

Holly Tate:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, vice president of business development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, Sarah Robbins, our VP of sales and client relations here at Vanderbloemen talks with Jon Burns, international president of Greater Europe Mission. This episode was recorded during COVID-19, which has greatly altered mission work. Funding, travel and available work has all shifted leaving nonprofits unsure of what steps to take next. Sarah talks with Jon about his experience navigating mission work and church planting amidst to this global pandemic. He explains how missions have been affected and what that means for the future. This conversation provides an encouraging reminder that what the world may see as a crisis, the Lord can turn into an opportunity. Jon's powerful insights are helpful and applicable when facing any kind of crisis. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag Vandercast and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind the scenes content. We'll even post today's behind the scenes video in that Facebook group. Without further ado here's Sarah's conversation with Jon Burns.

Sarah Robbins:

All right. So I am very, very excited about the podcast guest today. He is a friend and someone that I get to do work with. I've got Jon Burns here from Greater Europe Mission. Hey, Jon.

Jon Burns:

Hi, Sarah. Nice to be with you.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah, good to be with you too. So I feel like news agencies have to qualify that they get funding sometimes from someone. And I feel like I need to qualify that I'm on the board at Greater Europe Mission. So I have a vested interest in this.

Jon Burns:

But no funding.

Sarah Robbins:

No funding. Yeah. It's usually the other way around here. No funding, but I'm very, very excited to have Jon on and really just kind of share a little bit of his story and the organization's story. And if you're listening to this, you know we're in the middle of just some real, crazy stuff in our country and our world. And GEM focuses their ministry in Europe, meaning Greater Europe Mission. So we thought it would be really, really cool to have a discussion with him and talk about what's been going on over there, the work that they're doing, how it's affecting it. So yeah. Glad you're here.

Jon Burns:

Yeah. I'm glad I'm here.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. Well, I guess Jon, if you could just really quickly start by giving a, Jon's got a cool story. You can hear the accent. He's not from Dallas where he's currently living, but just how you ended up at GEM.

And then I have some questions and just want to talk through what has been going on over there that we've been watching and the ministry and how that's all unfolded.

Jon Burns:

Yeah. So, yeah, I'm from England originally, the Northeast. Been in ministry, I think probably 30 years, mostly in youth ministry in the early days, and then planted two or three churches. Been involved in church leadership for probably the 20 years or more. And I actually came across GEM about eight years ago. Greater Europe Mission was looking to establish a bit of a network in the UK, where it was all over Europe but not really in the UK. And so I'd been asked to lead the UK's church's response to the London Olympics. So we built a thing called More Than Gold and we had 3000 churches and 300 mission agencies worked together through the London Olympics in 2012, and Greater Europe Mission came along and said, "We'd like to partner in the UK. Can you introduce us to some people?" So that's how I met them. I was impressed with them. Got asked to speak at one of their annual conferences and fell in love with the quality of their people.

Jon Burns:

And then I came to America six years ago and actually they helped me get my visa and I volunteered with them as a self-supported missionary. And then just over four years ago, they asked me to become the president, the first non-US leader of the organization.

Sarah Robbins:

What a novel idea.

Jon Burns:

I know. Crazy idea. So yeah, they've at last got a token European leading in the thing.

Sarah Robbins:

That's awesome. Well and a big turning point, I think this is worth sharing, was the, if you've listened to the news at all, then you're not deaf to the refugee crisis that's been happening over there. And that was a huge thing for you as you were. I mean, that was right as you were kind of stepping into this.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah, it was actually probably the thing that took me over the edge to join in GEM. So I'd been working with them a little bit and I'd watched how prepared they were to be interrupted by the whole crisis, the refugee crisis. And I'd been asked to consider becoming the president. And I was a bit hesitant. Was it the right thing to me? I had some other stuff going on. And then you know that famous awful moment of the little boy getting washed up on the shores of Greece and I'm sat watching CNN or whatever it was saying, "Lord, why am I in Dallas when everything you're about to do is in Europe?" And the only answer I could get from the Lord was to send people to Europe. So I kind of rung the chairman. I said, "Yeah, I said I wasn't interested. I might be interested after all."

Sarah Robbins:

Really the Lord called me through that, some people call it a migration crisis. We like to think of it as a God opportunity. And I'm very proud of GEM's response to it. We've dived in. We've got a huge ministry outreach on Lesbos Island, which is one of the key kind of landing points in Europe. I know it's a very

politically loaded issue, but the truth is we're seeing absolutely incredible results as people are getting saved and disciplined and planting churches. It's real New Testament stuff going on.

