

REACH PLANT TRAIN SERVE – SO ALL CAN HEAR

VOLUME 2 – NUMBER 3

# worldview



**kosovo**  
*A House Divided*

# worldview

/wərl̩d,vyoo/

noun

1. A philosophy of life or conception of the world.
2. A perspective from which one sees and interprets the world.
3. A conception or image of the universe and humanity's relation to it.

## Our Worldview:

Humanity is lost.

Eternity is certain.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.

Our mission, in the power of the Spirit, is to **reach** the lost,  
**plant** churches, **train** leaders, and **serve** the poor ...  
**so all can hear** the saving message of Jesus.



Gaylon Wampler

VOLUME 2 — NUMBER 3

in this issue

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## Kosovo — A House Divided

The power of the gospel is bringing light to Kosovo — a nation darkened by generations of war and ethnic division.

BY KRISTEL ORTIZ

\* For ease of reading, Assemblies of God and Assemblies of God World Missions will be shortened to AG and AGWM, respectively, throughout this issue.

next issue —

Tiny and proud, Estonia survived centuries of domination by Christian nations that did not represent Christ well. Now is the time for Estonians to meet the real Jesus.

Fog rolls heavily across the valley. Driven by a cold wind, it moves uninterrupted except by a solitary graveyard. The gates at the cemetery's entrance are shrouded in spiderwebs ornamented by trembling drops of water.

The fog creeps through the webs and then lightly, almost ghostlike, drifts across the graves of slaughtered Albanian soldiers. This is a martyrs cemetery – one of many found in the tiny Balkan nation of Kosovo.



By Kristel Ortiz

Photography by Gaylon Wampler

# KOSOVO

## A House Divided



Above and center: The cobbled road to Gazimestan ends in an ancient Cyrillic curse.

Flags of Albania, not Kosovo, blow grimly over every stone. As a final, bone-chilling touch, the face of each slain soldier stares up from his stone, carved with unsettling detail alongside his name and the dates of his birth and death.

Not far away, an imposing stone tower pierces the

fog. The site, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded 24/7 by armed soldiers, bears an ancient Cyrillic curse. A cross at the entrance serves as a symbol — not of salvation, but of Serbian dominance.

The tower, called Gazimestan, was built nearly 600 years ago. The curse written on it

rails against Serbs who did not answer their warlord's call to arms, and Serbia's resulting defeat in battle. Buried under the tower is the disembodied heart of the Ottoman prince to whose forces they lost.

The martyrs cemetery and Gazimestan are macabre embodiments of the war, bit-

terness and violence that have haunted Kosovo for a thousand years. The details of both ancient and recent wars are remembered and rehearsed with equal vividness and handed down verbally from generation to generation.

With each telling, emotional scars are pried open, scabs

are ripped off, and wounds between Albanians and Serbs, who together make up the majority of Kosovo's nearly 2 million residents, fester and decay.

## History of a Tumultuous Nation

The Ottoman Empire ruled the area now known as Kosovo from 1455-1912. The marks of the Ottomans' Eastern culture are still evident in many ways, including the presence of Islam among the Albanian population.

Albanians are an ancient people believed to have descended from inhabitants of the Balkans, particularly the Illyrians whom the apostle Paul mentions visiting in Romans 15:19. They possess a deeply ingrained national identity that includes identifying themselves as Muslims, despite having virtually no actual commitment to the religion itself. For centuries that identity has held strong, even as Kosovo became part of Yugoslavia, then Serbia, and since 2008 when the government declared independence.

Serbian residents of Kosovo are equally loyal to their cultural identity as Orthodox

Christians, and view Albanians as weak for having converted to Islam. Serbs have inhabited the Balkans since it was ruled by the Byzantine Empire. They ruled the area of Kosovo from 1180-1455 and still feel it belongs to them. Several important Orthodox monasteries are located in Kosovo, and Orthodox traditions are deeply engrained. One of the monasteries is as important to Serbians in Kosovo as the Vatican is to Catholics in Rome.

