

# Reflections On A Trip to Bosnia

by  
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Our trip began as Bob Seiple, the president of World Vision, and I met at 1:00 p.m. Sunday, April 21, at SeaTac Airport to begin our journey to Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia.

In Chicago we met up with Edward Foggs, the president of the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, and continued on to Frankfurt, Germany, where we were joined with John Huffman of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church and chairman of the board of World Vision and also Robert Ricker, who is president of the North American Baptist Church, and Craig Barnes, pastor of National Presbyterian Church of Washington D.C. We flew on to Split, Croatia, together, arriving at 4:15 p.m. Croatia time (nine hours time change from Seattle; it was 7:15 a.m. Monday, Seattle time -- a flight time from Seattle of eighteen hours plus).

## Split, Croatia On The Adriatic Sea

Here in Split we met up with the World Vision staff who were our guides for our time on this trip: Serge Duss, associate director of government relations of World Vision, who has recently spent three years in Russia and speaks several languages; Bruce McConchie, director of Middle East and Eastern Europe for World Vision -- Bruce is from New Zealand, a totally knowledgeable representative of World Vision to this part of the world; Terry Madison, editor of World Vision Magazine, who is a Canadian and has covered World Vision stories around the world.

Once we arrived at our small hotel, the Bellevue (there must be a Bellevue hotel in every country), we met up with Art Beals, Presbyterian Church USA representative and Urban and World Mission pastor from my own University Presbyterian Church (UPC). Art brings very deep understanding and experience to the situation in Eastern Europe. He had already been in the region for two weeks with our UPC people in Albania and Romania.

My roommate for the first night was Bob Ricker, and we walked around this beautiful (1700 years old) seacoast city to see the people and the small boats and narrow-winding streets. There were many people of all ages walking the streets in the early evening and having coffee at small street cafes. They were open faced, energetic people who were enjoying a warm springtime evening. Before the war Split was a major resort city of Croatia that hosted mainly Germans, Czechs and British tourists, but since the war the hotels are just about empty of tourists. They are hoping that this summer the visitors will return. Because of the very steep mountain range to the east of the city, Split was not shelled during the conflict, except on one occasion from Serb war ships. It is that same mountain range that caused the crash of the United

States plane of Secretary Brown to the south at Dubrovnik. Split is beautiful in an old European way but severely depressed economically. We all gathered together at about 7:00 p.m. and went to a small restaurant and had a meal of mixed local sea food: large prawns, squid, a white-meated fish, and clams. It was a time to be briefed on our trip. We then had ice cream cones and the U.S.-arriving travelers decided to go to bed and sleep after our long trips.

On Tuesday at 7:00 a.m. we had our breakfast together and left for Sarajevo in our two vans. Our drivers are on the World Vision staff: Uri and Mario are each Croatian and both served in the Croatian army -- Uri as a soldier for three years, and Mario (who has almost completed his MD training) as a medic. They are both married, and Mario and his wife expect their first child in August. His wife is a physician, and he comes from a family of ten doctors. If their child is a boy, since he is the eldest son in his family, he must name his son after either his father or his grandfather, which makes name choice simple for him and his wife unless they have a girl. In that case, any name choice is permitted. He seemed pleased by the tradition.

### **Mostar -- A Broken City**

We drove south along the coast almost as far as Dubrovnik, and then headed east toward Mostar. Soon we crossed over the border into Bosnia Herzegovina, which is now officially (since the Dayton Accord) called the Bosnian-Croat Federation. Once across the seacoast mountain range we saw the destruction of the three-year war. I felt a strong wave of sadness to see small villages completely destroyed. The most devastation of all is seen in the town of Mostar, which once was a beautiful and ancient city. The city is in a deep valley surrounded by mountains, which made it a helpless target of those who militarily held the mountains. The ancient Arch Friendship Bridge was destroyed. Just about every building, church and mosque had been badly damaged. We saw many cemetery markers of people too young for graves. Unlike World War II which reported a civilian casualty rate of about 40%, this war experienced a civilian casualty rate of 85%. The civilians clearly were the main victims of the battles.

### **Sarajevo -- The Once Proud Capital**

We drove on to Sarajevo, which is a modern city of about 400,000 people that experienced more than 1000 days of blockade and siege. Here is a city that is also surrounded by mountains, some verdant green because of the arrival of spring and others with snow still on them. From those steep hills the terror of snipers and heavy shelling was rained upon this tragic city. Today there is hardly any building that is not severely damaged. All of the major buildings and arenas for the Winter Olympics and most of the factories are in total ruins.

