



FARMER'S GOAL:

USING SOCCER TO MINISTER TO KURDISH REFUGEES



Soccer practices weren't easy for the first year. In fact, they often resembled nightmares.

Paul Farmer and his colleagues at Ultimate Goal Ministries, a soccer ministry in Nashville, had been working with young Kurdish refugees — youth some might mistake for thugs.

"One shove and it's over," Farmer said. "Everybody's fighting and they take sides and they're all fighting on the field. We had to end practice every single time for the first year."

Such was Farmer's introduction to ministry with the Kurdish refugees. But the troubles didn't stop him from befriending the Kurds. They didn't stop him from loving them. If anything, they only made him more resolute.

"We're all about building their character and shaping them," Farmer said. "As they look at our lives, they're seeing Jesus. It's transformed them."

After five years of investing in the lives of Kurdish refugees, Farmer, a 2001 Union graduate, has seen God bless his ministry in countless ways. He and Matt Smith, also associated with Ultimate Goal Ministries, have led a weekly Bible study for the students for almost two years.

They've unashamedly proclaimed the gospel

to a group of Muslims and have witnessed the fruits of their labors.

"He's been a good motivator in my life," said Azad Abdullah, 16, about Farmer. "I didn't have the right attitude towards anything. I was a fighter. I had to have the last word in everything. When I met him, I just kind of calmed down. They taught other ways to deal with some of the situations."

Abdullah is just one of the Kurds that Farmer now refers to as his brothers. It's a fraternity Farmer didn't expect to find when he left Union in 2001 to join the staff of Ultimate Goal Ministries.

"To me, he's been like a brother," Make Said, 18, said. "That's the best way I can describe him. If it wasn't for him, I would probably be on the street or whatever, like some of our other friends. Paul and them, they just kept us straight."

Farmer and his wife, the former Nikki Summers (a 1998 Union graduate) had been wondering if God was calling them to go overseas after college. At the Urbana conference one year, however, Farmer met Smith, who introduced him to the work of Ultimate Goal Ministries.

It was an organization that used soccer to minister to refugees in Nashville, one of the nation's largest refugee hubs. Farmer was a member of Union's soccer team, and so it seemed like a perfect fit for him.

"I can stay in the U.S. and I can have an outreach to all these different international people," Farmer thought.

Ultimate Goal Ministries didn't provide Farmer with a salary, so the Farmers moved to Nashville on faith. They worked to raise their own support, until Farmer eventually got a job as a graphic designer for Dave Ramsey Ministries. His soccer ministry became something he did on the side.

Since Farmer was a graphic design major at Union, it worked out perfectly for him as he's now combining his professional abilities with his passion for ministry.

"He was extraordinarily bright and conscientious," said Union graphic design professor Chris Nadaskay about Farmer. "He's a people person and seems to enjoy interacting with others. I think those are qualities that serve him well in his ministry."

Though Ultimate Goal Ministries worked with a lot of different nationalities, Farmer

said he eventually felt God's call for him to focus on the Kurds. His involvement with them started when he saw a group of Kurdish students hanging out one day, and he approached them with a soccer ball in hand.

"You go anywhere outside the U.S., and soccer is a god," Farmer said. "It's an icon. It's a language that we can speak."

Soccer opened doors for Farmer gradually to get more involved in their lives. He played soccer with them regularly and coached them on a club team. He'd visit them in their neighborhood. He loved them unconditionally.

"These Kurdish guys, since I've narrowed in on them and I really feel like God has placed me in their lives, they're like my brothers," Farmer said. "Every time I see them I don't go preach the gospel to them, but it's like my life reflects it."

He does, however, preach the gospel to them every Thursday night at a Bible study. After getting to know the players, Farmer and Smith approached them about starting a Bible study.

Farmer knew that his relationship with the Kurds could only go so far when it came to winning them to Christ. He knew that God was the only one who could bring about a

change in their lives.

"It's the word that's going to change them," Farmer said. "It's the Holy Spirit. He's the one who convicts. That's the first act of the Spirit, is to convict. What's going to convict? The word. How can we get them the word? Start a Bible study and see if they come. And they came."

They've been coming for two years now — every Thursday night, to hear Farmer and

Smith talk about Jesus

Christ. Six of the Kurdish students have been faithful over the two-year period, with attendance sometimes reaching as high as 12 or 15 each week.

Farmer and Smith point to Christ as the only hope for salvation. If he went to Iraq to do the same thing, "I could possibly get my head chopped off," Farmer said.

The results of the Bible study have been positive, Farmer said. It's not easy for Muslims to convert because of how ingrained Islam is in their culture. Conversion to Christianity often means being cut off from family.

But while Farmer has yet to see any public professions of faith in Christ, he thinks a few of the players are close — and he fully expects in a few years to see God using some of his Muslim protégés as ambassadors for Christ through Ultimate Goal Ministries.

That's what keeps Farmer laboring for the Lord. That's what drives him. That's what has changed his life.

"I grew up the whole time thinking that ministry was working in church and missions was being overseas," Farmer said. "My perspective has radically changed through this ministry." ✝

