

K O S O V O



Celeste Yocom talks with teenaged girls.

Story by James Culhane
Photos by Caelen Weber

For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard.

Psalm 22:24 (KJV)



Pastor Mark Yocom prays in Albanian for an unconscious young man while his parents listen in the emergency room.

Lying still in his hospital bed, the young man with the broken neck recognized Pastor Mark Yocom as he approached. This was one of the Americans who had come to his school soon after the war in Kosovo ended in 1999. They had brought a film about Jesus Christ; he remembered learning about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Back then, he had not accepted the teaching although he never forgot it.

Now facing death in a hospital in Prishtina, Kosovo, the young man had a new hunger to know more about eternal life. Mark approached him and asked in Albanian if he could pray for him. "I remember you," the young man said. "You came to my village." They talked about *The JESUS Film*, and Mark explained further that Jesus died on the cross so that all who believed in Him could be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life in Christ.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."
John 6:47

The young man listened, and his heart was pierced. "Would you like to accept Jesus Christ?" Mark asked gently, feeling a special prompting by the Holy Spirit to ask so direct a question. The young man, believing the Gospel, prayed with Mark to ask God to forgive him. A few days later, the young man passed into the arms of Jesus. Later, Mark recalled, "I could see the peace of Christ in his countenance when he opened his heart to Jesus right there in the hospital bed."

The unofficial hospital chaplain, Mark makes frequent visits to the hospital in

Prishtina, Kosovo, and has done so since he moved to the country eight years ago as a full-time missionary. On a recent visit, Mark talked and prayed with several Muslims who were injured or visiting loved ones, while a short-term mission team from New Mexico also ministered there.

Healing After War

When Mark first arrived in Prishtina just after the Kosovo War, he knew it was a strategic time for ministry because people had gone through so much and were still suffering. Serbians and Albanians have clashed violently there for more than a decade, and political bombings still occur. Prishtina is the capital city of Kosovo, which was a province in former Yugoslavia and presently is under UN authority waiting for its final status to be determined. "The majority of the [half-million] people in our city are non-practicing Muslims except for observing the Muslim holidays," said Mark.

"Nevertheless, they hold to their identity and are afraid of how others will respond if they change their religion. The fear of man is a major factor," he said. "Many are dissatisfied with Islam but are seeking after materialism to fill the emptiness in their hearts. Though the ground is hard, little by little we are seeing breakthroughs."

The Kosovo region had no known evangelical Christian presence before 1985. When Mark arrived in 1999, Prishtina had less than 100 evangelical Christians. But spiritual doors have opened: Calvary Chapel Prishtina has grown slowly but steadily as nationals have come to Christ. Mark related, "The Lord has taught me: Don't let the number of people be the determining

factor of the ministry's success. It's what God is doing in the lives of the individuals. Keep pouring into them and shepherding them faithfully." He cited Zechariah 4:10 as a reminder not to despise "the day of small things," adding, "What may seem small to us may actually be a very big deal to the Lord."

Mark added, "While we have seen the Lord at work, we have also faced many challenges and an uphill battle. God has truly been faithful to sustain us and to keep us going forward. We thank God for sending many supporters and prayer partners who have stood by us."

Mark's initial ministry was through humanitarian aid and reconstruction projects. At the hospital, he began reaching out to war victims of all ages, including refugees and land mine victims. Now, everyone at the hospital knows Mark well when he makes weekly visits. Sometimes Celeste, his wife of two years, goes with him. When visiting church teams come to CC Prishtina, they often minister there.

"Our heart for Kosovo—and I believe it's God's heart—is to see the knowledge of Jesus Christ fill the land and to see a real revival take place," Mark said. "Also to see the believers grow, mature, and become fruitful in the things of the Lord."

The region suffers economically as 70 percent of workers are unemployed. "There is still quite a rift between the ethnic groups [Albanians and Serbs]," Mark explained. "We can point people to Jesus. If they can experience God's forgiveness personally ... they will be [able to] forgive each other."

In April 2001, Mark began CC Prishtina in the Dardania high-rise district. For the first year, they met in a coffee bar on weekends then moved to a discotheque and later an office park. The church began praying and looking for a new place in 2005. That April, they found a beautiful place in an ideal location in the heart of the city. "We rejoice and are thankful to God for His wonderful provision, and look forward to seeing His hand continue to work among the people of our city," said Celeste.



Troy Tocher, left, teaches the guitar to Arben Hoti of CC Prishtina.

