily on the transcription of this excellent book.

The book is a study of the significance of Maria, mother of Jesus, in the Old and New Testaments, as well as the changes and values people have assigned to her over the course of the centuries. It is the only one of its kind in Italian, and I dare to say in English. Salvoni was a leader in the church as it began to grow in Italy just after World War II and is known throughout the religious world as an important voice in biblical studies. I am honored that I have this opportunity to collaborate with this great man.

Lectureship in Aprilia

October 27-28, 2001, was the annual *Convegno di Aprilia*, a lectureship held by the Church of Christ in Aprilia (a Roman suburb). The theme was “Protagonists or

Spectators, the role of the Christian in the Church.” The speakers included brothers from all over Italy as well as the evangelist at the vaile Jonio congregation, Paolo Mirabelli. The whole lectureship was well attended (by about 200 people) and we all left with new friendships and closer bonds as well as food for spiritual growth.

Thanksgiving was a moment to share a bit of American culture and food with friends and contacts. The church in Rome hosted an enormous dinner with almost 60 people. I did not attend the dinner in Rome because I spent the holiday in Florence. The few days that I spent in Florence provided the last chance that I had to be together with the Christians, friends, and students in that city. It was a bitter-sweet week of thanksgiving and salutations.

Youth Activities

One of the needs of the churches in Italy is more emphasis on teaching the children. In my time here I have had several opportunities to teach Sunday School or to direct the children’s classes and activities for retreats, etc. In the month of November we held a “Mini-Giovani (Mini-Youth) Day.” It included a special study on Noah’s Ark followed by snacks and games.

Pancakes and Parties

It has been my pleasure during my time in Rome to have made some wonderful friendships. The favorite activity when we get together is to eat, of course, and one of the most fascinating, new American things that these Italian (and non-Italian) friends want to eat are PANCAKES! This month we had yet another opportunity to spend sweet time together in joy, prayer, and pancakes!

Partenza

Partenza is Italian for “leaving.” I am “in partenza” from Rome and from Italy December 17, 2001. It is sad to leave everything here. After two years I feel like I’m leaving home. Upon my return to the States I will be in contact with the various churches and individuals that have supported my work here in Italy in order to make my Final Report. For those who are in constant prayer for me and the mission here in Italy, I ask you to continue to pray for me and my departure and re-entry and especially that the Lord continues to bless the seeds that have been planted and that in His time they can give “a crop of sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:23)



Tanya Kuhnley, who plans to go to Florence in January, is a 23-year old college graduate with a bachelor's degree in Human Development

and Family Studies from Abilene Christian University. She comes from a family of six in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She learned about the program through Gary and Jennifer Williams.

Ryan and Paula Butterfield

Ciao everyone,

We want to wish all of you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from all of us in Florence. The Bible School will officially be closed for two weeks but we hope to use this as an opportunity to spend more time with our students and their families.

Although the thought of spending Christmas away from home can be somewhat depressing, we are overjoyed by the progress we have seen recently in our students. In our last newsletter we wrote of how students

have seemed more interested and more open to the ideas and teachings of the Bible. They still are. This is very important because it is not uncommon for students to become less interested as the studies become more difficult.

We have also recently had a number of people inquire about studying who are not interested in learning English but only the Bible. We have been praying diligently that God will send us those who are seeking to follow Him and it seems those prayers are being answered. We are convinced that God is answering the prayers offered up from around the world when we had the "Week of Prayer" that so many of you were involved in. From October 28 through November 3 we arranged for different people to be praying straight through for 24 hours a day. We were asking that we could come to know our students better, we would be able to spend more time with them, and know how better to study with them. We also asked for boldness in teaching His word, that His word would touch the hearts of our students, and that they would have the courage to make any necessary changes in their lives. It is happening. There is not a better example of this than our new friend and brother Ben.

Three weeks ago we set out to distribute advertisements for Bible and English lessons. Before splitting up, we made a circle and joined hands and were about to begin praying when a Nigerian man named Ben stopped us and asked what we were doing. We explained to him who we were and what we were doing, and he said he had grown up a Christian and was looking for a church to attend in Florence. He then joined our prayer and helped us distribute our flyers for about an hour. He attended worship with us the following Sunday and again yesterday. After morning services he came back to the Bible School and ate lunch and studied the Bible with Howard Bybee who is here in Florence overseeing the Avanti Program until February. Last night Ben was baptized. Was it a coincidence that we just bumped into Ben? Ben doesn't think so, and neither do we.

We ask that you remember us and the work in Italy. Pray that God will send us more people like Ben, who are searching for God. Pray that God will soften the hearts of our students and give them the courage to follow Him. We appreciate all of your prayers, and so does Ben.

