

THE KOSOVO WAR

A Call for Peacemakers

By Zdravko Plantak

"I am hungry. No, I am *very* hungry," were the last words that Dijana Daka muttered over the phone before she was ushered into the refugee convoy headed toward the Albanian border. The only woman Adventist pastor in the former Yugoslavia, Daka was ministering in the most difficult of pastorates in Kosovo. Being of Albanian descent, she was forced to flee her home at Serbian gunpoint, like over 1.3 million other Kosovars.

"Personally, I didn't plan on leaving Kosovo," Daka said later in a telephone interview. "I wanted to stay and help my people. However, the bombings and shootings became really bad. Many dead bodies lay in the streets and every so often they would be moved out and buried. It was during this time that I was told by Serbian troops to leave." Although the Church lost contact with Daka at the point she was sent to a refugee camp, members continued to pray for the pastor and her three Djakovica, Kosovo, church members, who were also missing.¹

A month later, someone in England recognized Daka in an international television report from a refugee camp in Albania. The good news was that she was still alive, even though officials did not know exactly where she was. Finally, she made contact with the church and was taken to stay with Caleb Bru, president of the Albanian Mission, in Tirana. "I am thankful to the Lord for the protection he provided during the past six weeks of this terrifying ordeal," says Daka. "I have lost everything, except my faith in my God. I am so happy to be alive!"²

As I write, news is breaking about the possibility of lasting peace in the Balkans. Christian prayers must continue toward peace,³ but they must also be substantiated by efforts and pressures that we put on all decision makers, individually and politically, to reject injustice, to stand for human rights of the oppressed, and to reject unjust wars and violence against innocent people—whether in Kosovo en masse, or individuals in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Also on the news is a report on the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, which occurred on June 4, 1989. As I reflect on the Chinese student march for justice, fairness, and freedom, I think, if only our Adventist people would stand for freedom of press, and march against evil dictators and those whose desire is to destroy and kill and "cleanse" on the basis of ethnicity. If only Adventists would march and protest and be willing to die for the right thing, for peace, for other people's human rights.

Speaking Out Against a War is Not Easy

When the General Conference Office of Public Affairs released "The Seventh-day Adventist Church Statement on the Crisis in Kosovo," April 6, 1999,⁴ critics immediately asked why a statement had not been made earlier

in the 1990s, at the time when Vukovar in Croatia was leveled, when Srebrenica in Bosnia was annihilated, when innocent people and historical monuments in Dubrovnik and Sarajevo were shelled and destroyed. Such questions are legitimate. However, they must not imply that if we have not raised our voice before, we should not ever raise it. Our silent church can and must become an audible community.⁵

The General Conference "Statement" "expresses its grave concern regarding the situation in Yugoslavia, in particular in the Kosovo province, . . . [especially] about the worsening humanitarian situation in Kosovo and elsewhere in the region, with hundreds of thousands of displaced and homeless people." Furthermore, it "rejects the use of violence as a method for conflict resolution, be it ethnic cleansing or bombing," and offers, "in cooperation with the leaders and members of the Church in the Balkan region, to foster a deeper understanding of and greater respect for human rights and non-discrimination, to meet crying human needs, and to work for reconciliation between national, ethnic, and religious communities."⁶ It would have been useful if this official statement had been translated and distributed among the Church leaders, pastors, and lay members in Yugoslavia. Regrettably, and somewhat mysteriously, this was not done.⁷

However, another statement *was* translated and widely distributed among members of the Adventist community, and was given to the official Belgrade media at the very beginning of the bombing of Yugoslavia. Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division wrote this more personal letter to "all brothers and sisters in Yugoslavia" to encourage Adventists caught up in the conflict. One of the things he said was that the attack on Yugoslavia was a "serious mistake." Since there was no mention of the Kosovo humanitarian disaster in this letter and no condemnation of Milosevic's regime, the media made the best use of it for propaganda.⁸ Two weeks later, Adventists referred to this letter in *Vecernje Novosti*, the state-run daily newspaper, to express their loyalty to the Serbian government and to remind a wide readership how early in the conflict "the top leaders of our church in the world declared the attack on our country as a serious mistake."

God's Love Needed Now

Our "progressive" century¹⁰ has been filled with unspeakable cruelty and devastation, authored and orchestrated by those who place ultimate selfishness and deranged motives above all else. In the face of such

forces it becomes even more imperative that the love of God penetrate all spheres of human strife and conflict. God's community should bear the major responsibility in making this love real to those who are treated unjustly. In his inaugural speech, Jesus uttered his purpose of "preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom for the prisoners [and refugees], restoring sight to the blind, releasing the oppressed [implying the oppressed due to ethnicity, religion, or language] and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord." He also exclaimed on the rolling hills of the "Mount of Blessings" at the top of his voice, "Blessed are the peacemakers." (Note, Jesus did not say "Blessed are the peace prayer-warriors," but "peace-makers.") We are that called community; we are called to be his voice and action group.