In the 1980s, as the nation of Yugoslavia began to fracture, Kosovo's Serbian population put increasing pressure and restrictions on Albanians. Eventually the Albanians formed militias and rebelled, resulting in a gruesome war. Though peace has tentatively reigned since 1999, a constant undercurrent of tension necessitates the ongoing presence of various international peacekeeping agencies.



Albanians possess a deeply ingrained national identity that includes identifying themselves as Muslims, despite having virtually no actual commitment to the religion itself.



# kosovo

A House Divided

*“Albanian Kosovars are very open and loving toward Americans, but that is not to be confused with openness to Christ.”*

— Steve Frey



The Frey family: (left to right) David, Selah, Steve, Naomi, Lisa, Jonathan, and Raema

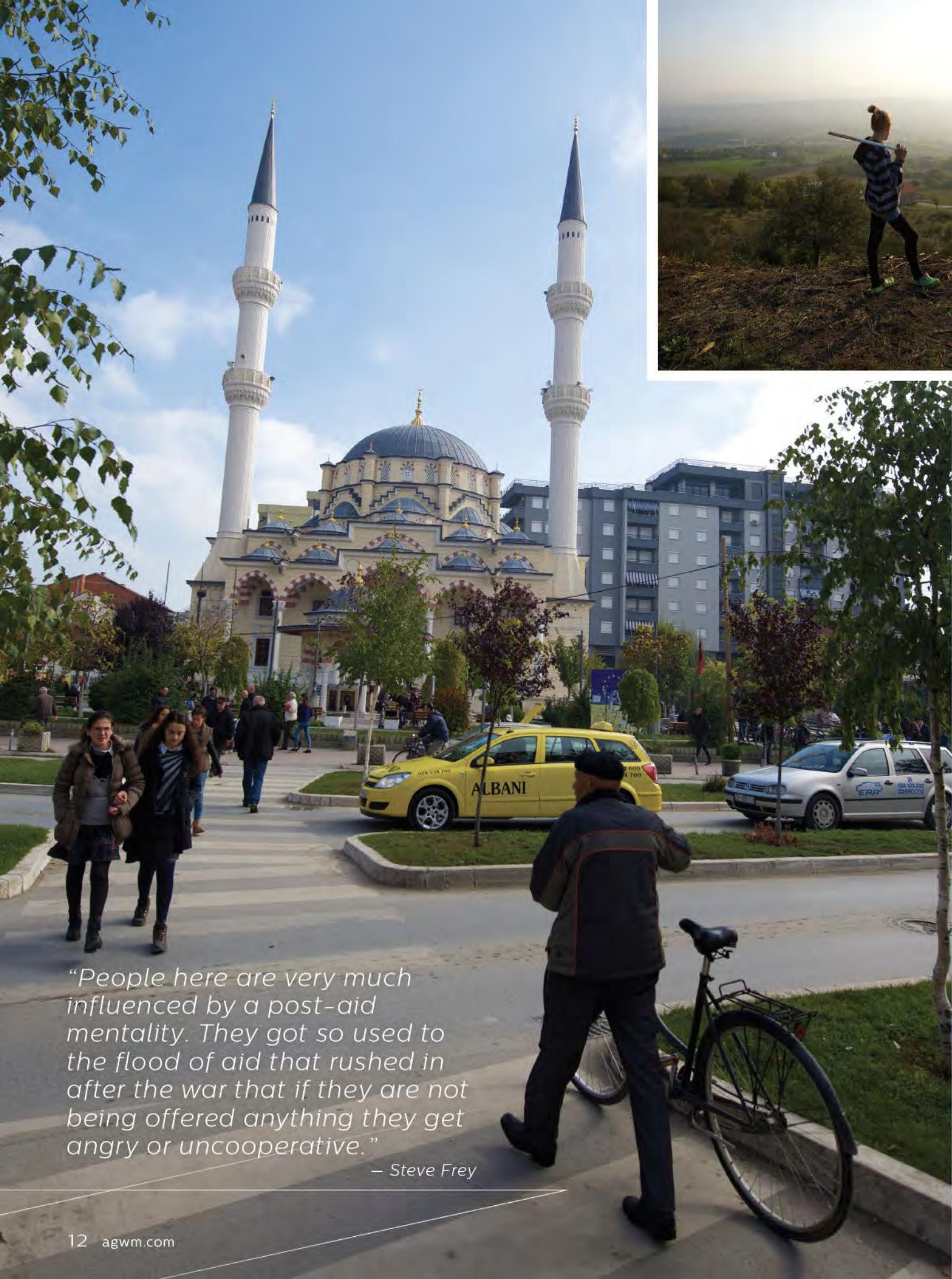
“It is said that every generation in Kosovo has a war,” AGWM missionary Steve Frey (pronounced FRY) says. “Since the ethnic cleansing that was conducted against them in the 1990s, Albanians are afraid of what might happen to them if peacekeeping agencies pull out too soon. They feel Serbs are violent and oppressive, while Serbs feel Albanians are two-faced and untrustworthy. The word *Balkan* means ‘division.’ Division has plagued this part of the world for a very long time.”

