

Stanko Jambrek

Mladen Jovanović (1945-2013)

Mladen Jovanović (April 21, 1945 – October 6, 2013), a preacher, theologian and a writer, was born in Zagreb. He studied at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Zagreb where he graduated with an undergraduate degree in phonetics, general linguistics, as well as Polish language and literature. Then he studied (1979-1980) biblical theology at the Institute for Biblical Studies at the University of Texas (Austin, USA), and acquired a Master's degree in applied theology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

After studying phonetics, linguistics and Polish language and literature, he worked as a lecturer at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Zagreb, and then as a Croatian language lecturer at the Warsaw University in Poland (1970-1979). At the age of 24 (1969), he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior because of the witness of missionaries of the American Churches of Christ. This encounter changed his personal and family life, attitudes, life goals and academic career. Together with Ivan Tešić, he led a home church at the beginning of the 1980's in Zagreb. This church was established earlier by the missionaries of the American Churches of Christ which grew spiritually and in number, and thus was registered as *Kristova crkva* (Church of Christ) in 1985. They gathered in an apartment on Amruševa Street in the center of Zagreb. From the beginning, Mladen was the church's leader and preacher, and he remained in those positions until his death. Over the next several years, the church community grew and reached about 50-80 members, while toward the end of 2001, the church gathered over a hundred believers at two locations in Zagreb, in Amruševa Street and in Kušlanova Street. Thanks to Maden's ministry, the Church of Christ was able to purchase an apartment for the gathering of the believers in Amruševa street (1985), and then also a building in Kušlanova Street (2000) which was remodeled into a sanctuary.

The Church of Christ in Zagreb was the first Church of Christ in the former Yugoslavia, then Mladen helped in the establishment of other local Churches of Christ in Croatia and Serbia, especially in Belgrade. In the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Croatian War for Independence and the establishment of the sovereign Republic of Croatia, Mladen Jovanović laid the foundations for several important ministries in the Churches of Christ in Croatia. During the War

for Independence in Croatia, the Churches of Christ, led by Mladen, collected and distributed humanitarian aid for the needy, especially refugees. The Churches of Christ continued with this work, although with less intensity, for years later. Along with the humanitarian work, the members of the Churches of Christ endeavored to proclaim the Gospel at every possible opportunity. The result of this proclamation was the numerical growth of the existing churches and the establishment of new churches.

On July 4, 2003, an agreement was signed in Zagreb between the government of the Republic of Croatia and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Croatia, the Christian Adventist Churches in the Republic of Croatia and the Union of the Baptist Churches in the Republic of Croatia. The Churches of Christ were aligned in this agreement with the Union of the Baptist Churches. For this occasion, twelve members of the Churches of Christ established a Council of the Churches of Christ and Mladen Jovanović was elected as their first president. That same year, the Churches of Christ were included in the census evidence of religious communities in Croatia.

In the beginning of 1991, Mladen Jovanović started a radio program called "*Radosna vijest*" ("Good News") which was broadcast on the radio station *Hrvatski radio Čakovec* (Croatian Radio Čakovec). The same program was broadcast by radio stations in the cities of Daruvar, Samobor, Sisak, Varaždin, Velika Gorica and Zabok.

Under the leadership of Jovanović, the Church of Christ in Zagreb started a Bible school in 1990 which started with a one-year program at the beginning and then expanded to a two-year program in 1992. In 1993, the program was broadened through the recognition of the International Christian University in Vienna. Toward the end of 2000, the Bible school, under the name *Institute for Biblical Studies* (Institut za biblijske studije) offered three programs: a two-year academic study of the Bible, two-year education and training of church workers and an individual program for the spiritual development of individuals. Mladen was actively involved in the development of the Institute for Biblical Studies which was later renamed Biblijski institut (Bible Institute). In partnership with Abilene Christian University in the USA, the Bible Institute organized an undergraduate and graduate study program in Christian ministry. Also, Mladen was instrumental in brokering a partnership agreement for cooperation between the Bible Institute and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek.

He was a lecturer in the basics of communication, homiletics and introduction courses to the Bible in several colleges, including the Bible Institute in Zagreb, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek and the International Christian University in Vienna. He was warmly invited and welcomed as a speaker at Christian conferences in Croatia and abroad.

Mladen served as a preacher not only in the Churches of Christ, but also elsewhere, and he was well known and appreciated for his pastoral and counseling ministry even in other denominations. He was involved in the establishment of the Protestant Evangelical Alliance in Croatia where he served as secretary during the last decade. Mladen Jovanović worked together with the editorial boards of significant publications and magazines, among which include: *Novozavjetni komentari* (1997) (*New Testament Commentaries*), *Biblija na Brailleovom pismu* (1997) (*The Bible in Braille Script*), *Novi zavjet – suvremeni prijevod* (2003) (*New Testament – a Modern Translation*), *Leksikon evanđeoskoga kršćanstva* (2007) (*Dictionary of Evangelical Christianity*), *Vjerske zajednice u Hrvatskoj* (2008) (*Religious Communities in Croatia*) and *Kairos: Evanđeoski teoloski časopis* (2007-2013) (*Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology*).

He loved to study and teach the Word of God. While holding firmly to the tradition of the Churches of Christ, he respected and appreciated the brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions. Within Christian fellowship, he endeavored to find, emphasize and build those elements which connected believers in the kingdom of God. He was devoted to the unity of the church.

With all of his heart, Mladen Jovanović endeavored to proclaim and apply the Word of God in everyday life: by preaching, teaching, writing, counseling, fellowshiping, admonishing, organizing events and by friendship. He used his “gift which was given to him” (1 Tim 4:14) productively until the last moment of his life, and was a blessing to generations of believers and spiritual leaders. Carved indelibly into my memory are his love toward Jesus Christ, his passion for the Word of God, his optimism while spreading this experienced love, and his zeal in both his life and in his encounters with people.

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