Sarah Robbins:

That's so awesome. Yeah. Well, and to kind of segue, I mean, the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, that's made a huge effect. I mean, I've heard stories from you guys and Lesbos specifically and just all across Euro space in many different ways. What, I guess, have you seen that's given you hope? Because I think we need a little bit of hope today in the midst of all of this for Europe and how that spills over.

Jon Burns:

Well, there's two things we're seeing over the last few years, and then I'll kind of zero in on the last few months, but we've got a lot of people who serve faithfully in cities and all over Europe and the going's hard. You don't see a lot of fruit. You keep sowing. You see the odd little bit to keep you going. And then as we responded to the whole migration crisis, both at gateway places and destination cities, a lot of them in Germany, we started to see fruit like we'd never seen. And some of our people were like, "Oh, I can't reach the locals. What's going on?" And God broke most people's heart for the opportunity, but at the same time, something else is going on, which is I think the whole crisis in Europe, whether it's economic, migration, the fragmentation of Brexit, whatever it is, I think has actually weakened secularists' foundations.

Jon Burns:

So not only are we seeing first fruits and great fruits with Muslim background believers now, but we're starting to see much more openness generally in old Europeans. Now, if you highlight where we are right now, 10, 12 weeks as we recalled this end of the COVID pandemic, we're seeing online attendance at church across Europe in numbers we can't quite believe. So the recent statistic in the UK is that 25% of the nation has been to church online in April or May.

Sarah Robbins:

That's incredible.

Jon Burns:

Well, when you think basically under 5% go to church normally, this is like online revival, right? And we've seen it in other places. Our most exciting story of our lockdown time is a couple in Sofia, Bulgaria, who've been ministering there for years and they've kind of disciplined a church plant that happened down there and this young guy that he's coaching, a local Bulgarian guy that helped them flip the church on online. And the numbers grew from like the normal 140 people that attended to hundreds and thousands online. So they're getting about 6,000 people online every Sunday, Bulgarians from all over the world that at this time are looking for heart language connection. And at the same time, we think the vast majority are non-Christians. And then their Easter message. 50,000 Bulgarians has listened to this guy's Easter message. Well, he was preaching to 100 three months ago. Now he's was preaching to 50,000. So despite the crisis that we're in the middle of, we're seeing a hunger and an opportunity like we've never seen before.

Sarah Robbins:

Wow. That's incredible. And what's the statistic, less than 2%?

Jon Burns:

Yeah. So I like to talk, I don't like to talk, but the truth is I talk about, we talk about unreached people groups, that's the big missiological thing. And I like to say that the whole of Europe is an unreached people group. So there's 750 million people in Europe. And on the whole, it's very difficult to find anywhere that's more than 2% evangelical Christian. And so, yeah, there's big churches. There's a traditional Catholic community. But if you looked at committed evangelical Christians, it's under 2% everywhere. There's a little bit of Romania that's 7%, right. This little weird bit of Romania, but everywhere else, nowhere near 2%. So if Europe's an unreached people group, that's why we believe most of our resources need to go into that place because there's no tipping point in Europe right now like there is in Asia and South America and other places, there's a tipping point of Christianity that we're nowhere near that in Europe. And yet even in the midst of that, this unsettling time in 2020 that we're in, people are checking into church anonymously all over the place.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. Oh, that's really cool to hear it because we're, state side, we're watching, at Vanderbloemen specifically, online church patterns and it's a weird thing for a crisis to happen and the place where you want to go in the crisis to not be available to you. So hearing that translate over in Europe is pretty spectacular. What, so thinking, I guess, a little bit forward, moving out of the madness, which we hope will happen eventually, how, and I guess I'm asking this because our church is even thinking through this, we partner with some Europeans through GEM, but what have you seen with churches or ministries or nonprofits specifically over there? And then I think church planting is something that our folks would really want to hear a lot about.

Jon Burns:

Yeah. I think it's important that people like me in a leadership position and a mission agency acknowledge our use and abuse of the local church in the past. So classic mission agencies, we want you to pay it, pray it and get out of the way, right? We want to steal your people, have your money and then we'll go and do what we know how to do. And that's an awful prideful attitude. And certainly there's no hint of that in GEM anymore. We're well past that. And so we know we're a partner to the church and we're an arm of the church, specifically where they might not know how to go. So all the time we're looking at sending churches in the US. How can we help you with your footprint in Europe? Are there places or people or projects y'all have passionate for? Can we be a conduit to that?