## Broken Nation, Broken Church

Steve and his wife, Lisa, arrived in Kosovo in 2004 with three young children — David, Raema and Jonathan — for their first missionary term. Since then, two more children — daughters Naomi and Selah — have joined the family. Together the Freys are pioneering a church in Mitrovica, a city of about 120,000 located in northern Kosovo.

The task they face is daunting. They are aware of only five evangelical Christians in Mitrovica, and the total number of evangelicals in all of Kosovo is estimated at less than 1,500.

“Albanian Kosovars are very open and loving toward Americans, but that is not to be confused with openness to Christ,” Steve and Lisa share. “They are friendly and polite, but they will start leaving clues that they are not interested in what we have to say.”



*“People here are very much influenced by a post-aid mentality. They got so used to the flood of aid that rushed in after the war that if they are not being offered anything they get angry or uncooperative.”*

— Steve Frey



The few pastors in Kosovo are treated the same way. There are only 32 evangelical churches in the country, and most of them are directly linked to American or European churches for financial help and other support.

“There is no indigenous Fellowship here, and it is very difficult for existing churches to cut financial ties,” Steve

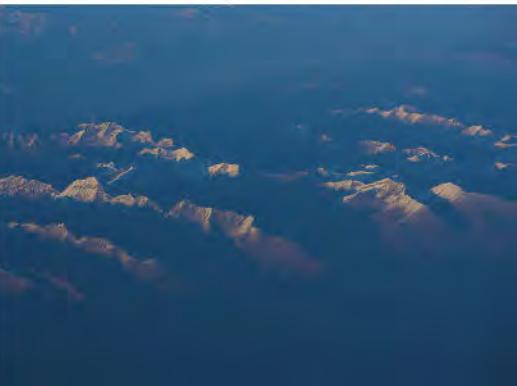
says. “People here are very much influenced by a post-aid mentality. They got so used to the flood of aid that rushed in after the war that if they are not being offered anything they get angry or uncooperative. But if you offer them something, they are very suspicious of you.”

“That post-aid mentality is the enemy of the church and of progress,” Lisa adds. “We’ve worked hard to find ways around it. For example, we once had a neighbor who was in desperate need of firewood one winter. We took it to her, and in return she came to our house and made lunch once a week for several months. We bought the food, of course, but cooking lunch gave her dignity and also kept others from becoming jealous. Older foundations were built on activities and aid. Our foundations are built on Jesus and prayer.”