Interim Directors in Florence

The Avanti Italia is currently functioning without a permanent director, but that condition will be remedied in the summer of 2002 when Gary and Jennifer Williams join the team. In the meantime, the following people have been assisting as interim directors:

Heber Taylor, who is no stranger to the program, spent the two months of September and October in Florence. Heber has worked there at several times in recent years, so he was able to step in and add maturity to the team. He was also able to teach several beginning students.

Then on October 30, Evan and Betty Ulrey arrived in Florence to help out. They have worked in Florence twice before as professors at the HUF program. Evan has served as chairman of the Avanti Italia program since its beginning. Their interests include editing this bulletin and teaching in the training program for AI workers. Heber, who became ill right before his time to leave, recovered soon enough to fly home alone. Evan and Betty stayed until November 21, and Howard and Doris Bybee arrived the night before they left.

The Bybees, who originated the program after their long service in Italy, will stay until mid-January. They are the parents of Jennifer Williams, who grew up in Italy. The Bybees are proficient in Italian and able to teach even the advanced students.

Carl and Frankie Mitchell will go to Florence in February and stay for

three months. They are, like the Bybees, long-time Italian missionaries. Carl also serves on the AI committee, which oversees the work.

Three workers have returned to the states in recent months. Liz Hopkins, who was in Florence, left a few months early to return home because of her health. Melanie Castleberg and Emilie Shepherd have returned home from Rome. Two new workers are planning to go in January: Tanya Kuhnley and Brooke Smith.

Matt Shaner, Blaine Tucker, and Sarah Bailey, who started their service in September, have come to the United States to spend the holidays with their families.



The Avanti Italia team is pictured above with two interim directors. Front row, left to right: Ryan and Paula Butterfield, Sarah Bailey, Beth Florea. Back row, left to right: Heber Taylor, Blaine Tucker, Matt Shaner, and Evan Ulrey.

Matthew Shaner

Church of Christ Missionary/Military Retreat, Chiemsee, Germany

At the end of November, our team attended the annual European Missionary/Military retreat at Lake Chiemsee, Germany, outside of Munich. The theme for the week was "Tending the Inner Fire," with keynote lessons each day by Bruce McLarty. Each lesson centered on some aspect of persevering in the faith and cultivating a ministry that was powerful and effective without experiencing burnout. For us, it was a time of mutual encouragement with missionaries from all over Germany, France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, and several other countries throughout Europe. Evertt Huffard led several sessions dealing with Islam and the Muslim faith, which seemed to be a particularly popular topic in light of the situation in Afghanistan. Other group sessions were lead by various ministers and missionaries from the States and from Europe. We were privileged to be able to spend some time with Bruce McLarty and his family, especially since several of us knew him from having lived or gone to school in Searcy. It was also a joy to be able to share stories and experiences with other missionaries from around Europe and find out what was going on in the Lord's church in their particular part of the world. The globalization and spread on the church is an amazing thing and a testament to the power of God working through men and women to

evangelize the world. One particular phrase from one of Bruce's lessons stands out that I'd like to share: "Untended fires soon die and just become a pile of ashes." God has given us so much zeal, desire, ability, and a measure of His Spirit, but unless we set ourselves to the task at hand and allow Him to transform us, that fire in us will die. May God empower us to cultivate His Spirit in our hearts.

Thank you for your continued encouragement and support. Especially remember Ben, a Nigerian man who was recently baptized, in your prayers as he begins his new life in Christ. May the Lord continue to bless you!

I especially enjoyed the time I was able to spend visiting with the Hurley family who are also sponsored by Naperville, my home congregation. The Hurleys have been working in Slovenia since the end of July, and were formerly missionaries in the Czech Republic.

New Contacts

During our week of prayer at the end of October and the beginning of November we asked our supporters to pray the Lord would put people in our path who would be receptive to the gospel. When it rains, it pours! We have had five people literally "show up" in the last two months who knew nothing about the school or the English aspect of our work and who were simply looking for a church of some kind. We had

two men from Romania who were looking for some sort of church knock on our door and we had two Italian women, a mother and daughter, who wandered into our church building and who have been involved in a Bible study with Ryan, another Avanti Worker, and me since the middle of December.

We also met a young man from Nigeria named Ben while we were out distributing flyers to advertise our school. Ben came to worship with us on a couple of different occasions and Howard, our temporary director, was able to study with him. I had the privilege of baptizing him into Christ just before returning to the States for the holidays!

We have also had a couple of contacts who saw our advertisements and called to inquire about studying only the Bible instead of taking one of our English courses. Studying the Bible is our goal in offering English and it has truly been a blessing to find people who were interested only in the Bible and not in English.

The Romanian men, the two Italian ladies, Ben, and the students interested in the Bible, I believe, have been a direct result of our prayer that God would put people in our path that would be receptive to His word. I truly feel like the contacts we've made since the beginning of November are a testament to the power of prayer in our lives and in our ministry. Please continue to keep all of our contacts in your prayers.

Avanti Italia

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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Carl Mitchell Evan Ulrey (chairman)

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