The city was intended by the Dayton Accord to be a tri-party city in keeping with its multi-cultural past history, but in fact, almost all Serbs have left the city and many Croats have, or are leaving. Because of this exodus, the city consists mostly of Bosnians. There are very few jobs, though the life of this merchant city is coming back. Small cafes are springing up again and small shops are open. People are neatly dressed and carry themselves with dignity. The children played soccer in the

side streets, and youth are picking up their lives as students again. French soldiers are the NATO forces assigned here, and many United Nation's vehicles and armed NATO vehicles are everywhere, with tanks in readiness at major street intersections. This has provided an uneasy peace in the city since the Accord. There are many areas with yellow tape that warn the people of the existence of live explosive mines still buried in the ground.

### **World Vision Is At Work**

We arrived first of all at the World Vision headquarters at Sarajevo and walked up a circular stone stairway to the top floor of a very old building, and there we entered a pleasant office area where the World Vision has its staff office and where World Vision engineers work on the apartment rehabilitation projects they have underway. Here we met Todd Stoltzfus, a very outstanding twenty-seven year old American World Vision staff member who has had experience in Africa and now heads the Sarajevo office. His deputy is a young Croatian woman, Gora Ivanisevic, who was our brilliant translator at the meetings we had during our stay. We also met a young medical student who works in the World Vision office. She is Bosnian from a Muslim family. It was at her home, which her mother rents as a bed and breakfast, where four of us stayed the two nights we were in Sarajevo. Two bullet holes are in her living room walls from the time of the war. One bullet is still in the sofa and the other in the hutch next to the dining room table.

Our first visit was to two sites to see an apartment rehab project. My group saw the work being done on the fourth floor apartment of a seventy-year old Croatian widow whose apartment took a direct hit that destroyed her windows and pockmarked the walls. A large hole with exposed broken rebar steel and broken concrete was being repaired in the ceiling of her apartment. World Vision is focusing special assistance toward older widows as of now, since they are the most vulnerable and since housing safety is essential. She was a beautiful woman with very bright eyes and an engaging smile. We discovered that the two workers on this project had just been discharged from the Bosnian Army the day before, so this was a job for them. In her apartment house of about ten floors, I would estimate that about 60% of the apartments are presently non-inhabitable. One by one, people are trying to make them livable again. The World Bank is funding this window-repair project of World Vision. It is one of their small projects, a new strategy for World Bank, and a policy that I think is wise. It is human scale and very cost effective too, as well as a model of hope for discouraged people. We saw a bigger project too, in which World Vision is helping an elementary school to be reopened. The yellow tape kept us from actually walking too close to the school building. When the mines are all removed from the field around it, they will begin restoring this now-damaged school.

### **Five Visits**

In the late afternoon we visited Mustafa Ceric, head of the Muslim faithful for all of Bosnia. We were directed by an assistant cleric to a large square room with square-stuffed chairs that were along each wall. After a few minutes the Imam entered wearing a white clerical hat and flowing robe. He is a self-confident man; he quickly circled the room meeting each of us. He had earned a Ph.D. at University of

Chicago, so he focused especially on Craig Barnes, who also received his Ph.D. at University of Chicago. He spoke to us about his understanding of the conflict and the future of Bosnia. He thinks that the separation of the three historic groups needs to be maintained. He defends the participation of Afghan and Iranian advisors as participants in the Bosnian cause. One fascinating thing he said to us was this: He challenged us as Christians to really believe and live out our own faith. He warned us, that in his view, Western Christianity was threatened from within by secularism and the practical atheism of the west. He also wanted us to know that we should not carelessly include all of the people of Islam together. He was worried that many westerners automatically thought of Muslims as extremists. My understanding is that the Imam will enjoy increasing influence in the new Bosnia and that he is aware of that new-found importance.

On Wednesday, we drove in the morning across the border into Serbia and met with a Serbian Orthodox priest and his two young assistant priests. This priest had been a chaplain in the army and had served an Orthodox congregation in Sarajevo, but along with the great majority of Serbians, he moved across the border because, as he said, the people were fearful of remaining in Sarajevo. He was quite insistent that the Dayton Accord was unfair to the Serbs, but his opinion was that the tensions that would break out would be between the Croats and the Bosnians. He strongly advocates that each ethnic group "should go to their own room." We realized that he and the Imam had the same view, that for them the best peace would happen as the cultural groups were apart.