Previous attempts to establish the church in Kosovo included paying Kosovars to pastor local congregations. When the salaries dried up, nearly all the pastors got angry and quit. No real burden for or commitment to ministry had taken root.

One exception to that rule is the first known Kosovar believer, who planted the first church in Pristina, Kosovo’s capital city, 30 years ago. Through this church, a man was saved after he walked past it with his sick mother. They went inside, and the mother was healed. As a result, the entire family received Christ, and the man is now a pastor.

*Kosovo’s cities and countryside still bear the marks of war.*



# **kosovo**

A House Divided

“The family honor and name are of utmost importance in Kosovo, and giving up Islam will result in shunning and possibly violence,” says Steve. “People don’t like to make a decision for Christ alone. They want their whole family to do it with them. Many women are believers, but they live as underground believers in very abusive marriages.”

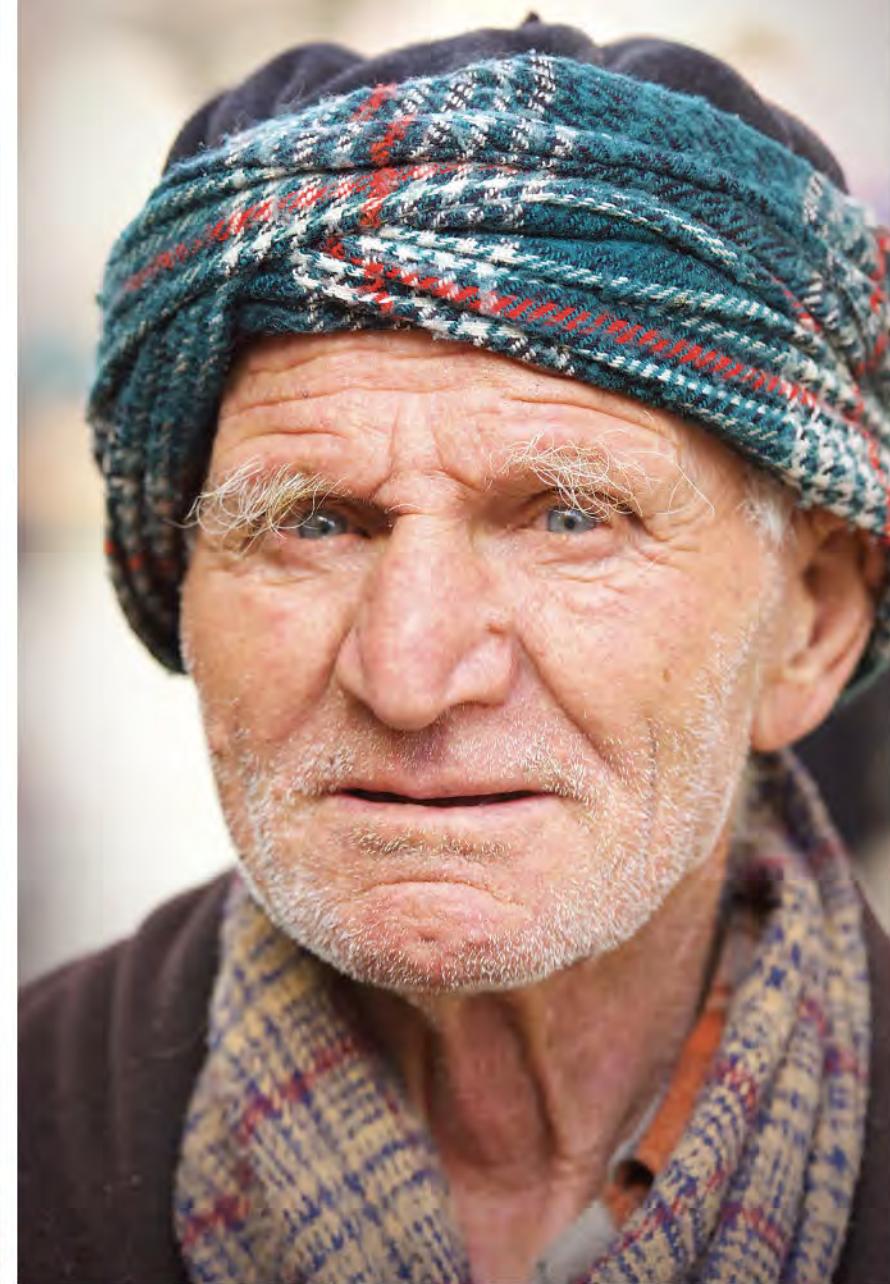
Steve and Lisa conduct home visits, pray personally with individuals, and work to befriend Kosovars around them. In a country with a family structure that is often deeply dysfunctional, they also provide an example of a better way.