As we exit the twentieth century certain fundamental questions linger. Have we been the peacemakers? Have our churches been havens of peacemaking or shelters of war cheering? Have we stood on the mountain tops of opportunities and "sung the new song of the Lamb," or have we found shelter in the safety of silence, watching as thousands of innocent victims of injustice, religious hatred, and personal economic interests are killed and maimed and slaughtered? As children of God, where have we been when hundreds of thousands were expelled from their homes and their communities in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo? How loud was the Church's voice in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, where thousands of innocent people were killed and villages annihilated? "Blessed are the [active] peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God!"¹²

"The Adventist hope must manifest and translate itself into deep concern for the well-being of every member of the human family," reads the public statement on human rights released by the General Conference in 1985. Describing the kind of world that we have yet again experienced in the Kosovo crisis, the world "filled with hate and struggle, a world of ideological strife and of military conflicts," Adventists must be "peacemakers and work for worldwide justice and peace under Christ as the head of a new humanity."¹³ That means that we must condemn the actions of governments not only when our members are in danger, but also when freedom of any human being is endangered, regardless of his or her religion or nationality. We should act, speak, and think nonviolently and scream: "Cry Freedom!" Only when we put another human being before ourselves are we part of God's authentic kingdom.¹⁴

"When confronted with this stormy and con-

fused world, the Adventist conscience [must be] aroused. . . . Adventists, by precept and example, must stand and work for peace and good will toward men—and thus be known as peacemakers and bridge builders.”¹⁵ Let this be the case in Kosovo and every region in the future wherever Adventists find themselves in the midst of war and injustice. Baudouin I, King of Belgium, said in an address to the U.S. Congress on May 12, 1959, “It takes twenty years or more of peace to make a man. It takes only twenty seconds of war to destroy him.”¹⁶ Whether the king meant it literally or symbolically, the Balkan crisis has shown that even forty or a hundred years of peace is sometimes not enough to make a man act in “God’s image.”

Dijana Daka, even though suffering because of her nationality and being displaced from her home and work place, said that “she plans on moving back to Kosovo and continuing her pastoral work there.”¹⁷ This implies forgiveness, love of one’s perceived enemies, and reconciliation. This means actively seeking peace and acting in loving mercy. If we could only follow Jesus’ earnest instruction in the war time, but more importantly, during the time of seeming peace, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God!”

Notes and References

1. ANN Bulletin, June 7, 1999. The description of Daka’s ordeal can be found in the same interview. Cf. “Update on the Crisis in the Balkans,” ANN Bulletin, Apr. 28, 1999.
2. ANN Bulletin, May 19, 1999.
3. According to some pastors, the Church in Yugoslavia is presently not allowed to conduct its usual worships because of the announced state of war. Due to this, Adventists meeting on a regular basis call their meetings “Prayers for Peace.”
4. The statement was voted by the General Conference Administrative Committee, April 6, 1999, and released by the General Conference Office of Public Affairs. It can be found on the General Conference web site under “Statements,” and in ANN Bulletin, Adventist News Network, Seventh-day Adventist Church World Headquarters, April 6, 1999.
5. I have dealt in more detail with the issue of Adventists encountering previous situations with a “silent voice” in *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Macmillan Press, 1998).
6. “Seventh-day Adventist Church Statement.”
7. While the Trans-European Division communication director suggested that this statement was translated and given wide circulation among Church leaders, pastors, and churches, as well as the Serbian press (for weeks the requested information for clarification on this point was delayed), none of the Adventist pastors and lay leaders in the region contacted by this writer knew about it, saw it, or knew of it being sent to their congregations. They unanimously point to only one statement that the Trans-European Division distributed

to members in which the NATO bombings were condemned, but in which Kosovo’s humanitarian disaster and Kosovar genocide were not mentioned.

8. The letter was published in the Belgrade daily, *Politika*, Mar. 30, 1999.
9. Miodrag Zivanovic, letter to *Vecernje Novosti*, Apr. 18, 1999; *Politika*, Mar. 30, 1999.
10. In a devastating irony, the twentieth century has seen the greatest growth in the recognition of human rights and concern for their safeguarding as well as a corresponding violation of human rights in such murdering campaigns as Hitler’s gas chambers and concentration camps, Stalin’s Siberian labor camps, Idi Amin’s reign of terror, the ruthless killings of Khmer Rouge, and most recently the “ethnic cleansings” of Slobodan Milosevic. On explanation of “ethnic cleansing” as a euphemism for murder, rape, torture and genocide see in Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning Dispatches on the “Ethnic Cleansing” of Bosnia* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), xvii, xxix.
11. Luke 4:18-19; Matt. 5:9.
12. Matt. 5:9.
13. General Conference President Neal C. Wilson released this public statement on June 27, 1985, at the General Conference session in New Orleans after consultation with the sixteen world vice presidents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The statement can be found on General Conference web site and on pages 39-40 of *Statements, Guidelines & Other Documents: A Compilation*, published in 1996 by the General Conference Communication Department and edited by Ray Dabrowski.
14. Delegates to the fifty-third session of the General Conference adopted “A Statement on the Peace Message to All People of Good Will,” which reads in part: “We call on all Seventh-day Adventists and other people of good will, inasmuch as in them lies, to help create atmospheres of cooperation and brotherhood, leading to exchanges between different cultures and ideological systems and better understanding between men of all races, faiths, and political persuasions.” The statement was adopted by the General Conference session in Dallas, Texas, April 1980, and can be found on the General Conference web site and in *ibid.*, 41.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Cited in Lewis D. Eigen and Jonathan P. Siegel, eds., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Political Quotations* (New York: Macmillan International, 1993), 687.
17. ANN Bulletin, June 7, 1999.

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