A Common Place

Volume 20 Number 3 Summer 2014

Bringing God's blessing to the whole world
J RON BYLER
MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3)

As Christians, we believe God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 to bless the whole world. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 4 that, as followers of Jesus Christ, this promise is for us as well—through us, all the families of the world will be blessed.

For more than 90 years, MCC has brought together Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Canada and the U.S. to help share God's blessing to the whole world. Today, we join with churches, partner organizations and communities in some 60 countries to work in relief, development and peace in the name of Christ.

In this issue of A Common Place, you will find testimonies of how God's blessing is being shared.

Explore MCC work in Ukraine helping to care for people living with HIV, or in Cambodia encouraging communities to pool their resources to expand small businesses and begin new ones.

Read about how MCC's Global Family education program is touching the lives of children in Bolivia and Indonesia, and see how an MCC worker is partnering with teachers in Brethren in Christ schools in Zambia.

I was privileged recently to visit Global Family projects in Kenya, Burundi and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Mutaho, Burundi, MCC's annual investment of about $25,000 supports 23 teachers and administrators who are teaching almost 500 children from the marginalized Batwa people.

"MCC has done so many things for us and we are not able to adequately express our gratitude," one teacher told me.

Through MCC, you are part of bringing God's blessing to the whole world. Thank you for your generosity.

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Indonesia
To school by boat
In Enggros, a community of stilt houses on a coastal shore in Papua, Indonesia, getting to school is not as easy as walking down a street. Each morning, seventh-grader Alfrida Hamasyeb must make a boat trip, either in her father's boat or by boat taxi, then, if she is to be on time, take a van or motorcycle taxi another 1.5 miles to school. MCC's Global Family education program provides funds for transportation, making it more likely that Hamasyeb and other pupils will be in class regularly and have more of a chance to succeed in their studies.

Canada/U.S.
New MCC resource
A new MCC booklet, available free in the U.S. and Canada, helps individuals and churches better understand the dangers of pornography. "Pornography: Lies, Truth and Hope" explores some of the lies about men, women and sex that are told by pornography and offers ideas for loving and effective action in order to prevent and overcome the harm it causes. Order online from resources.mcc.org or by calling 888.563.4676, or view the booklet online at abuse.mcc.org.

Ethiopia
School supplies for refugees
The simple contents of MCC school kits were special gifts for Somali refugee Nimeco Abdifatih Adam, who did not have notebooks for two of her subjects until receiving the kit. "I was just using old papers to take notes in class," she says. The 14-year-old also rejoiced in the cloth school kit bag that became her backpack. Before she says, her pencils fell out of the plastic grocery bag she used, and it was hard to distinguish her plastic bag from that of other students. Over the last year, MCC provided 13,750 school kits to students in camps for Somali refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia.

School kits
THESE ARE MCC’S MOST-REQUESTED ITEM. NOTEBOOKS AND PENCILS ARE TREASURES FOR FAMILIES WHO STRUGGLE TO AFFORD BASIC SCHOOL SUPPLIES AND BRING HOPE TO REFUGEE FAMILIES.

1 large pencil eraser
(NEW items only)

1 medium pencil
(NEW items only)

2 large pencils
(NEW items only)

1 large pencil case

4 spiral or perforated notebooks
(8.5 in x 11 in and 70 sheets)

8 unsharpened pencils

1 ruler (flat, flexible plastic; including both 30 cm and 12 in)

12 colored pencils (in packaging)

Key:
School kits are distributed in useful, double-drawstring cloth bags (11 in x 16 in). You may sew the bag yourself, request bags from a drop-off location or donate contents that we will place in a bag. For bag instructions or drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.

A Common Place is printed on Rolland Enviro100 Satin, a chlorine-free paper that is FSC- and EcoLogo-certified, and processedochrom 18% recycled fibers, using biogas energy.

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Cover story

Restoring lives, bettering health in Ukraine

Ukraine has the highest HIV rate in Europe. In response, MCC’s partners share practical help, hope and the encouragement they’ve found in faith.

BY JULIE BELL
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

For many, being released from prison is a chance to start over. For 42-year-old Vladimir Kozlov of Nikopol, Ukraine, it felt like a death sentence.