Many men have made fun of Steve for not being abusive toward his family and for helping with chores, like washing dishes. They view such acts of kindness as signs of weakness. Yet they continue to watch Steve’s example, and many have asked him to help them learn how to treat their wives and lead their homes the way he does.

The Freys hope to organize prayer and worship services with Kosovar pastors and other Christian workers in their area, but their efforts will take time.

“Separatism is a killer,” Steve comments. “There is so much pride and bitterness rooted here that it even affects how believers treat their brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Trades – and grudges – are handed down in Kosovar families.



# KOSOVO

A House Divided



*"We have to work together. If you are alone here, the devil will pick you off one by one. We can't afford to give in to petty issues."*

— Steve Frey

## Strength in Numbers

Despite the deeply entrenched ethnic and religious lines throughout Kosovo, the Freys have found friends and collaborators.

They enjoy the friendship of missionaries from another sending group, who also have a large family. Together the two families collaborate and dream together about reaching Mitrovica.

The Freys also partner with Sebastian and Georgiana Vasarhelyi, missionaries sent by the Romanian Pentecostal Union (a member of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship). The couple arrived with their baby son, Amos, in 2013 and plan to plant churches in Kosovo. They currently are studying Albanian.

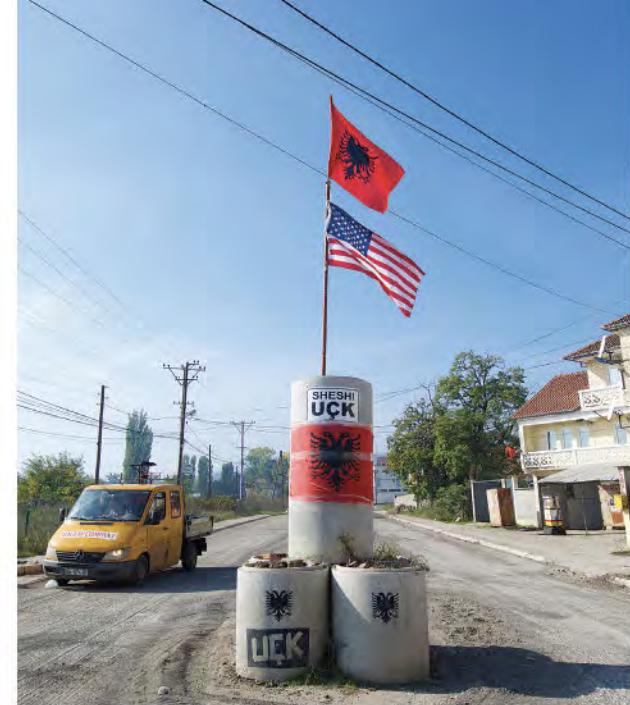
"We have a little advantage over Americans in that area," Sebastian says with a chuckle. "Romanian shares between 500 and 1,000 words with Albanian."

Since Romania lies within the Balkan area of Southern Europe, Sebastian and Georgiana are also able to understand the lifestyle in Kosovo more quickly and to empathize with Kosovars in the aftereffects of communist rule.