A Helpmate

Celeste was involved in missions in Russia for nearly a decade before meeting Mark. After a short-term trip to Moscow in 1992, she joined CC Church Planting Mission, a group which starts and nurtures churches in the former Soviet Union. She traveled to many Russian cities to work closely with church leaders and missionaries through outreaches, retreats, and conferences. In 2001, Celeste moved to CC Omsk in Siberia to lead the women's ministry and counsel young women. Celeste reflected, "As I look back, I see how the Lord used that experience to prepare me to be a helpmate to Mark."

Mark and Celeste first met in Austria during a Calvary Chapel Missions Conference. Celeste supported Mark's work as a prayer partner, not suspecting they would one day marry. By October 2003, Celeste started to question the Lord about her future. "I really did not have the desire to leave Russia," she recalled. "I thought maybe I just needed a break, so I decided to go back to the States to spend time with my family and seek the Lord for direction." While home, Celeste attended the CC Missions Conference in Murrieta, CA. She ran into Mark at his missionary booth, and she felt the Lord impress on her heart to pray about serving in Kosovo.

After Mark returned to Kosovo and Celeste to Siberia, the two started corresponding via email. Both sensed the Lord working.



CC Albuquerque team members perform a skit to music.



Children join in a Bible skit performed by CC Albuquerque team members.

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Pastor Mark Yocom



Mark looks over the city, talking about the lost souls and work still to be done.

Mark invited Celeste to Kosovo that spring and asked her to marry him. She returned to Russia to wind down her ministry before they married in Albuquerque, NM, in November 2004. They now have a baby on the way.

The new culture and language have been an adjustment for Celeste. "It was extremely



Mark teaches as Urim Zogaj translates the midweek Bible study at CC Prishtina.



Celeste gives Vlera Musliu a hint during the weekly English class.

hard to leave Russia. I shed many tears,” she said. “While the young ladies in Russia are very open, I have found it difficult to really get to know ladies here. I think it has to do with [the] Muslim culture.” Still learning Albanian herself, Celeste teaches English to teen girls and children. At the church, she teaches Sunday school and a ladies Bible study.

Raising Up Leaders

A recent graduate of CC Bible College in Hungary, Lirak Gjoshi came to Christ after the war through a ministry in Gjakova, his home city in Kosovo. In 2001, he went to Prishtina for law school. Mark needed a translator and met him through Campus Crusade for Christ. Lacking previous Bible instruction, Lirak’s translation of the Bible studies into Albanian brought transformation in his life.

After accepting Christ, Lirak had experienced tremendous pressure from his Muslim family. They threatened him and sometimes beat him, but he persevered, growing stronger and bolder in faith. He withdrew from law school and became the first believer whom CC Prishtina put through CC Bible College in Hungary. He is pursuing English teaching credentials as a means of supporting himself so he may continue serving with Mark. He assists Mark with translating, building maintenance, and discipling young believers.

Other Laborers

Several short-term teams from CC churches have gone to Prishtina. Recently, a team from CC Albuquerque stayed for 10 days, ministering at the hospital, Prishtina University, and Kids’ Club meetings. “God opened doors for a lot of one-on-one



A girl wipes off the board after participating in her English class taught by Celeste.

ministry with the local people,” said Mark. Kathy Scott, a physical therapist, helped restore nearly full mobility to a little boy’s arm using newer techniques not practiced in Kosovo. Dr. Dale Erickson shared with physicians and medical students about biblically-based medical ethics. One local doctor said, “These are the values we need for our country to steer it onto the right course.” The doctor also spoke at CC Prishtina about God’s unconditional love—an important message in a land where many rely on personal performance to gain God’s favor, noted Mark.

The following week, a team from CC Bible College in York, England, arrived. They visited elementary and high schools in Prishtina, helping students with English skills, sharing cultural values, and inviting them for coffee and meetings at CC Prishtina. They held Kids’ Clubs with more than 100 children. The *Left Behind* movie series played over three nights to full houses of young people. A couple of teenagers whom Mark and Celeste had been reaching out to for a year committed their lives to Christ.

Having studied Islamic law in Egypt, author Samy Tanagho visited to teach about ministering to Muslims. Mark recalled, “We saw God use him in a powerful way, both to equip believers to reach Muslims and to communicate the Gospel to Muslims. Each meeting was packed with people from different cities around the region. Samy beautifully illustrated the love of our heavenly Father in the Bible in contrast to the description of God seen in the Koran.”