Next we visited with three Protestant pastors, and what we heard from the young pastor at work in Mostar was very encouraging. It made me see that perhaps the two small minority communities in this troubled country -- the very small Protestant fellowship and the small Jewish community -- could play a creative new role since they do not have any special agendas rooted in the three historic cultures of the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. These three cultures have been aligned in a historic way: The Bosnians with the Muslims, the Serbs with the Orthodox Christians and the Croats with the Roman Catholic Christians.

We then met with the auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Sarajevo, and he was not optimistic that the Croats who have fled would come back to Sarajevo. He predicts their continuous exodus from this city.

On Thursday we drove to Zenica, which is the second largest city of Bosnia. There the damage is not so great as in Sarajevo or Mostar. We met a Franciscan priest who was more hopeful that Croats and Bosnians could live together in the future in that city, and he has even seen cooperation developing between Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches. That very day he was scheduled to officiate at an Orthodox funeral at the request of the Orthodox priest.

### **Beginnings of Restoration For People Weary of War**

We saw a small business success story in which a Bosnian Family had made use of a World Vision loan to restart a mushroom growing business. This man was now employing nine people and had already made the first repayment on his \$15,000



loan. I realized how business and trade can often create a climate for peace. He imports his moss from Croatia and sells some of his mushrooms beyond the border to Croatia. I think it is important that trade is encouraged to happen between all of these groups. He and his family served us with coffee and apple juice and delicious pan-fried mushrooms.

We arrived back in Split after driving through more devastated country villages with heavily-mined fields. We saw from the highway the famous hunting lodge of Marshall Tito. We prayed for the people in this badly hurt land and especially for children and youth who must now build toward the future. The Christian churches were put in a very stressful place as it was just assumed by many that Catholic equals Croatian and Orthodox equals Serb and Muslim equals Bosnians. This nationalistic expectation puts ordinary pastors and people of faith in a very difficult place when they by conviction want to lead their people toward the way of peace and love at a time when nationalistic fervor is intense and where fear stirs up hatred and the desire for vengeance. But it is clear to me that the Christian churches have a very real chance to develop positive relationships across ancient barriers. The extreme nature of the harm that this three-year war has done has worn the people out, so that they are weary of battle, and in every place people said to us: "What was it for after all?" And "I hope war does not come again," and "Enough is enough." The people we met are grateful that NATO troops are in the region, and now the next important step is the careful rebuilding of a shattered economy. The whole world needs to help with loans, grants and good will. The country is beautiful with high snow-covered mountains, Swiss like green valleys and breathtaking beaches and coastal islands. The people are very bright and well educated, so with peace and justice this beloved part of God's earth can be healed.

### **Christians Have A Vital Role To Play**

I believe Christians have a vital part to take in helping this healing to happen. The gospel of Jesus Christ has hope, joy and love at its center. Men and women who trust in God's love have the very gift of encouragement that an exhausted and battered people need most in order to pick up the broken pieces and rebuild. The four days encouraged us in that way because I saw some people who I would describe as good and nourishing people, and for that I am thankful to God. I was impressed by every World Vision staff person I met in Bosnia. They were just these kinds of Christians. I was pleased also to meet some of the local Bosnians who had been hired for specific tasks, and these local citizens, some who were Christians and some who were Muslim in their family background, were all very earnest in their concern for reconciliation in Bosnia and in offering effective aid to the very vulnerable and needy people being aided concretely through the World Vision projects. This brief visit convinced me once again of how totally new and breathtaking is St. Paul's radical affirmation of the result of our discovery of the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." I prayed that this affirmation would be ours to know and experience today.