"Romanian Pentecostals had all they could do to survive while communism ruled our country during the Soviet Union era," Georgiana explains. "After its fall we became stronger and started sending missionaries to other countries."

Together, the Freys and Vasarhelyis began an international fellowship that meets every Sunday.

"International believers living in Kosovo are desperate for fellowship," Lisa says. "Also, when missionaries or church leaders here don't work together, church youth take up their offenses and lines are drawn. Taking sides, even when it isn't necessary, is a deeply ingrained habit here."



Georgiana and Sebastian Vasarhelyi



Steve agrees. "We so appreciate friends who come alongside each other and work together. Division runs deep in Kosovo, and having a unified, multinational, multigenerational team is key. We have to work together. If you are alone here, the devil will pick you off one by one. We can't afford to give in to petty issues."



A mountain farmer tends to his land near homes left rotting after the war.  
(Below) A fragment of Zvecan Castle.



## The Power of a Structure

Deep feelings are linked to buildings in Kosovo. Homes (even beautiful ones) that were inhabited by Albanians on Serbian-claimed land are left to rot. Serbs refuse to set foot in buildings “defiled” by the other side. Albanians do the same with homes formerly inhabited by Serbs. As a result, rotting buildings can be seen from one end of the country to the other.

Built around 600, Zvecan Castle was inhabited by a Serbian lord who eventually committed suicide. Sitting atop a mountain towering over Mitrovica, the castle is known as a haunted place. Throughout the

centuries, Orthodox Byzantines and Ottoman Muslims ruled it. Below it, the stone foundation of a Byzantine-era church lies buried beneath a prejudice-charged cross defiantly painted on the side of the mountain.

Down in Mitrovica, on a bustling corner, stands a large building called Hope Center. Though a much smaller and simpler structure than Zvecan Castle, it too has a history — one of hope, disappointment, defeat, and renewed hope.



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Built shortly after the war as a relief distribution center, the building came to embody the plans and goals of various agencies that served in Kosovo for short periods of time. As each entity left, the building evolved into a storage space for forsaken supplies and dreams.

In 2014, the building became Steve and Lisa's responsibility. The couple both chuckles and cringes as they talk about it.

"The building had a history of betrayal and abuse, and had left bad feelings," Lisa says. "We have had to learn to forgive it!"

Steve nods. "We really just wanted to bulldoze it. One man who worked here before us was shot at, and at one point he was grabbed, blindfolded, and thrown into the back of a van. As it turned out, the perpetrators were members of an al-Qaida cell based across the street."

(Left) The Hope Center. (Middle) The Freys have family prayer before embarking on the day's work.

Terrorists and bad feelings aside, Steve and Lisa are moving forward with clearing out and restoring the building.

They are adding a third story to house missions teams, and making renovations to allow training, church services, outreaches, and distribution of supplies. They also hope to start a 24/7 prayer chain in the building. Every morning they go there to pray and worship.

"Until recently the building was the centerpiece. It owned the work here. The opposite needs to be true — that building needs to be used by people, not to use people," Lisa says firmly.



## The Face of Torment

Violet was 9 years old when her family fled into the mountains to escape Serbian forces. She, her parents, and her two brothers took a bag of potatoes to eat. Their home and the remainder of their belongings were burned to the ground.

In the mountains, Violet's nightmare took another hellish turn when she became separated from her family. For 24 hours she was nowhere to be found. When at last she was returned to her parents, Violet was not the same girl.

Today 25-year-old Violet never speaks, and she resists eating and drinking. Unless heavily medicated, she runs from room to room in her parents' home, screaming uncontrollably and gnawing bed linens, shoes, and other strange things.

Her black eyes resemble those of a wild animal. Her papery skin is stretched painfully across protruding bones and carved with deep wrinkles.

Her expression is one of ceaseless torment.

Violet's family, who are Muslim, despair at her condition. They have never learned what happened to her in the mountains that day.