Jon Burns:

Can we twin you up with new church plants across Europe? And so we've seen even in the last year or two, loads of success with that, with churches that may have supported a missionary and it is sending them money every month and they got them back once every three years to pop up and say something on the stage, actually say, "No, no. How can we help you partner into Europe in a much more tangible way, increase your footprint there, partner with a church plant or partner with a project? Get some of your people over, get them out and look at it. Some may go for the long term or the short term." So we're seeing that happen all over. And particularly as we push into church planting across Europe, we're trying to find friends in the States and other places who are going to help enable that.

Sarah Robbins:

That's really exciting. What, I mean, when does church planting look like in Europe? I saw a little bit of it as I was over there, but it's very, very different than what we're seeing here.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. And there's all those old sorts, of course. There isn't one type. So you've got wonderful large Anglican churches in the UK that have come to life in the last 20 years, planting more like an American church. They're taking 50, a hundred people. They're giving them a million dollars to kickstart it. They're taking over an old building, bringing it back to life, bringing a new congregation in there. Wonderful. So there's that stuff, but there's also much more kind of embryonic stuff like a single person or a couple that say, "Look, there's this bit of our town, or there's this tribe in our city that is totally unreached. How do we let the gospel explode in that space or with that people? And what might church look like? What shape might church look like for them?" So my own experience, I planted a pretty normal church in the north of England.

Sarah Robbins:

And then the Olympics was coming and I got asked to relocate to London and a bunch of young people really that I'd known years ago who were out of church. We started hanging around and I'm like, "Oh no, here we go again." So we planted another church in downtown Soho and we realized that their friends lived all over the place. They weren't going to come back in on a Sunday. So we started a Wednesday night church in a pub in London, and people would come for a drink after work, very easy for them to bring their friends. And then after half an hour, we'd go down this little basement and we'd do a very different model of church for 90 minutes, then we'd all go eat together. And so it was about contextualizing the passion we had for a particular crowd. And so loads of people are doing that all over Europe.

Sarah Robbins:

In fact, I was just on a call today with Exponential Europe. And we're looking at how do we gather two or 3000 church planters across Europe and not tell them there's a right model, not giving them a program or anything else, but just encourage each other to start thinking bigger about reproducing those churches.

Sarah Robbins:

That's so cool. And that's the church, the pub church, that's the one that Sandra, your wife, gave you a hard time about in your preaching, right?

Jon Burns:

Oh, yeah. So my wife, my wife's wonderful gift to me. He says through gritted teeth, she's wonderful. And when I told her, "I'm not doing a church for Christians. I'm doing a church for people who don't get church or don't like church," so she helped me get all my Christianese out of me. So if I'd use some classic Christianese phrase that her average friend wouldn't know, she'd just stick her hand up and go, "What does that mean?" in the middle of my seminar. "What's that mean?" And I'm like, "Oh." And so she pulled all the Christianese out of me and taught me to speak normally again.

Sarah Robbins:

Oh, that's why God gives us partners sometimes.

Jon Burns:

Yeah.

Sarah Robbins:

Oh man. That's awesome. What, I guess, anything particular that you think is, or any particular story that you think is worth telling? I don't know, maybe the mosaic or I think there's some really cool stuff happening in during Germany. As, that again, I'm saying this, you have the Europe lens, you're living state side, that you think filters through, that's worth the North Americans to think about that might be inspiring.

Jon Burns:

Yeah. I think you're right. The Frankfurt thing feels kind of a prophetic voice really into the future of church to me. And so we have a guy there that's been a missionary for 25, 30 years, Stephen Beck. He was head of missiology and church planting at a seminary in Frankfurt and through a heart attack, actually laying in bed and negotiating his life with the Lord, he realized that he'd been talking about church planting, but it was time to do it. So every year his class at the Giessen Bible College. He says, "Look, if you're going to join this class, you're going plant a church with me this year." And every year they plant a church out of that class, the new class. And so eight years later, eight church plants later, with now led by eight former students.

Jon Burns:

But there's some really wonderful pieces to it in the DNA, really born out of a lot of Bonhoeffer's thinking back in the day that he rarely saw realized, but this whole idea of not just multicultural church, but a new mono-cultural church, where, how can a blended group of people from a blended bunch of backgrounds find a kingdom culture together. So not that you have a German church and next to it a Farsi church, but how do Germans and Muslim background believers come together with others, other internationals that are in all these cities, and find an expression of church that honors the Lord without ditching their cultures, but without being segregated. And so, so this, we call it mosaic, the mosaic movement of mono-cultural church is a pretty important thing. And maybe three, 400 church leaders across Germany have now been influenced by this model, particularly as every town and every city has got more and more immigrants arriving. And they're saying, "Okay, what does church look like for these people?"