Kozlov, an intravenous drug user for much of his life, had spent 17 years in prison off and on and had contracted diseases including tuberculosis, hepatitis C and AIDS. By the time he was released in 2008, he weighed just over 100 pounds.

“They actually released me 11 months early because they didn’t want me to die inside the prison,” Kozlov says. “They wanted me to die on the street.”

His situation is not unusual in Ukraine, where it’s estimated that up to 40 percent of inmates have HIV. Agencies that work with them say critically ill inmates sometimes are abandoned to the streets so the prison can avoid the expense and paperwork of treating them.

It’s a troubling glimpse into a larger reality.

Ukraine has the highest HIV infection rate in Europe. And those who work with HIV and AIDS note two unsettling trends: Many who have HIV, especially former prisoners, are left without adequate resources to care for their health or sustain themselves, and HIV rates are increasing in the under-30 population.

“People are living in awful situations. That’s why almost all of MCC’s funding in Ukraine is dedicated to HIV and AIDS projects,” says Ruth Plett of Kitchener, Ont. Plett and her spouse, Krystan Pawlikowski, are MCC’s East Europe representatives.

Through Ukrainian partners, MCC is providing housing, food, medical assistance and items such as blankets and hygiene and school kits. MCC also supports activities and health education for young people most at risk of contracting the virus, and visits to prisons and schools where information on HIV and AIDS is shared.

Forty-one-year-old Oksana Plekhuan sits on the edge of her bed in a rented room of a house in Nikopol, which is in Ukraine’s Dnepropetrovsk region.

She began using drugs when she was 18 and spent most of her life in prison. By 2010 when she was released for the last time, Plekhuan had been living with AIDS for more than a decade.

She recalls that she was in so much pain and her legs were so swollen that she was using two tree branches as crutches to help her walk. Plekhuan was sleeping on a bench when a worker with an MCC partner, New Life Charitable Fund, found her. The...
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A worker took her to one of the New Life halfway houses and gave her food, clothing and medication, along with a place to stay.

“In our country nobody wants these people,” says New Life’s project manager Natalia Mezentseva, who helped begin the organization after being released from prison and overcoming her own addiction. (Read more about her on p. 10.) “Our work is to help them in whatever way we can.”

In Ukraine, that often means helping people apply to regain the identification document that they need to receive social services. Ukrainians are required to obtain this document when they are 16 and to have it throughout their lives; without it they cannot get a job or apartment.

But many prisoners no longer have the document by the time they are released—some because it was lost before their arrest, some because they never got it back after their incarceration, MCC partners say.

Plekhuan received the document for the first time with the help of New Life. Before, she says, she was in and out of prison so often she didn’t need it.

In the halfway house, her health stabilized, although she is not well enough to work and her body remains covered in wounds from years of intravenous drug use. New Life helped her find a room to rent and is now seeking a permanent home for her in a dormitory for people living with AIDS.

“By myself, I wouldn’t be able to do this,” she says.

When MCC’s partners come to people such as Plekhuan, they offer more than housing or help with documents. They bring their own stories, sharing the encouragement they have found.

In Zaporozhye in southeast Ukraine, Slavik Lobatch, a volunteer with MCC partner A New Chance in Life, remembers when returning to prison was like going home because he had spent so much time behind bars.

He found hope in the Bible when volunteers came to the prison to meet with inmates.

“It was like little drops of kindness. The Gospel and these kind people helped me restore my life,” he says.

Today, Lobatch, who was last released in 2000, offers that same hope in his visits to prisons in villages around the region, talking with inmates about the Gospel, connecting with those living with HIV and AIDS and sharing information about the disease.

In our country nobody wants these people. Our work is to help them in whatever way we can.”

New Life Charitable Fund helps provide people with housing as well as other assistance. Vitalik Gorbunov works on a bicycle in one of the New Life homes.

Vera Krakova, Oleg Ruchitsa, Vitalik Gorbunov and Sergei Zhukov participate in a group counseling session aiming to improve the psychological health of people living with HIV.

Slavik Lobatch, standing in a home for men run by MCC partner A New Chance in Life, brings his own story of struggle and faith as an encouragement to others who face similar challenges.
At a high school in downtown Zaporozhye, Oksana Aleksandrova, a volunteer with MCC partner Word of Life, stands before 16- and 17-year-olds in a health education class, animated as she warns them about the dangers of HIV and AIDS.