"I am so very sad, as is my husband," the mother tells Lisa, her eyes welling with tears. "She is our daughter. She was a normal girl, but she has lost her mind with fear."



Lisa visits with  
Violet's mother.

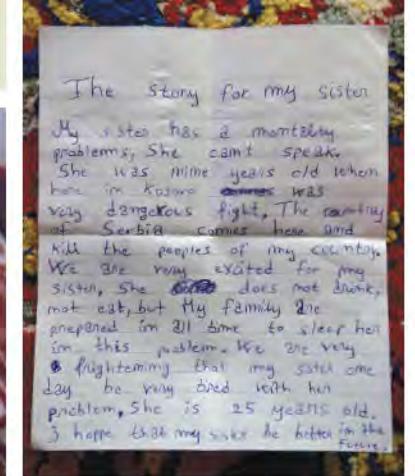
*Violet's nightmare took another hellish turn when she became separated from her family. For 24 hours she was nowhere to be found. When at last she was returned to her parents, Violet was not the same girl.*



# KOSOVO

A House Divided

(Below) The Freys visit with Violet's family.  
(Middle) Lisa Frey with Violet. (Top right) Violet's brother's letter. (Bottom right) Violet's brother.



Lisa's visits are a shock to the family — a shocking glimmer of light in a very dark world.

When the Freys enter Violet's bedroom, she screams and grabs at her blankets.

"I speak the peace of Jesus to you," Lisa says tenderly. "Do you know who Jesus is, Violet? He loves you. He is here with you."

As she talks, Lisa sits down beside Violet's pillow and begins to smooth her hair. She takes Violet's hand.

Steve stands quietly beside his wife, smiling kindly at Violet when her eyes dart frantically toward him. He prays for Violet and speaks Scripture over her, particularly Isaiah 61:1: "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (NIV).

Violet becomes quiet in the presence of Jesus. Her free hand still flutters nervously across the blanket, pulling stray bits of fuzz and popping them into her mouth. But she is listening.

As Steve and Lisa prepare to leave the home, they hug Violet's mother and assure her they will be back.

"God has better plans for Violet than this life," they tell her. "And your family has not been forgotten, even all these years after the war. We will see you again."



Steve and Lisa have recently befriended Violet's family and begun the traditional home visits that include bringing small gifts.

In a culture that refuses to acknowledge the weakness or pain left by the wars that have wracked it, people like Violet must be ignored. So Steve and

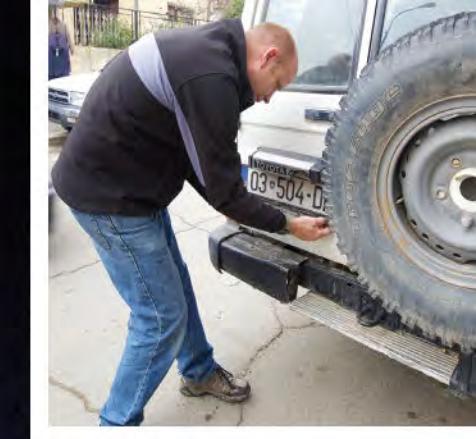
## Ongoing Challenges

Riots and protests are still regular occurrences across Kosovo. Every city and town in the country has two names — an Albanian one and a Serbian one. Both groups maintain their own languages — Albanian and Serbian.

Serbs, who view Kosovo as an illegal state, will target vehicles bearing license plates from the Albanian side of town, so Albanian Kosovar drivers (and the Freys) dutifully remove their license plates in a

gesture of respect before entering Serbian parts of Mitrovica. Across the nation, land mines from the last war still litter Kosovo's mountains, rendering it unwise to travel far off the beaten paths.

The war destroyed Kosovo's economy and rendered it undesirable to foreign investors. Albanian-run factories were bombed during the war, so most jobs are now in construction, farming, or family-run shops. About half the population is unemployed.



