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ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN HORN

ICF PADUA: *Confronting secularism and superstition in northern Italy*

They gather outside Padua's bars and in piazzas, tipping the latest trendy drink of the student culture. It's called spritz, and if you want to be in, you've got one in your hand.

Because Padua, Italy, is only 15 minutes by train from Venice, one of the world's most compelling tourist sites, it is often overlooked. But

Padua is compelling in its own right. Students are drawn to the 800-year-old University of Padua where Galileo taught; religious pilgrims to the Basilica of St. Anthony; and travelers-in-the-know to the city's history, architecture, art, literature (Padua is the setting of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*), and more.

The city was heavily bombed during World War II, leading to a sometimes bizarre intermingling of ancient and modern architecture. This same juxtaposition exists in the city's spiritual core where the modern — secularism — vies with the ancient — superstition.

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Left: Astronomic observatory
Top right: Youth gather in large groups in town squares.
Bottom right: Giotto, famous Renaissance artist



Top left: Children of members of ICF wait for their parents after service.

Bottom left: A resident fishes with a hand line from a bridge.

Right: Basilica of Saint Anthony

An Assemblies of God ministry is reaching out to those from both extremes.

Students who gather in the Prato della Valle, reputed to be the second-largest square in Europe, to drink spritz and socialize are sometimes met by Church in the Park, a student-focused outreach led by AG missionaries Steve and Patti Gray.

Church in the Park started simply as an outdoor service for members. But opportunities stared believers in the face, and the service morphed into an outreach offering soccer, Frisbee, music and other activities intended to draw students in. Recently teams from North Central University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, participated in an outreach that led to more than 20 young people showing up at the church-run coffeehouse ... an ongoing evangelistic effort.

The Grays arrived in Italy in 1988. Steve found a job as a computer programmer, and he and Patti helped start International Christian Fellowship in Rome with AG missionaries Terry and Ruthann Hoggard.

Ten years later they accepted the call to pastor a group of former ICF Rome attendees who had moved to Padua. The new church held its first service Feb. 8, 1998.

“We merged an African group and a Filipino group,” Patti says, “and we started the church. We commuted every other week for almost a year until we were able to move here.”

The initial handful of people has grown to a core of 150 from some 23 countries. The majority of members are from African nations.

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Then there are the university students. Patti serves as the team coordinator for outreaches. “One of my goals,” she says, “is to have a team every week all summer long, May through September. Many different types of ministries can be done. Everything is basically evangelistic.”

One thing the groups do is pray for the city by spending time at each of the nine ancient gates. “It’s like circling the city with prayer, like they did at Jericho,” Patti says.

Soon my wife, Peggy, and I see another reason the prayers of Spirit-filled Christians are so needed in this city.

The sky is hazy and the spiritual atmosphere heavy as we enter one of Padua’s best-known attractions. The Basilica of St. Anthony is famous for housing relics of the storied 13th-century preacher.

Inside the spacious shrine people press against the tomb of the saint, laying their hands upon it and murmuring prayers. A brochure invites visitors to pray to the saint himself, “Christ’s perfect follower ... who intercedes with the Father on their behalf.”

Nearby, a slow-moving procession files resolutely past the cases that display Anthony’s relics, including his “incorrupt tongue” and vocal chords.

In 2006, 24 new believers were baptized at ICF. The congregation includes those saved from both superstition and secularism.

Teuta is a student from Albania working on her doctorate in biology. Though her father was a communist and her mother was not a believer, she and her two sisters accepted Christ. After joining ICF and seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit for two years, Teuta was filled. Now she says her life has been transformed.

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Left: Basilica of Saint Anthony
Top right: Pastor Steve Gray baptizes converts in the open air.
Bottom right: A statue of Petrarch stands in front of the Basilica del Carmine.



Curtis and Amy Denton initially came to Rome as missionary associates. After 2½ years there, they felt called to Padua to work with students. They returned home, became fully appointed missionaries and returned to live in Padua.

“We’re working with Students for Christ Europe,” Curtis explains, “which is similar to Chi Alpha. This is the first organized Pentecostal student group in Italy, and ours is the only evangelical ministry on this campus [University of Padua]. There are 60,000 students here in Padua as well as some 2,300 international students representing 90-plus nations.”



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Opposite: Steve and Patti Gray
Left: The youth of Padua are a fertile mission field.

Vanna, also from Albania, saw her whole family leave another religion and come to Christ.

A Hindu man came to Padua from Mauritius. He had a heart attack and was not expected to live through the night. The church prayed for his healing, and that night he asked Jesus into his heart.

“The next day he’s saying, ‘I want to go home,’” Steve relates. “God brought this guy from the Mauritius Islands east of Madagascar all the way to Padua, Italy, to save and heal him. Shortly afterward, the man returned to Mauritius and told all his elderly friends about Jesus.”

Opportunities for international churches in major cities such as Padua are limitless. “What we see are 30 or 40 different nationalities in our backyard right now,” says Steve. “I don’t have to go to Africa to minister to Africans. I don’t need to go to Russia to minister to Russians. There are thousands of them right here.”

And whether they drink spritz and follow no religion or they are bound by superstition, people in Padua find a welcome as the Grays and members of ICF accept them with open arms ... and the love of Jesus. **tpe**

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