“We can save ourselves from this terrible infection,” she urges. “This is your life. Think about it. How do you want to live it?”

It’s a critical question.

HIV infection rates are increasing overall in Ukraine, but the most rapid growth is for the group between 16 and 30 years of age.

In 2010, experts reported that 80 percent of the people recently infected were younger than 28 years, many of them teenagers. That transmission of the virus is increasingly coming through sexual activity, rather than the intravenous drug use of the past.

Plett has noticed that MCC partners are troubled not only by these numbers but also by the erosion of families and how many youth they see who do not have strong parental models.

“If things don’t change with this generation,” she stresses, “what happens to the next generation, and the one after that?”

Zhenya Shuvalov runs a youth club for 14- to 17-year-olds on behalf of A New Chance in Life. “These kids say to me ‘my parents are alcoholics. My mother was crying all night because her third boyfriend left her,’” he says. “They say, ‘Can you help me?’”

Natalia Tereshenko, who leads a summer camp for youth ages 7 to 16 through Word of Life, encounters children who have been living on the streets or in tents or basements in the winter and are sexually active, sometimes with adults, she says. Many drink or sniff glue and have contracted diseases, including HIV.

At camp, children are given medical attention and the chance to enjoy outdoor activities. They are told about HIV and AIDS, and Tereshenko encourages them to make contact with her year-round if they need help.

It’s another piece in a patchwork of caring — like the kindness that helped change the course of Lobatch’s life when he was in prison — that partners are counting on to help reverse the upswing of HIV, especially among young people.

“I believe every child is valuable,” says Aleksandrova, who volunteers her time to teach the sessions about HIV to high school students. “I believe I can save them from this disease. If I am not hopeful, what else is there?”

Julie Bell is senior writer and editor for MCC Canada. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Man.

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**Give a gift—Health**

Support efforts to care for the sick, promote basic health and prevent the spread of HIV.

$68 provides materials to teach teens in Ukraine the dangers of AIDS and drug and alcohol abuse.

Send contributions in the enclosed envelope, give online at donate.mcc.org or contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
I am the project manager at New Life Charitable Fund in Nikopol, Ukraine, where I work with former prisoners, with those living with HIV and AIDS and with others in need.

I believe that every person is born with a soft and clean heart. But as we grow up there are different circumstances and all of this piles up in our hearts, in our lives and minds. I know from my own experience that only God can change our hearts and minds.

I grew up in a normal family and was a good girl who studied well. But I was looking for something new, a forbidden heart. I started to hate drugs very much. I tried drugs and started to get used to them.

After that, miracles started to happen. My father left me an apartment when he died, and I sold it and split the money with my brother and sister. I had enough money to start my own business buying and reselling clothes. And I came back to my apartment and said, “Dear Lord if those people have that attitude, please change my heart. Please give me that same attitude so that I can love other people.”

God changed my heart and started to give me this love. With Olga, I went to the places where homeless people lived near garbage and where prostitutes stayed and tried to earn money. A team came together, and we formed an organization to do this work.

We don’t always have positive results. We are not always thanked for what we do. But if there is one person whose life has changed, that’s more important than the people we wanted to help but couldn’t.

As I analyze my life, I believe that God was with me all of the time, even when I was making bad decisions. I am thankful for all the circumstances of my life because through them I came to know God. If all this hadn’t happened I wouldn’t have the life that I have now. And thanks to my new life, I can help others.

Natalia Mezentseva is project manager for New Life Charitable Fund, an MCC partner in Nikopol, Ukraine.
Touching the lives of children in Bolivian prisons
MCC’s Global Family education program supports a Bolivian church effort to provide meals and school support.

BY EMILY LOEWEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA LINTON

The courtyard of the women’s prison in Cochabamba, Bolivia, is a riot of color and sound. The central, open-air space could be mistaken for an outdoor restaurant. A collection of red and white plastic tables is topped with bright yellow umbrellas, where couples sit to eat food purchased from one of the stalls that surround the square.

But because this is prison, once the couples are done eating they won’t go home together. Husbands will leave their wives behind the locked door, along with their children.

In Bolivia, when parents go to prison, children sometimes live there with them—often because no relatives can take them in or parents don’t feel good about other options such as children’s homes. Officially, only children younger than 6 are allowed to live in the prisons; in practice, though, older children can end up living there as well.

