

Prison Saved my Life

A thriving prison ministry in a war zone

One of Ukraine's biggest challenges, before the war, during, and which will continue long after, is drug addiction. Every family in Ukraine is affected. My Husband and I worked in south-central Ukraine from 2004 to 2015. Since then, the church where we worked has been ministered to by Slavik and Katya. Outside of the preaching and teaching his main daily ministry is in two rehab facilities that he has established, helping men and women break free from their addictions.

On the outskirts of Kyiv, a sister ministry operates, Victor Shuka and Slavik were

brought together by their ministries. The Church of Christ in Obolon district runs a prison ministry. In Ukraine drug use and incarceration are even more closely related than they are in the U.S. According to the Ukraine National Drug and Alcohol use report 29,587 drug related offences were recorded in 2021. The number of unreported offences is much higher as corruption in law enforcement fails to report many crimes.

Unfortunately, In Ukraine, once a criminal, always a criminal. The National Library of medicine conducted a study, taking a sample piece of 402 inmates and found inmates very likely to reoffend. The job market is already difficult. They often have very little social support. Friends or family who have been burned too many times, often refuse to support them in any way. It is not possible to find work before they have documentation in order (which often involves having to work through the same barrier of corruption. Meanwhile, they need somewhere to stay. The drug market is a lucrative business, and one that is very enticing to individuals who have nowhere else to go. With all of these obstacles, it doesn't take long for previous offenders to return to selling drugs and quickly return to prison.

Prison conditions are significantly worse than in the states. In 2020, 6,000 were actively sick with tuberculosis. Corrupt guards allow drugs in the prison, and the inmates often share needles resulting in high rates of HIV and Hep C. The rate of incarceration in Ukraine is half that of the United States, yet



suicide is the same. With the war and imprisoned Russian soldiers, the prison populations have soared leading to overcrowding, which will likely see these statistics skyrocket.

In 2004 Victor was a prisoner in Nikolaev, he was invited by a fellow inmate to a Bible study, he hadn't been a spiritual person, but he was bored and so he went. The topic that week was on Mark 5, and for the first time Viktor saw his own image in scripture. He felt exactly like the demon possessed man. He felt like he had been among the tombs and covered in sin. He had no way of escaping from the spiritual bars that held his soul. He heard the gospel and, in that moment, like a switch was flipped, he felt drawn to the life that God had called him too. After study and prayer, he knew this was the direction he was going to go for the rest of his life. He was baptized and while in the prison, started telling others about his faith.

As Jesus was leaving, the demon possessed man begged to go with him, but Jesus said:

“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” Mark 5:19

When Victor was released from prison, He did exactly this, he went home and began to tell his family about his new-found faith. His mother seeing the change in him, became a Christian and his brother and nieces soon followed.

Victor soon found himself back in prison, but not as a repeat offender - he was drawn back with purpose. He began visiting the very prison where he had been, sharing his own testimony of what Jesus had done for him. Zhenya Shevchenko met him while attending the church in Nikolaev. He saw potential in him, so when the prison where he had been incarcerated closed, Zhenya invited him up to Obolon to continue his prison ministry there. Victor now visits three prisons, and he shares the word of God with one-hundred fifty inmates on average every week. Many prisoners have become Christians and do their own



evangelization within the prisons as they serve their own sentences. They even repurposed an old hot tub pool as a baptistry.

When prisoners are released, their old habits, friends and lifestyle await them. The Obolon Church of Christ has developed a program to meet their immediate needs, providing a place to sleep and food to eat while they get documentation together and look for work.

Victor's ministry is very unique, not many churches can do this on the scale that Viktor brings to the ministry. 60% of his congregation in Obolon came to know the Lord through his ministry. His work has had an impact on the congregation in Nikopol as well as many other churches throughout Ukraine. Many women have come to the Lord through women's prison ministries as well.

Valentina and Lucya share their testimony



Lucya left, Valentina right

Valentina and Lucya grew up together in Donetsk. As the girls grew up their paths took them separate ways. Lucya landed herself in jail for the first time when she was only 14 years old. By the time she was 17 she was addicted to drugs. Valentina for other reasons, and at different times, also found herself in prison three times. By chance their paths came together again in the prison colony in Kyiv.

Victor came to the prison to conduct Bible study's he shared the story of the crippled man at the pool of Siloam. He looked directly at Valentina, and said to her, "Do you want to be saved?" All her

life, like the crippled man, she felt like the opportunity for healing was never open to her. In that moment Valentina knew this was the last stop if she continued the road she was on, hell awaited her.

"When I became a Christian, I understood my life was changed. I knew God lived in me, and he had freed me from sin." At that time, not many churches visited the prison, but after my release, I joined Victor in the prison ministry. I cried when my former inmates saw me. They saw such a change in me. I told them there I found freedom from the bonds that held me previously. Since that time, I have worked in the adaptation ministry (this is the term for a halfway house) and have helped many other women get past their addictions and start a new life.

Two years after her conversion, Valentina brought her childhood friend Lucya, to Christ through Victor's ministry. Lucya's criminal background landed her in prison for a total of 27 years. She was thankful for her incarceration as she believed without it, she would be dead. She says she never woke up without a headache. As soon as she awoke, she looked for her next dose. She would do anything to get it. She didn't want to be alive if she couldn't get a dose. She says, "I didn't know there was any other way to live.

All of that is behind me now. The person I am now is not that person I was. People who knew me couldn't believe I was the same person. Now, instead of a headache, I wake up thinking how I can be helpful for others. I have ministered to some of my former friends, I tell them there is another way to live. I even worked in the women's rehab facility in Nikopol for three years before the war started. In our country, drugs are its own war.

The church in Obolon is supported in part by the Ukrainian Bible Institute and in part by Zhenya Shevchenko, the individual who invited Viktor to start the prison ministry. The rest of the funds are raised by the congregation. Currently Victor travels approximately 1,400 miles every month, and the rate of gasoline is close to \$6 USD per gallon. The whole cost is \$2,800 USD a month. To continue this ministry, he is asking for \$300 USD a month.

Currently Nikopol Evangelism works with the rehab facilities on the outskirts of Nikopol, which Slavic runs. We do not have the means to assist the church in Obolon, though we wish we could. We also cannot allocate the resources to being a sponsor or agent for them. It would not be difficult to find someone to translate, but we need a congregation who is willing to take this ministry. The financial obligation is not prohibitive even for a small church which may be looking to get involved.

If you are interested please contact Andrew Green at Nikopolcoc@gmail.com or Katie Green at Keileen1979@gmail.com

Katie Green worked with her husband in Ukraine for eleven years and is now employed by [healing hearts Wisconsin](#)

She and her husband continue to work as Stateside financial agents for the congregation in Nikopol Ukraine.