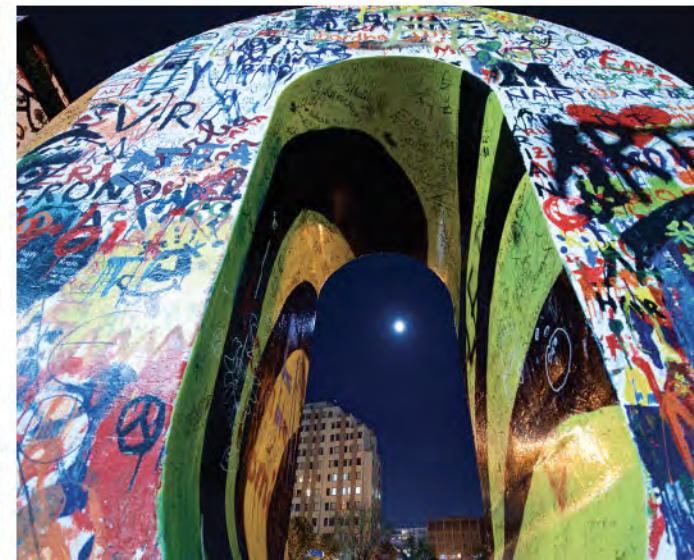
Steve removes his license plate before entering Serbian communities.

War and economic conditions have also affected Kosovo's age distribution.

About half the population is under 25, and Steve and Lisa have observed that this group is the most spiritually open. Other groups are also aware of this fact and are attempting to influence them.



*About half the population is under 25, and Steve and Lisa have observed that this group is the most spiritually open.*



Mitrovica's mosque is a popular gathering place for Albanian Kosovar men.



Terrorist groups like ISIS seek to prey on bored, angry young men in war-torn places and come seeking to radicalize. Last summer four young men with ISIS ties were intercepted on their way to poison Pristina's main water supply.

"These are people without hope, and they live in very rocky spiritual soil. Hope is a concept that has long been lacking here," Steve says.

"Prayer and fasting are all that can change that soil," Lisa states.

## Codes, Keys and Candles

Among Albanian Kosovars, an ancient code of ethics — the Code of Kanun — rules. Some claim it originated from biblical texts, but no one can say for sure. The code prizes hospitality, family honor, and blood loyalty. Lying, stealing, and honor killings are perfectly acceptable as long as a person does not shame his or her family in the process.

Steve shakes his head as he talks about the code and the behaviors it has created.

"We have been in Kosovo for 11 years," he says, "and on some days we feel we have so little to show for it. We've been beating our heads against the wall, praying for God to show us how to break through all these strongholds. And He has been faithful to supply us with Scriptures and solutions."





Steve explains that the three main bondages gripping Kosovo — division, nationalistic pride, and witchcraft mixed with folk Islam — must be approached with exactly the opposite spirit these bondages espouse.

"We have to face division with long-term love, pride with unity and humility, and spiritism with God's spirit and power. Perseverance is key," he says.

And the Freys are determined to persevere.

"The first night Lisa and I arrived in Kosovo with our children, the power in our home went out, leaving us in the pitch dark. We had one candle, but in that kind of darkness even such a tiny light was bright. That night has come to symbolize our lives in Kosovo. It is very dark here, and we are small. But we are still burning."

KRISTEL ORTIZ  
is a staff writer for AGWM.

To view more photography of Kosovo, go to [agwm.com/wvphotos](http://agwm.com/wvphotos).

*"We have to face division with long-term love, pride with unity and humility, and spiritism with God's spirit and power. Perseverance is key." — Steve Frey*



Lisa Frey, missionary to Kosovo

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Your faithful and generous giving to your local church's missions program through monthly faith promises and offerings enables our missionaries to:

**reach the lost  
plant churches  
train leaders  
serve the poor**



**so all can hear the saving message of Jesus**