This prison became home for Jhosselin Dorado Ardaya when she was 10 years old and her mother was convicted of drug trafficking, a common charge in this region of Bolivia where lack of job opportunities and education lead people into the easy money of the drug trade.

She remembers learning to share a small cell with her mother and two of her siblings.

“At first it was really difficult and I wasn’t used to it at all,” she says. “We slept in a really tiny room on the floor with the four of us all together.” This was actually a step up. Bolivian prisons don’t have assigned rooms. Prisoners pay bribes to guards to get a cell and avoid sleeping in the hall.
And, Dorado Ardaya recalls, the family struggled at first with having enough to eat. In this system, food allowances are enough only for the adult who is incarcerated; prisoners are expected to work within the prison or have family members send them money to provide for the children with them.

But things changed when her mother heard about a program at Casa de la Amistad that provides meals and school support to children living in the prisons. Every morning, staff members pick up children and bring them to the center, where they eat three meals a day, are escorted to school and get homework help or counseling if needed.

Casa de la Amistad, run by the social development wing of the Baptist church in Bolivia (Organización Bautista de Desarrollo Social or OBADES), receives support from MCC’s Global Family education program.

There are 320 children in the program, all of them live with a parent in one of the four prisons in Cochabamba. While the government gives the center some money for the food, it doesn’t receive funding for school supplies or to pay the teachers and psychologist.

Carla Ninet Bottani Peña has been the psychologist at Casa de la Amistad for 15 years, helping to assess and work with the young people in the program who need extra assistance. Life in prison can be stressful for children. They see more aggression than normal, and they live with limited resources and freedom; some face abuse or neglect. “We work also with the parents to help them focus on the well-being of the child,” she says Bottani Peña.

That’s why Casa de la Amistad also decided to start a work training program for students who had been part of the program but have completed high school. The classes can lead to employment opportunities that students might not otherwise be able to access. With funding from MCC, OBADES is offering scholarships for 20 students, 10 of them from Casa de la Amistad, to complete training programs in fields including graphic design, mechanics and carpentry.

Dorado Ardaya, now 18, received one of the scholarships and started taking beauty classes in August of 2013. She’s excited to learn the new skills and has been practicing on her older sister and staff at Casa de la Amistad. “I like to work with my hands,” she says. “I like to see other people look nice and help them look nice.”

Because there is a high demand in this field, the training will help her contribute more income to her family. “I have three siblings and my mom always struggled to provide for us, and so this was the extra support for me to be able to study,” Dorado Ardaya says.

And, Bottani Peña notes, that chance to study new skills is what’s needed for youth like Dorado Ardaya to step outside the drug trade. “It’s important to break that cycle of the family, that they realize and see other options for themselves,” says Bottani Peña, “another type of life for themselves.”

Emily Loewen is a staff writer for MCC Canada. Nina Linton is a photographer from Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.
Savings groups boost businesses in Cambodia

Pooling savings provides new opportunities to expand existing businesses and begin new ones.

In order to join you have to begin saving first,” Sarat explains. “Every month we each put in what we can. It might be 10,000 riel ($2.50 U.S.) or up to $50 a month or more. We pay ourselves 1.5 percent interest per month, which is a good incentive to save.”

Once people have given a certain amount to the savings group, they can begin to borrow at a rate of 3 percent per month, generally for short-term loans of one to six months.

“I started by borrowing $300 to $500 each time. But now by borrowing $3,000 to $5,000, I have been able to increase the variety of my inventory and therefore increase my customer base and sales,” Sarat says. “Every time I pay back a loan I have more profit and savings than I did before.”

In a space not too much larger than a one-car garage, Sarat has tucked a variety of inventory — baskets of salted dried river fish, cloth sacks of various beans, vats of pickles, totes full of cold soda and soybean drinks on ice, dried noodles, insecticide, cooking oil and much, much more.

And that’s not all. Sarat’s eyes brighten as she talks. “Have I told you about my pigs?” she asks. “I know you need to visit Takeo village but on your way back, stop and I’ll show you my pigs.”

In Takeo village, the store of Mom Chhoeun is much more humble, with maybe a fifth of the inventory in Sarat’s store. Yet since Chhoeun joined a savings group in 2005, she has been able to repair her house, increase her inventory and buy piglets to raise.