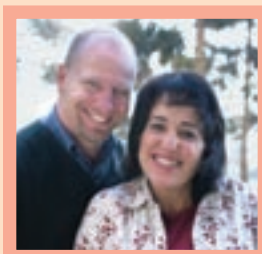
Vision for the Future

“Our vision is to establish a strong and fruitful fellowship of believers that would be light and salt in our city and eventually become a sending base to reach other parts of the region and plant churches,” said Mark. “We desire to eventually start a school of ministry to train ministry workers and leaders.” He welcomes short- and long-term workers. ☞

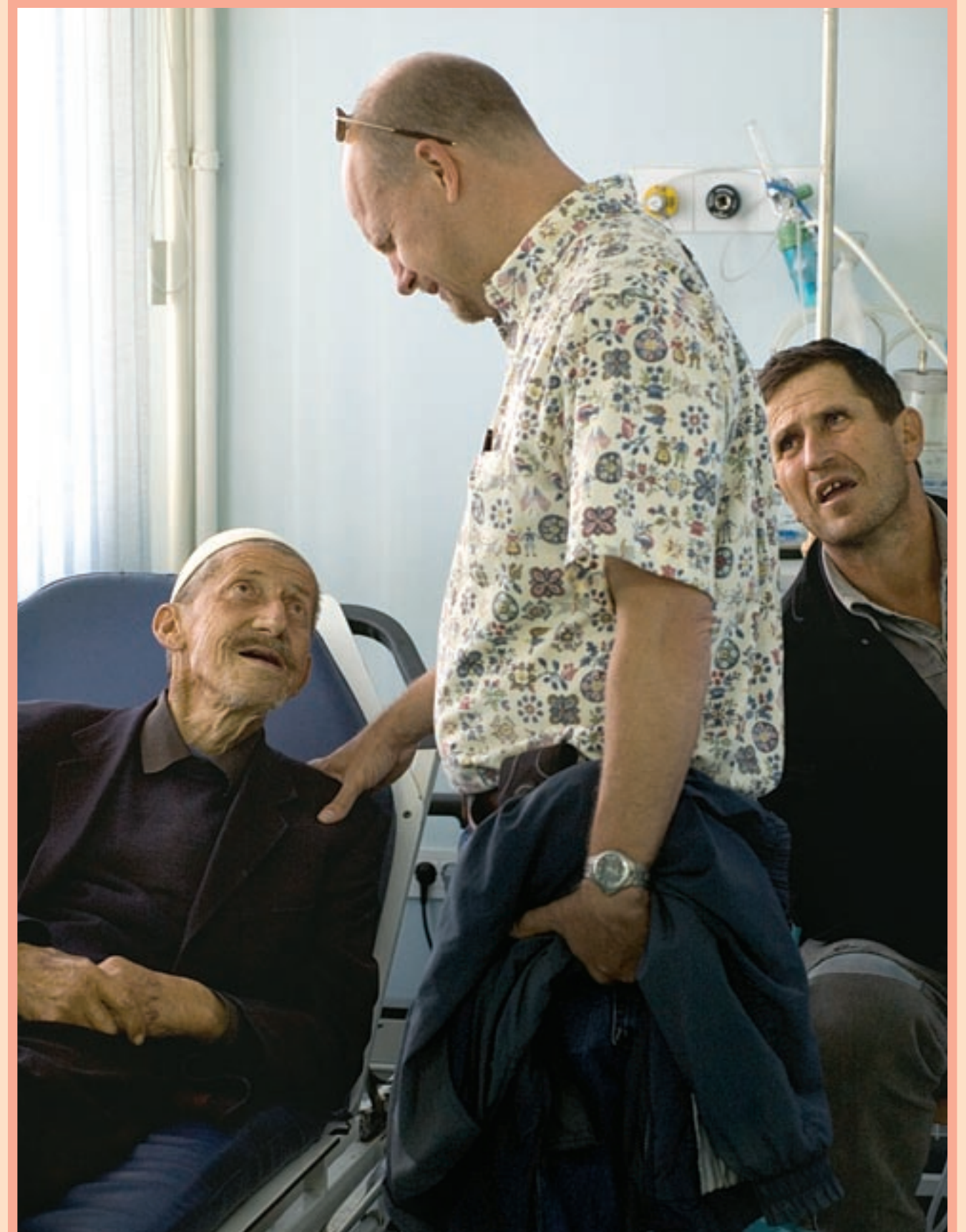


Prishtina is the capital city of Kosovo.

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Mark and Celeste Yocom



Mark prays for an elderly Muslim man in the emergency room at a local hospital. He also prayed for the mother of the Muslim man on the right. God has opened many such doors during Mark’s weekly visits to the Prishtina hospital.