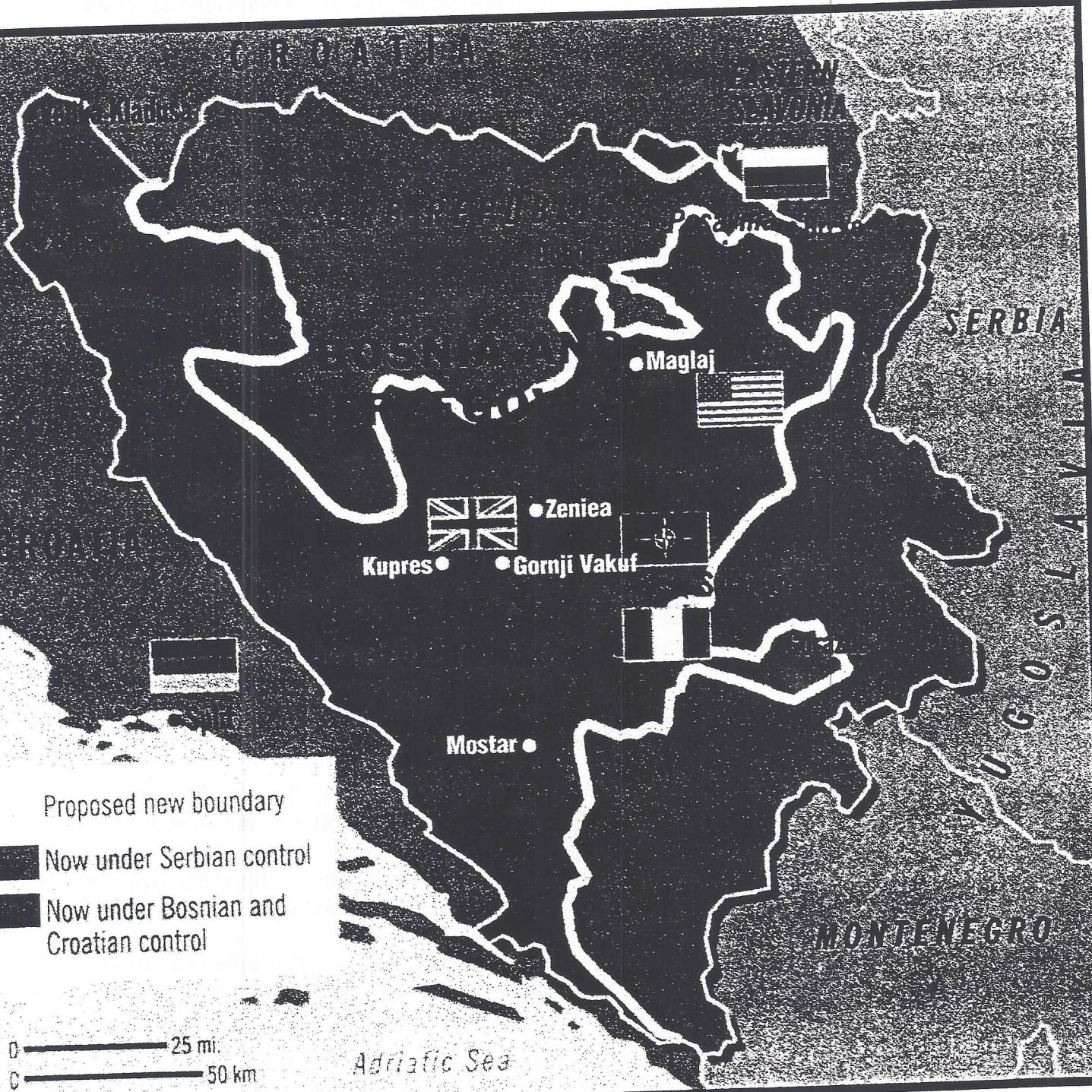
We who traveled together became good friends, and our fellowship together was also a very special part of the whole experience for me. I especially appreciated the

chance to witness the outstanding and wise leadership of Bob Seiple, the president of World Vision. God has raised up Bob as a Christian statesman in this time of world-wide opportunity and crises for decisive action by Christians. I said to myself many times, "Thank God for World Vision."

Earl F. Palmer  
May 4, 1996

Attached: Map  
Field notes by Bob Seiple







### III. WORLD VISION'S WORK:

World Vision is very much in a rehabilitation mode. This involves three key interventions in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica:

1. Rehabilitation of homes/apartments for the elderly. Taking place in Serb territory, hoping that more Serbs will stay within Bosnia.
2. Microenterprise Development: Small loans to start labor intensive cottage industries. Greater income, self worth, values.
3. Trauma Treatment and Training: Primarily with women and children. Key intervention. Needs to continue well into the future.

The staff has greatly increased, with approximately 60 employees, 15 of whom are expats. This staff is well networked, highly professional, extremely dedicated. It was a joy to spend time with them.