“But most important,” she says, walking over to a machine with hoses nearly 4 inches wide on both ends, “is this big water pump we purchased so that we can irrigate our fields.”

Her husband Khut Thon points to one of the only green fields in sight. “We not only get two rice crops a year now, where we only got one before, but my wife and I can grow a third vegetable crop as well.”

In the field Chhoeun pulls up one of the plants by the roots. “See. Peanuts.” She smiles and holds out a bunch. The field holds hundreds of peanut plants, each with 10 or more peanuts under the ground.

That represents a lot of protein in Cambodia, where according to the United Nations 40 percent of all children are chronically malnourished, the bulk of those in rural areas.

“The village savings group has made a huge difference to our family,” Chhoeun says. “I don’t know where we would be without it.”

Back in Trapang Khna village, Sarat walks from her store across the street to her pig shed. She says she started with one piglet. “I wasn’t sure if I knew how to raise one, if it would live or die,” she says. “So the next year I bought three piglets and the next more, and now I have 23. I time them so they are mature right during the Cambodian and Chinese holidays. That way I get maximum value.”

“I am so thankful to the backing of MCC,” she says. “It has made a real difference in many people’s lives.”

Of the 12 participants in her group, 28 are women, she tells me. “It has given us hope for the future,” Sarat says. “Myself, I hope to one day become a wholesaler, which will save people in our village even more money. But that is a ways away. I have a lot to learn before then.”

Michael Bade of Seattle, Wash., is an MCC worker in Cambodia.
Teacher mentor

Name: Michelle Potts

Hometown: Abbotsford, B.C. (Alderbrook Community Church)

Assignment: I work with teachers in Brethren in Christ (BIC) schools in Choma, Zambia, to learn more about their challenges and develop training opportunities. We’ve focused on phonics workshops and resources for early literacy skills, a need that fits my background and education. Zambian teachers have much more experience than I do with the challenges here — including few books, no photocopier and classes of more than 60 students — and I hope to bring them together to learn from one another.

Typical day: Workshops start with “The Alphabet Jive,” a song I used to teach letter names and sounds to my kindergarten class back in Abbotsford. We sing in English and a Zambian colleague leads the song in Chitonga, the local language. We play bingo with beans to mark the cards and talk about how teachers can use bingo for letter sounds, sight words or other material. At 2, we eat together, and by 5, I am home with my husband Andrew and our two children. We read to the children before bedtime, then read books ourselves or play board games.

Joys: Watching teachers play the phonics game we used in workshops with their students and seeing their creativity in putting together materials and games to teach other subjects. Also, the teachers have been so welcoming.

Challenge: Before January, students in second grade and up were taught in English instead of a local language — here it’s Chitonga. Now classes through fourth grade are in a local language. I’m learning Chitonga but don’t speak it well enough to teach a class using it.

Find your place

MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S.

Go to serve.mcc.org, contact your nearest MCC office or follow @servemcc on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

Exquisite eggs

Ukraine is famous for pysanka (pis-ON-ka) eggs, eggs decorated with beautiful, complex patterns. Designs are drawn on an egg in hot beeswax, then the egg is dipped in dye. The process is repeated with more colors. Color these examples of traditional pysanka designs.
An idea born from a summer bike adventure more than two decades ago continues to make thousands of dollars of difference a year for MCC. After joining an annual bicycle ride across Iowa, friends from MCC’s Akron service unit “came back and said, ‘We should be doing this,’” recalls Clark Yoder of Canby, Ore.

The first West Coast MCC bicycle ride was in 1992 and since then, riders have convened every other year for rolling adventures in places such as Washington’s San Juan Islands or, this year, in Idaho’s panhandle. In alternate years, an East Coast ride is held, raising funds for MCC’s work and offering riders the chance to explore areas such as Virginia’s Skyline Drive or New York’s Finger Lakes region.

Going once, going twice… it’s dairy cows for MCC. Thanks to support from the Ontario dairy farming community, an annual heifer sale, sponsored by the Ontario Mennonite Relief Sale, has raised more than $4.2 million to support MCC’s work around the world. Some 3,314 heifers have been sold through the effort, as well as other donated items. All sale costs are covered through donations, including the time of auctioneers such as Brent Walker.