

## **Down Ancient Paths** Partners with **The Christian and Missionary Alliance**



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Many Ambrose students and lifelong learners from the broader community have travelled on *Down Ancient Paths* travel study ventures with award winning, Ambrose faculty member, Dr. Charles Nienkirchen. Recently, however, in another creative expression of its exploration of the global Christian heritage, *Down Ancient Paths* partnered with The Christian and Missionary Alliance to make possible a 7-day, travel study, professional development experience for its international workers serving in Silk Road countries. On the itinerary were two of the Seven Churches of the Book of Revelation, Ephesus and Smyrna in Turkey and the Greek island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey.

The group assembled in the cosmopolitan city of Izmir, the legendary birthplace of the Greek bard, Homer, to commence its energetic, learning journey. First on the travel agenda was an excursion to the magnificent, archeological ruins of Ephesus where the establishment of the Christian church in the first century through the courageous, missionary enterprise of the apostles Paul and John was the focus of attention. Near the great theatre, Dr. Nienkirchen lectured on the subject, **'The Church in Ephesus: From Spiritual Visitation to Spiritual Dehydration'** in which he traced and accounted for the spiritual decline of an initially spiritually vibrant, apostolic congregation over a couple of generations. Before making an exit from the site, the group visited the great, double Church of the Virgin Mary where the third ecumenical council convened in 431 CE. The subject of Dr. Nienkirchen's address, delivered as the group sat perhaps in the same place as the bishops who attended the council, was **'Ephesus: Where Christian Tradition Lived On'**. The presence of an early Christian baptistry in the church, served up opportunity for a robust discussion of the import of the three-stage sacrament of baptism (which included rites of renunciation/identification/invocation) in early Christian spirituality. Following a lunch respite, the group visited the presumed tomb of John the Evangelist (who allegedly died c. 100 CE) within the Basilica of St. John inside the walled citadel of Seljuk overlooking the Temple of Artemis.

The following morning, in the predawn hours, the group boarded a privately chartered boat for a four and a half hour trip to Patmos, the northernmost island of the Dodecanese archipelago. The breathtaking beauty of an Aegean sunrise in the gentle morning breeze soaked in enroute to the Holy Island on the Feast of St. John the Theologian, evoked a sense of pilgrimage embellished with majestic, scenic delight beyond words. On the open deck, Dr. Nienkirchen brought the third of his talks, a consideration of the origins and major themes of the Book of Revelation entitled, **'A Holy Man to a Holy Island for a Holy Book to be Read in Holy Time'**. Upon arrival at the port of Skala on Patmos, the group disembarked to visit three holy sites - the Cave of the Apocalypse where tradition says John received the Revelation, the Convent of the Annunciation which provided an impromptu setting for a conversation on female, monastic spirituality and the secluded, roadside chapel in Sikamia, located on the spot where the apostle baptized his converts while resident on the island. The next day featured a change of pace - Evangelical/Orthodox dialogue at the hilltop, fortified, Monastery of St. John built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century which towers over the sleepy, whitewashed town of Chora and dominates island life. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. The interchurch event was made possible by the generous hospitality of the monastic community and their gregarious, spiritual leader, Abbot Antipas, named after the biblical martyr of Pergamum (Rev. 2: 13). It was facilitated by the Rev. Dr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, an Orthodox priest/historical theologian from Atlanta, who provided highly skilled Greek/English translation for the occasion. The afternoon at the monastery climaxed

in the antiphonal, Byzantine chants of Vespers prayers in the icon laden Catholicon (Church) of St. John which created the atmosphere of having returned to Christian antiquity.

As guests of the monastery, the group was exposed to its inner life and able to savour its centuries old treasures. Following an introduction to the meticulous art of icon restoration, the specially arranged tour continued to the Great Sacristy (Museum) which contains among its many sacred artifacts, a late 5<sup>th</sup> /early 6<sup>th</sup> century text of the Gospel of Mark. The Library of the Monastery, not accessible to the public, possesses illuminated manuscripts, printed books, patriarchal decrees and an archive of historically significant documents among its holdings.

Traversing the liminal, volcanic, landscapes of Patmos sharpened the group's depth perception of the unveiled, glimpses into 'the beyond' which occur in the Book of Revelation. In the most enchanting experience one can have in the nature of Patmos, they hiked a narrow, stony trail through small ravines blanketed in brambles and thorny burnets and frequented by goats with their melodious bells, to the tranquil Psili Ammos (fine sand) beach on the Ikarian sea which is enclosed by jagged cliffs. From high above, before descending to sea level, it has the ambience of an outdoor, Greek theatre. Tradition says that here the dragon and beast of Rev. 13 appeared to the Revelator in his apocalyptic vision. Seated on the beach, the group read aloud the entire Book of Revelation. The backdrop of the pounding surf reminded of the textual references to the 'sound of many waters' (Rev. 1:15). A late, afternoon ascent to the white washed Hermitage of the Prophet Elias perched on the island's highest peak (269 metres), rewarded the group's perseverance with a spectacular panorama of the rugged, denuded island engulfed by the royal blue Aegean. On the steps of the hermitage, Dr. Nienkirchen spoke autobiographically in the fading sunlight of what Revelation had come to mean to him in his own spiritual journey.

Back on the Turkish mainland, the group contemplated the life of Polycarp, the venerated, second century, Christian bishop of Smyrna, whose life ended in a blazing martyrdom. In the Church of St. Polycarp, the oldest church in Izmir which dates to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the group sat in silence beneath a restored ceiling depiction of Polycarp's execution as Dr. Nienkirchen rendered a dramatic reading of the poignant, ancient, hagiographical text, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp'. This was followed by a visit to the agora (marketplace), a solitary, archaeological reminder of old Smyrna, where the professor's final talk reinforced the continuity between the heroic faithfulness exhibited by Polycarp in his martyrdom and the culture of fidelity manifested in the first century, apostolic church of Smyrna. This was lauded in the message to the Smyranean Christians in Revelation and undoubtedly embedded in the memory of Polycarp. The stellar example of his Christian ancestors deepened his resolve to endure without wavering the sufferings imposed upon him by his own dire circumstances. With this clarion call to bequeath a memory of fidelity to the next generation lodged in their consciousness, the group disbanded the next day to return to their respective countries of service.

***I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 1:9)***