Sarah Robbins:

That's awesome. Yeah. We got to attend a service there and they had, I think, five languages and they would give you headsets. And there are people in the back translating. And so it was Farsi, English, German. I forget the rest of them, but it was pretty special.

Jon Burns:

It is special. And you've got to sacrifice a bit of your own culture with a desire to be part of a bigger culture. Right? So I might like a song a certain way. I might like a sermon a certain way. We've got to leave that because it's not about us. Right? So we believe that at the door and we say, "What does this community need to experience together that is true of the Lord?" And yeah. And this is not a war reference. This is a soccer reference, but it's pretty hard for me to worship in German, but I've got to join in. Right?

Sarah Robbins:

That's true. Oh, that's awesome.

Jon Burns:

By the way, it's a much more beautiful to worship in French than it is in German, but that's just the truth of the language.

Sarah Robbins:

There's no getting around that, I think. Yeah. Yeah. As far as romance languages go, there's clear winners. Yeah.

Jon Burns:

German's tough. Yeah. It's tough to worship in German.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. It didn't make the cut of romance languages, just say that. I understand why. Okay. That's awesome. Well, Jon, I guess if you don't mind, I know we need to wrap up, but just kind of giving a word to maybe the church planter, that's state side of, like I said, of encouragement, we're in the middle of some really crazy stuff right now that you're seeing that you think is worth hearing.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. I think the church all over the world is getting shaken up in 2020, right? And whether I'm an existing church or a new church plant in America or anywhere, I've got to ask myself some different questions than I might have even a year ago. And I think the move to local is going to be increasingly important, that people are going to want to be much more localized. People are going to want to walk to church again, like the old days. And so I think the move to local is important, but I'd want to just give a shout out for global missions still. So I think mission is meant to be local and global, and we don't have to pick one, even as a tiny church plant. We don't have to pick one in the way we should shape our prayer meetings, the way we shape our giving patterns, the way we talk generally, and the stories we bring in. I think a great church has a local and global feel to it missionally.

Sarah Robbins:

And for me, it's two pedals on a bicycle, right? It's local evangelism, global mission, and both pedals give you the direction of a missional church. And I think wherever we are in the world, particularly in America, big or small, new or old, we need the two pedals, local outreach, global missional heart, and that should shape giving, worship, stories, preaching, giving, everything.

Sarah Robbins:

That's awesome. Well, it is pretty cool to hear what's going on over there, even though it's a mess here. I mean, it's a mess here.

Jon Burns:

Do you know what I think? I think it's really important as people of hope to, and I say this line all the time and people are sick of me saying it, but what the world calls crisis, God calls opportunity. So we may think America's in crisis. Europe's in crisis.

Sarah Robbins:

Hang on, Jon. You kind of cut out for that. I want you to say, backup to...

Jon Burns:

I can do that whole answer again.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. Just do the whole thing again and we'll see if we can. Yeah.

Jon Burns:

I think it's really important that as people of hope, we remember that what the world calls crisis, God always calls opportunity. And whether we feel we're in crisis in America, and I believe we are, whether that we feel like we're in crisis in Europe and we are, we've got to remember God sees opportunity. And if we can reframe what we're in the middle of through God lenses and start to think what innovative opportunity is there right now, what change is going on in people's mindsets, what change in their thinking patterns can the gospel dive into and how can we respond with hope to this opportunity, it changes our lens and our attitude.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. That's awesome. Well, it is, it is much more hopeful to think about it like that. So, and I think problems big and small, be it a two year old crawling on you in the middle of a Zoom meeting or what we've seen in Lesbos, this rioting and things like that, so.

Jon Burns:

Yeah.

Sarah Robbins:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for being with us, Jon. If you're interested in hearing more about the ministry, it's Greater Europe Mission. This is Jon Burns. There's just some really incredible stories. And you guys just started a social media campaign to highlight some of the stories where you can catch some of that and they're worth reading, so.

Sarah Robbins:

Yep. And it's gmission.org is the easiest way to find us, gmission.org, and everything kind of flows from there. But please reach out, reach out to me personally, if anybody wants to talk or talk about their church's footprint in Europe, we're dying to help.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. Yeah. He'll talk also talk about soccer, beer and other things of interest.

Jon Burns:

Maybe.

Sarah Robbins:

Yeah. Awesome. All right, Jon. Thanks for being with us.

Jon Burns:

Thanks. Thank you.

Holly Tate:

Thank you for listening to today's podcast with Sarah Robbins and Jon Burns. If we can help you here at Vanderbloemen with hiring or succession planning, please give us a call at 713-300-9665, or email me at holly@vanderbloemen.com.