### IV.

#### *By Their Roofs You Will Know Them."*

"What are you going to name your child," I asked our Croatian driver. Mario's wife was expecting their first child in August. His reply said much about the culture in this part of the world, for better or for worse. "If it's a boy, I only have two choices, either the name of my father or my grandfather. It's expected of the first born. I can't break the tradition. It's been that way for a thousand years."

Mario is loyal to tradition. After all, it's part of who he is. It's his identity and, in the Balkan states, identity means everything. A last name will distinguish the Croat from the Muslim, a Muslim from a Serb. The alphabet used to spell the name will also discriminate. Muslims use a Latin alphabet for example, while Serbs follow the older Cyrillic form.

Spiritual expressions serve to differentiate as well. A Catholic will cross himself with two fingers, moving left to right. The Orthodox Serb will make the sign of the cross right to left, using three fingers.

Catholics build their churches on a north/south axis. The Orthodox construct theirs east/west. Even without a sense of direction, one could easily distinguish the differences based on domes, spires and spinners.



And then there are the roof lines of the older homes. A Croat will construct his home with a single gable roof line. The Muslim's roof will come from four different sides, emerging as a single point, at the top of the roof. it's all a part of registering your identity, and it's all taken very seriously.

The war in Bosnia is all about Identity. This war has been described as a classic identity conflict. Such wars are intra-national, post cold war variety. The identity has very little to do with Ideology or citizenship in the state. It has a great deal to do with fear, the perception of fear, and acute paranoia, especially if your Identity is in the minority. A simple principle governs behavior in such a situation: No one wants to be a minority in a hostile environment. The environment might become hostile through nationalism, power or greed. Identity wars, however, become horrific in nature because of fear. " Do it to them before they do it to you." Cleanse the other Identity from your midst. Establish your own identity. Diversity can do you in. The tools of discrimination are employed: names, alphabets, crosses, traditions – and roof lines.

This is the new tribalism emerging at the close of the 20th century. It has been argued that the next world war will take place between civilizations, not nations. Bosnia helps make that case. East meets west. Muslims battle Christians. A protracted self identity prepares the soil for major conflagration.

Does our Lord have any relevance in such situations? More specifically, how might Christ's followers positively intervene? interestingly, the identity theme is both powerful and persistent with Jesus. He claimed to exist before Abraham. He told His disciples He was one with the Father. He announced His Kingdom and left no doubt that the King and the Kingdom were one and the same. During His trial before the crucifixion, almost the only time He talked was when His identity was questioned. "Are you really the Christ?" Christ's identity was sure, the answer positive, and the crucifixion quickly followed. Jesus would rather die than compromise that divinity that made Him distinctly different.

As the supreme act of grace, Christ's identity has become ours. "You are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ." We share the same family tree! We're kinsin' cousins. We come out of the same traditions. The God of history and the Christ of Calvary are related, and they are related to us! We share their identity!

We need to share their values, as well. We have been asked to bear fruit. We will be known by that fruit. We need to demonstrate love for example, that reduces the hostility of the Bosnian environment. We need to be good neighbors, 7,000 miles away, so that the people of Bosnia might see their neighbors across the street in a new light. We need to respect the diversity we encounter so that Bosnian differences might be affirmed as well.

It has been said, "You might be the only Jesus that someone will ever see." Challenging words. An awesome responsibility. But Bosnia presents an incredible opportunity for an incarnational witness from the children of God. It's time to respond like our namesake would want us to respond.

#### V. TRIP PARTICIPANTS

**Craig Barnes, Senior Pastor, National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.**

**Arthur Beale, Mission Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Seattle; Presbyterian Church (USA) Coordinator for Central Europe, Louisville, Ken**

**Edward Foggs, Secretary General, Church of God, Anderson, Indiana.**

**John Huffman, Senior Pastor, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California; Chair of the Board, World Vision Inc.**

**Earl Palmer, Senior Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, Washington.**

**Robert Ricker, President, Baptist General Conference, Arlington Heights, Illinois**

#### Trip Leaders:

**Robert Seiple, President, World Vision Inc.**

**Serge Duss, Associate Director, Government Relations, World Vision Relief and Development Inc., Washington, D.C.**

#### Additional World Vision staff:

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**Terry Madlson, Editor, World Vision Magazine, Federal Way, Washington.**

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